

Generation Next



Oh, for a time when the old were old, the young were young, and the rest of us just got on with it. These days, however, each of us is not only an island, entire of itself, but also a member of a Generation (note the capital G), and therefore subject to the wild generalisations of social commentators, researchers and members of the media everywhere. If you are a baby boomer (born 1946-1964)*, for instance, growing up in a period of unprecedented postwar prosperity, you

are, ipso facto, hard-working, confident and materialistic, with a profound inner gratitude for the invention of labour-saving white goods in all their miraculous variety.

If you belong to Gen X (born 1965 to 1979), you are independent and cynical, thanks mostly to the fact that your parents got divorced and the economy fell apart while you were watching MTV. And if you are a member of Gen Y (born 1981 to 1994), you are flexible, adaptable and convinced your destiny lies in being rich and famous and on reality TV.

As if all this isn't enough, there's now a new gang in town. Gen Z - also known as "iGen", "GenTech", even the supremely uncharismatic "Plurals" - comprises, the experts tell us, those born between 1995 (or 1996, or 2000: demographic dates are notoriously fickle) and, by some reckoning, as late as 2020.

This means many Gen Z kids are not yet born, and that the same generational generalisations, as it were, could be attributed to both my friend's daughter, who is 16 and intellectual, and my own toddler, nearly two and interested primarily in the power of her mighty, sandcastle-crushing fists. Still, never let it be said that common sense stands in the way of a universal theory.

This year, moreover, is particularly significant. In 2014, the last baby boomer will turn 50, and thus move beyond what commentators like to call the "all-important 18-49 demographic", to be replaced by Gen Xers (of whom, I should probably confess, I am one).

Gen X is now, apparently, at the height of our consumer and social leadership. (Yes!) We are "the key consumers in all product categories". (At last!) We are also the arbiters of parenting, family and community philosophy. (Oh no!) Gen Ys, meanwhile, are now all officially over the age of consent: every single one of them can vote, get drunk and tell us about it in gory detail on Facebook. (Sigh.)

And then comes Gen Z, which includes every Australian child alive today. They comprise the largest demographic group in the country: according to the 2010 census, 25.6 per cent of our population (more

than 5.7 million people) are younger than 19. But what are these kids like? What do they think? And why should we care? Let the generalisations begin.

Gen Z are the first humans in history to be born into a truly digital world. In 1998, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, only 16 per cent of Australian households were connected to the internet; by 2011, this proportion had risen to 79 per cent, of which 92 per cent used a "broadband-type connection" - a non-existent category pre-2000.

Often called digital natives, Gen Z kids are incredibly comfortable with all forms of technology and often impatient with "old" platforms: a Gen Z teen can disable a phone's geolocation settings and send a message on Snapchat in the time it takes a Gen X to find that pesky Facebook icon.

Indeed, Gen Z increasingly regards Facebook as irrelevant. In the US, according to surveys, 25 per cent of 13- to 17-year-olds have quit the megalithic media site this year alone. In Australia, David Seedhouse, founder of the Values Exchange (VX), a Gen Z forum with more than 100,000 registered users, estimates that "between half and two-thirds of them are not interested in Facebook. They're very safety conscious, very protective of each other and themselves. And they're very concerned about surveillance. 'It's our data, it's not your data' - they're very strong on that."

Rather than using Facebook, Twitter or Instagram, many are turning to platforms like Snapchat, Secret or Whisper, where their messages (often pictures or short videos) appear briefly in recipients' inboxes before spontaneously self-destructing, Maxwell Smart-style.

Interestingly, this means these messages, however brilliantly funny or thrillingly poignant, are usually lost after delivery: Gen Z teens appear far less interested in building a profile or celebrity-style buzz around themselves than, for example, Gen Y.

"If you look at surveys about celebrity," says Seedhouse, "it's often along the lines of worrying about a particular person - Miley Cyrus, for instance - being in trouble. Gen Z kids are worried about her. They want to see people do well, they don't want to see them in unsafe situations - and they see celebrity as an unsafe situation. They certainly don't glorify fame."

Nor do they overdose on their own digital expertise - at least in Australia. According to a US survey run by market research agency Sparks and Honey, an American Gen Z multitasks across at least five screens daily and spends 41 per cent of their time outside of school using computers or mobile devices.

