

## WHO IS GENERATION Z?

Generations, much like cultures, have their own attitudes, beliefs, social norms, and behaviors that define them. For some, Generation Z students might seem as if they are from a foreign land. Judgmental attitudes, lack of understanding, and stereotyping are barriers that might stand in the way of older generations in understanding this new culture.<sup>1</sup> Natives to the digital and online world, Generation Z will soon fully inhabit higher education and then the workplace, taking on roles that will influence the physical world beyond the screen. Before diving deep into the culture and personality of Generation Z, it is important to take a look at what characterizes and makes this generation unique.

### Back in My Day ...

“Every generation imagines itself to be more intelligent than the one that went before it, and wiser than the one that comes after it.”

*George Orwell*<sup>2</sup>

Each generation has experienced being “kids these days,” but as every new generation emerges, it is subjected to a certain level of disdain from older generations. Could the disdain be coming

from the fact the new generations are indeed disrespectful and lazy? Or is it that those in older generations do not fully understand who these young people are and how social rules are changing because of them? In order to embrace and engage Generation Z, it is critical to understand who these students are and what makes them different.

Older generations create the environments that younger ones are raised in, so to fully understand Generation Z, it is important to start by understanding the generations that came before them.

## Baby Boomers

The Baby Boomer generation gets its name from the surge of babies born after the end of World War II, between 1946 and 1964.<sup>3</sup> During the war, many men who would otherwise be fathers were busy fighting. As the war ended and troops returned home, there was more stability for the country and certainty for families, and thus began the boom of babies.<sup>4</sup>

Postwar America experienced a healthy economy; consumerism was seen as the cure for the Great Depression and the minor recessions leading up to and through World War II.<sup>5</sup> Baby Boomers grew up with the philosophy that hard work is the path to success<sup>6</sup> and the goal was to achieve the American dream of having their own houses, cars, and material possessions.<sup>7</sup> Driven by ambition to succeed, advance, and earn,<sup>8</sup> Baby Boomers are characterized by a strong traditional 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. work ethic.

Boomers also saw the civil rights movement and anti-Vietnam war demonstrations unfold before their very eyes,

and the oldest participated in the unrest. They have gone on to become parents, some to Generation X, but primarily to Generation Y, also known as the Millennials. At the time of this writing, the 74.9 million people in the United States are Baby Boomers.<sup>9</sup>

## Generation X

Those in Generation X, born between 1965 and 1980,<sup>10</sup> grew up during the height of cable television, MTV, leg warmers, and Michael Jackson.<sup>11</sup> They saw the first personal computers from Apple and IBM and likely played Pong on their Ataris. Much smaller in numbers than the Baby Boomers before them and the Millennials after, Generation X has a population of close to 50 million.<sup>12</sup>

With a 25 percent increase in married women in the workforce between 1968 and 1978,<sup>13</sup> Gen Xers were raised during a time in which it was becoming more of the norm for both parents to work. Thus, Gen X children, many of whom let themselves into their homes after school, were deemed “latchkey kids,”<sup>14</sup> leading them to having to be independent at a young age.<sup>15</sup>

Generation X has been viewed as cynical about the world, skeptical, and pragmatic.<sup>16</sup> They are often regarded as the “middle child” between two very large generations that have received a great deal of attention.<sup>17</sup> Where shows like *Leave It to Beaver*<sup>18</sup> idealized the nuclear family for the Baby Boomer generation, Generation X saw increased rates of divorce.<sup>19</sup> As Baby Boomers were excited and hopeful about the country’s race to the moon, Generation X witnessed the *Challenger*

explosion. Where post-World War II saw an economic boom,<sup>20</sup> the 2008 economic recession began just as many in Generation X arrived at what should have been their peak earning years. But in the end, despite all that defines Generation X, they lack a coherent generational identity of their own.<sup>21</sup>

Despite the rise in divorce rates during their childhood, two-thirds of Generation X are married and 71 percent have children.<sup>22</sup> Generation X plays an important role, if not one of the most important ones for Generation Z: their parents. The level of independence with which Generation X was raised has set an interesting stage for their own parenting. Taking a lesson from their hard-working parents, they strive to balance work and family.<sup>23</sup> They seek to play active and supportive roles in their children's lives and thus place great value on the time spent with family.

