

Understanding Generation Z Culture

by Axis

They're like "Millennials on steroids"... Except when they're not like Millennials at all

Are you looking at today's teenagers and wondering why they're always online or how on earth their views on sexuality, government, from yours?

In the U.S., the most recent generation to come of age is Generation Z, or Gen Z. American society has gone through incredible change in the past few decades, which has especially impacted how teenagers see the world because of their age and level of development. We are going to take a look at how generations have changed over time, what has shaped Gen Z's views on life, and how that knowledge can help you connect with your kids better.



What is a "generation" and why do they matter?

What is a "generation" and why do they matter? We can define a "generation" as "a group of people born within a certain period of time whose shared age and experiences shape a distinct worldview."

Bear in mind that whenever we're talking about large masses of people, we can't avoid stereotyping them. We simply can't generalize trends across a culture and cover the experience of every individual. Also, there could be multiple, contradicting trends within one generation. People are endlessly diverse. Nevertheless, we still think that evaluating the generations is helpful because of the truths we can glean. As Business Insider explains, "Defining generations helps researchers see how coming of age during certain historical events and technological changes the way people see the world."



What are the primary generations of the 20th and 21st centuries?

Not everyone agrees on the exact name for each generation, nor do they agree on the precise year when each begins and ends. We've done our best to give estimates based on the sources we found.

THE SILENT GENERATION (THE LUCKY FEW)

B. 1925-1945

Defining Events:

- Post-War "American Dream"
- Korean War
- Space race/moon landing
- McCarthyism
- Cold War/bomb shelters

BABY BOOMERS

B. 1946-1964

Defining Events:

- Vietnam War/protests
- Korean War/Watergate/Nixon resignation
- Woodstock
- Summer of Love
- JFK, Martin Luther King, Jr., Robert Kennedy assassinations
- TV

GENERATION X (GEN X)

B. 1965-1980

Defining Events:

- Fall of the Berlin Wall
- End of the Cold War
- AIDS crisis
- MTV/music videos

MILLENNIALS (GEN Y)

B. 1981-1996

Defining Events:

- 9/11
- Obama election
- Great Recession
- Rise of global internet

GEN Z (IGEN)

B. 1997-2012

Defining Events:

- Global terrorism
- Trump election/Brexit
- Social media natives
- YouTube/digital content
- Supreme Court ruling on same-sex marriage

Which of the previous generations is Gen Z most similar to?

Many agree there are clear similarities between Gen Z and the Silent Generation: “The parallels with the Silent Generation are obvious...There has been a recession, jobs are hard to get, you can’t take risks. You’ve got to be careful what you put on Facebook. You don’t want to taint your record.”

Besides caution, two other major similarities between the two generations are their entrepreneurial tendencies and their prioritization of their careers.

Which generation do they relate with best?

We’ve noticed through our interactions with families and students that members of Gen Z often relate well with their grandparents, who are typically Baby Boomers. There could be many reasons for this, including that both generations tend to desire financial security and thus make similar decisions in pursuit of that. In addition, as previously mentioned, both generations grew up during periods of rapid social and cultural change. The Christians in both generations experienced social pressures on their beliefs (Roe v. Wade for Boomers, the legalization of homosexual marriage for Gen Z) and grew up knowing that their beliefs were unpopular and considered “intolerant.”

There could be many more reasons for this, but the point is that Baby Boomers (grandparents) could be key in reaching today’s teens and tweens. When possible, enlist the help of trusted Baby Boomers in your discipleship efforts.

What are Gen Z’s preferred methods of communication?

Unsurprisingly, Gen Z prefers using devices to communicate. They especially like texting because of how manageable it is: According to the research, Gen Z and Millennials communicate with others more digitally than in person (65%). This percentage is even higher in English-speaking countries, with the US (73.7%) and UK (74.4%) relying more heavily on digital channels for communication.

Nevertheless, it’s interesting to note that Gen Z also appreciates face-to-face communication. 39% say it’s “the most effective” way of communicating.

What are their favorite social media apps and why?

45% of Gen Zers say they are online “almost constantly.” And what they enjoy online is visual media. Research shows that Gen Z’s favorite social media apps are Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube.

What’s more, “Gen Z spends more time on mobile devices (an average of 11 hours per week) and streams more content (an average of 23 hours of video content a week) than any other generation. That’s almost one full day spent watching (rather than, say, reading) content.”

What are their strengths? Weaknesses?

As you can probably already see, Gen Zers have some real strengths. They are pragmatic, they value relationships, and they love people no matter how different they are or how “shocking” their lifestyles might be. They’re interested in being self-starters and in finding creative ways to educate themselves and better their lives. They strongly dislike hypocrisy and are unwilling to go along with institutions merely because of their perceived authority (which has been a weakness of previous generations). Gen Zers also want to see evidence before accepting something as true.

On the other hand, Gen Zers’ emphasis on relationships and acceptance means that they can let their empathy overwhelm their morality. They tend to see truth and morality as relative and can value authenticity so highly that they have an aversion to making any kind of judgment, especially about another person. They can also fail to see that sometimes the most loving step we can take toward people is to confront them with the truth and challenge them to live differently. They need to know where their hope truly comes from and that there is good reason for believing in Christianity.

How can we encourage and love them?

Because Gen Zers emphasize their education and careers so much, Barna thinks the church should prioritize “vocational discipleship”:

This means teaching young people about the integration of faith and occupation, helping them to better understand the concept of calling and emphasizing the meaning and theological significance of work (not just their potential for professional or financial success).

Jonathan Morrow of Impact 360 says he believes that students are reluctant to take a stand on moral beliefs because they 1. don't want to be or appear judgmental and 2. live in a culture that doesn't believe people can have true knowledge about spirituality and morality. So how can we help Gen Z influence culture instead of letting culture influence them?

Morrow says:

As I have worked with Christian teenagers over the past 15 years, I have developed a framework that I call the “Three Rs of Worldview Transformation.”



In order to build a strong and lasting faith, students need reasons, relationships, and rhythms. These are the things we can directly influence.

From a young age, students need parents and other mentors to teach them the truths about Christianity, educate them about false ideas, and allow them the safety of being able to doubt well. He says, “In short, teenagers need a grown-up worldview, not coloring-book Jesus.”

To a generation that values people and relationships so highly, fostering relationships with Gen Z is essential.

By rhythms, Morrow means habits. He says that healthy teens develop good habits, noting that anything we do over and over again will eventually determine our identities. And this principle is “more than just doing the right thing; it's about becoming the kind of person who loves what is good.”

Morrow says:

Gen Z increasingly feels isolated and alone, but they hunger for real relationships. There are four strategic relationships we can help them cultivate: God, parents, mentors, and friends (see Prov. 13:20). I am convinced that relationships are the most powerful shaping influence during the teenage years.