"We don't see anything like that," says Seedhouse. "These kids are spending maybe one or two hours on-screen outside of school. Occasionally you find one person who seems to be overdoing it, and everyone else is really worried about them. It's quite touching."

Despite this concern, Gen Z - perhaps partly due to their technological competence - can be pretty hopeless in the real world. According to the Sparks and Honey survey, their digital acuity often makes them oblivious to their surroundings and lacking in situational awareness. Their communication style is loose and

intuitive: as well as images, they use icons and emojis (ideograms, usually of faces) rather than words, and their attention span is even smaller than it used to be (eight seconds, as opposed to 12 in 2000).

They are more sedentary and more likely to be obese than any previous generation - in Australia in 2011, more than 25 per cent of those aged between two and 17 were either overweight or obese, compared with 21 per cent 15 years earlier. And even when they're in motion, they may not know where they are: the average Gen Z kid, apparently, can't read a map. The lesson in all of this? Use short sentences in the presence of Gen Z, and try not to get lost.

If you are not trying to find your way to an obscure destination, Gen Z kids can be enjoyable, if earnest, companions. They have a strong ability to empathise, say researchers, and a powerful sense of equality. "These are some of their most consistent traits," says Kirstin Couper, research director for Colmar Brunton, a market research agency that studies generational change. "Liberal attitudes, tolerance for religion and sexual orientation: we can see support for those things across many countries."

Partly, this is simply a result of their own life experiences: wherever they live, Gen Z are themselves ethnically, racially and religiously more diverse than any previous global generation.

"They are completely tolerant of difference," says Seedhouse. "They have grown up in multicultural environments, so it's normal to them." According to VX, between 75 per cent and 80 per cent of Gen Z kids consistently demand equal marriage rights for all, regardless of sexual orientation, and equality for men and women. And they're just as concerned about minority groups and refugees.

"When they talk about racism, it's clear they just can't understand it: they can't get to grips with what it's about," Seedhouse says. "With issues like the boat people, 80-plus per cent just cannot understand why they can't be allowed in, and two out of three think we shouldn't keep people in detention. There's this very strong sense of equality: 'They're just people; they need help.' It's the same response as for gay marriage: 'They're just people, why can't they?'"

Gen Z's view of family is equally inclusive, according to Seedhouse. "I think previous generations have been impressed by appearances much more than Gen Z," he says. "In all sorts of contexts, Gen Z sees through things. The things they say about family and child protection, for instance, are extraordinary. Anything can count as a family for them: they define it as a group of people looking after each other. That's it."

However they are composed, family groups are central to Gen Z: in VX polls, 91 per cent would choose family over fame, while 80 per cent regard family as more important than friends. And 100 per cent believe that parents - both men and women - should be able to leave work early to care for children.

You might dismiss such views as youthful naivety - since virtually no member of Gen Z is in full-time work as yet, what can they know about the politics of leaving the office at 3pm? But in other ways, Gen Z seem extremely mature, even world-weary in their attitudes. "They're very focused on the future," Seedhouse

says. "You find nine-year-olds talking about what they want to be, what they want to do. They're very aware of the political and economic environment. It's very strange; they're little people."

You could be forgiven for thinking that a Gen Z child is often the most sensible person in the room. Gen Z are less likely to get drunk, fall pregnant or commit a crime than any previous generation at the same age. Once again, this is a global trend. In 2002, 87 per cent of German teens were found to have had experience with alcohol; by 2012 that number had fallen to 70 per cent. In the US, according to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, one of the most worrying trends in illicit drug use among under-age users is in attention-focusing drugs such as Ritalin, which kids use for studying. And in Britain, the number of 10- to 17-year-olds convicted or cautioned for a first offence has fallen by 75 per cent in the last seven years. In Australia, meanwhile, teens today are less likely to fall pregnant, and more likely than ever before to stay at school to year 12. They possess many "inner-focused" characteristics that help them make mature decisions: confidence, independence, organisation and the willingness to work hard.