## Generation Y, aka Millennials

Generation Y, more commonly known as Millennials, falls between Generation X and Generation Z. Although the dates of their birth years range depending on what source is used, one could put it as encompassing the 1980s and early 1990s. And although they are the closest in age to Generation Z, they certainly have their differences. Often referred to as the Me Generation, Millennials are criticized for being entitled and expecting things to be handed to them, leading to the perception of them as self-interested and overconfident.<sup>24</sup> They have used their twenties, a time when previous generations

were getting married and starting families, as a time to further their education, launch their careers, and practice introspection to determine what they want in life.<sup>25</sup>

Millennials are used to a strong support system, both financially and emotionally,<sup>26</sup> from their Baby Boomer parents:<sup>27</sup> more than half, even those who are working full time, indicate depending on financial assistance from their family.<sup>28</sup> Millennials are confident, with a can-do attitude, which many attribute to the active parenting style of the Boomers and the “everyone gets a participation trophy” philosophies characteristic of their upbringing.<sup>29</sup>

The healthy economy the Baby Boomers grew accustomed to influenced how they raised their Millennial children, which was to do what it takes to set their children up for future success.<sup>30</sup> Thus, Millennials expect jobs to finance their personal lives, including travel, expensive electronics, and trendy clothes, but they also face large amounts of student loan debt and unemployment.<sup>31</sup> It is no surprise that Millennials have high expectations for their career, including pay, opportunities for advancement, fulfilling work, and work-life balance.<sup>32</sup> Not wanting to fall in line as one of the statistics, 89 percent of Millennials are optimistic about their personal futures.<sup>33</sup> Their confident attitudes, coupled with their lofty work expectations, directly align with how they are perceived as always wanting something bigger, better, and right now when it comes to their professional lives.

Millennials are on track to being the most educated generation to date, with one in three having obtained a bachelor’s degree.<sup>34</sup> In the professional world, there can be a clash between

them and those from other generations. Growing up in a multimedia and interactive environment, Millennials are used to always being connected. This may create conflict with the traditional workday of 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.: their employers are likely to be Baby Boomers or even Generation Xers who have developed what they consider healthy boundaries between work and play.<sup>35</sup>

Millennials have been the earliest adopters of social media and Internet technology,<sup>36</sup> likely contributing to their comfort in using the technology available to them. They are known to multitask and use a variety of communication platforms throughout the workday, including instant messaging, e-mail, and social media.<sup>37</sup> Unlike their predecessor generations that did not grow up with such advanced technology, Millennials have had nearly a lifetime of exposure.

## Generation Z, Who Are You?

Generation Z refers to those born from 1995 through 2010. Having their world completely shaped by the Internet, they are often also aptly referred to as digital natives, the Net Generation, or iGeneration.<sup>38</sup> They make up a quarter of the US population and will become a third of the population by 2020.<sup>39</sup> They are the most racially diverse generation to date.<sup>40</sup>

Walking through history between 1995 and today paints an informative picture that can help uncover what makes this generation unique. As these students entered kindergarten, they saw the newscasts of September 11, 2001. They witnessed the economy crash and saw the unemployment rate skyrocket. They have known only two US presidents and have lived in a world at

war for a majority of their lives. And their schools have always been striving to leave no child behind. Where their predecessors had a special device for video games, another for playing music, another for making phone calls, and a paper calendar, Generation Z can do all of that with one device that fits in their pocket. As they started driving and needed directions, they likely never had to purchase or print a map; instead they plugged an address into their GPS or phone. This highly technological era in which they were born has helped make them smart, efficient, and in tune with the world, both offline and online.<sup>41</sup>

Generation Z has always lived in a virtual and physical reality. With easy access to the world's issues, Generation Z sees problems but wants to find solutions and knows how to wield their tools and knowledge to do so. We predict Generation Z will have a strong work ethic similar to Baby Boomers and the responsibility and resiliency of their Generation X parents, and they may be even technologically savvier than the Millennials. This leads us to the biggest question: Will Generation Z be the group that changes the world?

## Personality Characteristics

How Generation Z students describe themselves is influenced not just by the nature of the world they were raised in but the nurture of the families they were raised by: mostly Generation Xers. As parents, they are using an involved parenting style similar to that of the Boomers, but they're also instilling values of individual responsibility and independence.<sup>42</sup> After the Enron scandal, the dot-com bust of 2000, and the 2008 financial crisis, Generation X likely got the message that their

company would not always be there to take care of them. To succeed, their children would need to develop entrepreneurial skills and be able to take care of themselves. In our study, Generation Z students described themselves as loyal, thoughtful, compassionate, open-minded, and responsible, suggesting that this could be a mature and focused group of students who have concern for others.

### Loyal

Millennials have been branded the Me Generation, as evidence by *Time* magazine's cover story on that generation in 2013.<sup>43</sup> But our study indicates that 85 percent of Generation Z students describe themselves as loyal. They exhibit strong feelings and concern for those around them and align their pledges of support with issues that affect everyone, not just themselves or their small social sphere—quite opposite of a “me” focus.

Consider how loyalty might play out for Generation Z when it comes to the world of work. Having witnessed high levels of unemployment during their youth, this generation is very career minded. One might think they would be always be looking for the next move in their career path and hop from one job to the next. However, given their sense of loyalty, it is likely that they will change jobs less frequently than Millennials do.<sup>44</sup>

### Compassionate

Seventy-three percent of Generation Z students in our study described themselves as compassionate, no surprise given the context within which they live. This generation has had access



to nearly unlimited information, which has also given them the ability to learn about various topics and current issues. Because of this, they have been able to see the effect of events and experiences on real people. Previous generations heard about the impact of war, tragedies, and disasters in faraway lands, whereas Generation Z students can easily find detailed information, watch videos, and see pictures, making a distant experience close to home.

In addition, their constant connection with others provides a means to be in the know of issues facing their friends and family. They see social media posts and get text messages that describe intimate details of tragedies and misfortune. Being privy to this type of information certainly can make it difficult to be anything less than compassionate.

### Thoughtful

Having loyalty and compassion, it is understandable that 80 percent of Generation Z students in our study view themselves as thoughtful, as each of these characteristics is reflective of caring for others. The thoughtfulness of Generation Z is in contrast to Millennials, who have been perceived as selfish and self-absorbed.<sup>45</sup> But are Generation Z students really thoughtful, or do they just say they are? Through our study, Generation Z students described story after story of their concern about issues facing other people. Their concerns appeared genuine, definitely demonstrating a true sense of thoughtfulness.

“To move forward, we all should have well-educated minds so that we will be able to better understand our world, our problems, and each other.”

*Generation Z student*

## Open-Minded

Open-mindedness is the ability to consider new perspectives, ideas, and ways of being. And open-minded is exactly how 70 percent of Generation Z students in our study see themselves. This aligns with the findings from another study in which 70 percent described themselves as in the top or above average in understanding others compared to their peers.<sup>46</sup>

This generation is predicted to be the last one in America in which Caucasians are in the majority<sup>47</sup> as only 55 percent of people in Generation Z are Caucasian.<sup>48</sup> This is a considerable difference compared to 72 percent of Baby Boomers who are Caucasian.<sup>49</sup> Instead of shying away or opposing what is different, Generation Z welcomes difference with an open mind and open arms, believing more diversity in America is a good thing.<sup>50</sup> (More information on how Generation Z views diversity, multiculturalism, and social justice is in chapters 2 and 6).

“This generation is a very open-minded one and accepts uniqueness and the things that make others different.”