Researchers say these qualities are the result of their parenting. Whereas a baby-boomer parent might have told his or her Gen Y child, "You can do anything," Gen X parents tend to tell their children, "Do what you're good at." And if Gen Y's catch cry was "I want to be discovered," that of Gen Z might well be, "I want to work hard." But they don't necessarily want to work for other people. A study by consulting firm Millennial Branding found that 72 per cent of US high school students want to start their own business, and 61 per cent would rather be entrepreneurs than employees. All of them, however, are worried about the job market and the economy.

This might seem extraordinary in such young people, but a survey by TD Ameritrade found that parental job security is the biggest concern of 34 per cent of Gen Z. And while 69 per cent of Gen Z have a savings account, 64 per cent of those who own a smartphone still have their bills paid by their parents.

As well as being financially cautious, Gen Z is also politically conservative. In VX surveys, 91 per cent believe that marriage (as a commitment between two adults, whatever their gender) plays an important part in society. And even though, by most calculations, none can actually vote, another VX poll shows 45 per cent would vote for the Coalition - 30 per cent support Labor, 15 per cent the Greens and 11 per cent another party. The key issues in the last election were, according to Gen Z, education (29 per cent), followed by asylum seekers (18 per cent), the economy (11 per cent) and support for families (9 per cent). Incredibly, 30 per cent know who their local member is and 52 per cent prefer Tony Abbott as the party leader.

Interestingly, Gen Z politics don't appear to get in the way of their social conscience. Ninety-five per cent believe we need to do something about poverty and 82 per cent feel guilty about our consumer-driven society. They also care about the environment: 80 per cent believe solar power is the future of transport, and three out of four feel that investing in railway networks is crucial for the planet. And, just to liven things up a bit, a whopping 92 per cent believe the government should ban smoking. Many of these apparent contradictions - Tony Abbott, the environment, asylum seekers, savings accounts, poverty - can be understood, says Seedhouse, by the realisation that perhaps Gen Z's most powerful trait is that they're

"very, very risk-averse. Very concerned about safety. And of course, given the world today, their anxieties are well founded."

"There's an interesting balance between safety and independence," agrees Kirstin Couper. "They want to be in a safe environment, but they don't want people to tell them what to do."

Not that they're above the odd instance of laying down the law themselves. "There was a very serious, intense discussion on VX about whether an 11-year-old in a posh Sydney suburb should be allowed to bike to the shops a few suburbs away," says Seedhouse. "And they came down 50/50 for and against."

So, should we be worried - for ourselves, or for Gen Z? Certainly, they seem extremely, perhaps overly, responsible for people in their age range: surely a kid should be able to ride his bike to the deli without sending other kids into paroxysms of anxiety? But perhaps this is simply typical Gen-X unconcern. (We were, after all, dubbed the "latchkey generation", because so many of us had both parents at work while we got up to no good.)

The world Gen Z has inherited is one of unprecedented chaos, complexity and violence. Many Gen Z children have experienced the collapse of the Twin Towers and the global financial crisis; the hit books and movies of their childhoods - series such as *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* - are dystopian visions of children being slaughtered and authority betraying those it is supposed to protect. "So much bad stuff is so visible to them, it's pretty awful," says Seedhouse. "But they seem to be very good at avoiding it. They find their own ways of being. They're duly horrified about things, too, which is good."

All in all, Gen Z seem to be holding their own in difficult times. In the end, Gen Z's defining characteristic is "a lack of acceptance of things being as they're said to be", concludes Couper. "We see that across every issue. Gen Z know that such-and-such is the way things should be, but they don't necessarily expect that it will be."

If they're cynical, however, it's a healthy cynicism, even a necessary one. "There's a lack of trust in the state, in large institutions," continues Couper. "And they're telling us they have very liberal attitudes: they want more involvement, a much more fluid society. They have integrity and they're interested in transparent communication: they won't have the wool pulled over their eyes. But they absolutely believe in the individual voice having power."

"You can't fool them," says Seedhouse. "They see things as they are: they're much less connable than the rest of us. But at the same time, they're very optimistic. They're not unrealistic: they would like a better world. But they don't go round saying, 'We're going to change it all.' They just seem to have an implicit awareness of a way of living that will make things better."

For all our sakes, whether we're boomers, Gen X, Gen Y or a Mystery Gen to come, let's hope they do.

Source; <http://www.smh.com.au/national/generation-next-20140728-3coag.html>