*Generation Z student*

In addition, just as limitless access to information has helped Generation Z students develop compassion for others and a thoughtful worldview, it has also exposed these students to many different cultures, identities, and ways of living. So if it is not the diversity around them that accounts solely for their open-mindedness, it is the exposure to new ways of thinking and being prevalent in their news and social media that help them see perspectives other than their own.

## Responsible

Thank the parents of Generation Z for helping instill a level of responsibility with these students. Ninety percent of parents raising Generation Z students indicated that they assigned chores to their child to help teach responsibility and good habits.<sup>51</sup> This may have led to the foundation these students have for their own sense of responsibility as adults, as 69 percent of students in our study describe themselves as responsible.

“Independent people who are both excited and fearful for the future.”

*Generation Z student*

In addition, the financial and political instability of the post-9/11 world has created a situation in which Generation Z students crave predictability and order.<sup>52</sup> Thus, Generation Z has taken an “if not you, then who?” approach to life. They recognize that they will be responsible for taking the necessary steps to set up a successful life, whether that is getting the most out of college to prepare for a career or saving money to buy a house. They also understand the many issues in the world that are in need of solutions. Coupling responsibility with their compassion, Generation Z could be the generation to address some of the world’s most pressing issues.

## Determined

This is a generation that will not give up. Given their mentality for taking responsibility, they also bring with them determination. Our study revealed that 74 percent of Generation Z

students identify as determined, whereas another study found that 78 percent believe their drive to achieve is higher than that of their peers.<sup>53</sup> This attitude will likely serve them well as they learn that not everyone gets a trophy and that hard work is part of life.

“Generation Z consists of community-driven individuals who find creative ways to problem-solve. They are extremely driven and intelligent.”

*Generation Z student*

### **Not Like Me at All**

There are some characteristics that when asked about, many Generation Z students identified as not describing them or only somewhat describing them. First, 24 percent do not believe they are conservative, and 45 percent more say that conservatism only somewhat describes them. The word, *conservative* in the media reflects the idea of being leaning to the right on issues. Using this definition, not identifying as conservative aligns with our findings of Generation Z as students being moderate to left leaning on political issues.

In addition, we found that 19 percent do not believe they are spontaneous (with another 50 percent only somewhat believing they are) and 18 percent do not believe they are competitive (with another 36 percent only somewhat believing they are). It is clear that they do not see themselves as unplanned, likely because they appear to understand the reality of making sure everything is in order for their college experience so they do not stay longer than they need or pay more than they should. And although they may want to get ahead, their other

characteristics of loyalty, compassion, and thoughtfulness likely rein in any desire they might have to be competitive.

### **Me, But Not You**

In our study, we asked Generation Z students to report the personality characteristics that most described themselves and then those of others in Generation Z. We found that this generation of students certainly has a more favorable impression of themselves than they do of their peers. They see others as having high discovery, exploration, and risk-taking characteristics that they themselves do not have. These characteristics include competitive, spontaneous, adventuresome, and curious. They view themselves as responsible and determined individuals with concern for others, but the characteristics they associate with their peers can be interpreted as self-focused and irresponsible. Their perception of peers in Generation Z may fall more in line with traditional teenage stereotypes of being “fast and free.” In fact, this perception may not be too far from reality: 40 percent of Generation Z students will take a risk if they feel they have more to gain.<sup>54</sup> In addition, another study found that one in three Generation Z students thinks their peers are lazy and lack focus.<sup>55</sup> So because there is an incongruence between how they see themselves and how they see their generation as a whole, the truth about the personality characteristics they possess may be somewhere in the middle.

“Generally spontaneous and have an open mind because of multiple reasons. They are figuring out what they want to do with their lives, which will induce experimenting. They also want to have fun in their young lives and live carefree.”

*Generation Z student*

## Interactivity Trumps Physical Activity

Being constantly connected to a screen contributes to Generation Z's more sedentary lifestyle compared to previous generations.<sup>56</sup> This is one of many factors leading to the quadrupling of adolescent obesity rates over the past thirty years.<sup>57</sup> These students have grown up in an era of the reduction, and sometimes elimination, of physical education and recess in the K-12 school curriculum. And for many, playing video games and surfing the web have replaced playing outside after school.

There has also been a decline in organized team sports for Generation Z.<sup>58</sup> This could be due to the decreased funding for physical activity in their K-12 schools, the potential of injury, or even the fact that some sports, such as baseball or golf, are just too slow paced to keep up with their short attention span.<sup>59</sup> Participation in baseball and soccer, for example, has decreased by 7 percent in youth ages seven to eighteen, even though both sports are considered slower paced and where scoring happens less frequently.<sup>60</sup>

Although these students are entering a world in which they have nearly unlimited access to campus recreation centers and a growing number of fitness centers and personal trainers outside the college setting, Generation Z is still considered to be one of the unhealthiest generations.<sup>61</sup> Will this generation have a greater number of obese individuals than ever before, or will they reclaim fitness in their young adulthood? While they might not be participating in organized sports as often, Generation Z students show increased interest in staying active through working out with weights and machines.<sup>62</sup> Given the changing dynamics of work life, though, we may see a

generation of sedentary workers who sit in front of their computers all day eating carrot sticks and hummus, only to interrupt the routine with a one-hour workout at the gym to stay in shape.

## Motivation

Equipped with the power of knowledge, concern for the world around them, and technological resources unimaginable to previous generations, Generation Z is speculated to be ambitious and motivated.<sup>63</sup> What motivates them?

### Motivators

Our study revealed that more than 70 percent of Generation Z students are motivated by not wanting to let others down, advocating for something they believe in, making a difference for someone else, having the opportunity for advancement, and earning credit toward something. Not wanting to let others down and making a difference for others demonstrate the relational aspect of motivation for this generation, not surprising given their self-identified characteristics of loyalty, compassion, and thoughtfulness. And certainly their sense of responsibility explains why they are motivated by advocating for something they believe in.

Generation Z is also motivated by rewards, such as an opportunity for advancement or earning credit. These are rewards quite different from being motivated by a prize or a tangible gift. They have seen high unemployment rates and are concerned about their financial stability, and so their motivation to advance or earn credit toward a larger goal reflects their

commitment to solidifying a stable career path and financial foundation for the future. Consider that they will likely not be motivated by a Starbucks gift card, but by reaching milestones that are steps toward their careers.

We found that gender does play a role in motivation strategies with Generation Z students. Generation Z men are more motivated than women by leaving a legacy, learning something, and competing with others, all of which are more individually focused. Generation Z women are more motivated than men by making a difference and caring about the project, both of which are relationally focused.

### Unmotivators

At the other end of the spectrum are motivators that do not work for Generation Z students. We found that more than a quarter of Generation Z students are not motivated by public recognition, acceptance from others, competition with others, or the idea that someone will return a favor. While Generation Z has a high concern for others and issues, they are not driven by the need to be validated by others. It is generally assumed that teens and young adults are highly driven to fit in and find acceptance among their peers, but Generation Z's motivations tell us something different.

Surprisingly, money does not hold weight in motivating Generation Z. Despite being concerned about financial and career stability, only 28 percent of Generation Z students would be motivated to work harder or stay with an employer for financial gains, whereas 42 percent of Millennials would be



more motivated to work harder or stay with an employer for financial gains.<sup>64</sup> Even with a concern for financial stability, our study indicates that Generation Z students are more motivated by relationships and the ability to work toward something they care about than financial advancement.

For those who are teaching, managing, parenting, or simply interacting with Generation Z students, understanding what motivates them can be critical in empowering them to act.

## Conclusion

Generation Z sees the world through multiple screens, but as evidenced by their we-centric attitudes, they recognize that societal issues are much larger than just themselves. With their loyalty, determination, and responsibility as well as realistic outlook on life inherited from Generation X, this generation is committed to those around them and motivated by making a difference. Add to that their characteristics of care and compassion, and you can expect Generation Z to use both their heads and their hearts to solve the world's problems.

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