

Mislabeled:

A Study of Generational Labels and Gen Z Stereotypes

by

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Abstract

Generation Z is the newest cohort to be introduced in the generational cycle and has earned the attention of marketers, researchers, and the general public alike. While individuals and members of other generations have been quick to stereotype and assign labels to members of Generation Z, little research has been done to see if such labels are accurate. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to discover whether generational labels can accurately communicate the characteristics of individuals within Generation Z. This study used Henri Tajfel's and John Turner's Social Identity Theory to examine how group membership defines self-identity in terms of a generation and its members. In order to assess the accuracy of stereotypes for Generation Z, 14 members of Gen Z, ages 16–24, from across the United States were interviewed. Using a survey of existing literature and results from the 14 interviews conducted, the researcher concluded that prevailing stereotypes for Generation Z are accurate, yet members of Gen Z still question the effectiveness of such generational labels.

Keywords: Generation Z, Gen Z, generational labeling, stereotypes, communication

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Chapter 1: Introduction

“They say these are the golden years, but I wish I could disappear. Ego crush is so severe. God, it's brutal out here,” (Rodrigo, 2021, 1:00). These are the words of 18-year-old American pop star Olivia Rodrigo which seem to reflect the attitudes of an entire generation. Generation Z, more commonly referred to as Gen Z, is the newest generational cohort to step into the societal spotlight and is just finding its voice. This generation, composed of individuals born between 1997 and 2012, is often cast as sensitive, self-centered, and idealistic (Dimock, 2019; International Congress of Youth Voices, 2018). However, Generation Z is not the only cohort to have such labels thrust upon them. Baby Boomers, or those born between the years of 1946 and 1964, are often viewed as old, conservative, and self-centered (Dimock; Kuster, 2018), while Generation Y, or Millennials, individuals born between 1981 and 1996, are stereotyped as being entitled and lazy.

Rationale for Study

Although these labels are not without merit, research suggests that they are difficult to substantiate and that the practice of assigning blanket traits to an entire generation may be becoming outdated (Gardiner et al., 2013). While studies have been done to investigate the accuracy of such labels for previous generations, including Baby Boomers, Gen Xers, and Millennials, a lack of research exists when it comes to Generation Z's view of the labels attributed to them. Therefore, this study examined the accuracy of common labels assigned to Generation Z according to members within the generation and whether these labels successfully communicated the characteristics of the individuals therein.

The purpose of this study was to examine the correlation between generational labels and the perceptions of those being labeled, as well as identify any existing patterns when compared

to the perceptions of previous generations. Research has already shown that individuals in Generation Z are rejecting labels and are highly individualistic (Howard, 2018). Therefore, the primary research question asked in this study was:

Can generational labels, such as those applied to previous generations, accurately communicate the characteristics of individuals in Generation Z?

The practice of generational naming and labeling has been around for decades. While it is impossible to pinpoint the exact origin of generational labeling, most experts agree the practice began in the 20th century (Rosenberg, 2020). The first generation to be named was the group of individuals who came of age during World War I (Longley, 2020). This group was dubbed the Lost Generation as they were left scarred, disoriented, and directionless from surviving one of the most horrific wars the world had ever seen. The term was first said to have originated from a conversation witnessed by writer Getrude Stein between a French garage worker and his young employee during which the man chastised his employee saying, “You are all a lost generation” (para. 5). The term was later popularized by Stein’s pupil, Ernest Hemingway, who used the remark as an epigraph to his 1927 novel *The Sun Also Rises*.

Since the Lost Generation, there have been six subsequent generations labeled from the 20th century to the present: The Greatest Generation, the Silent Generation, Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z (Rosenburg, 2020). According to the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2020), authors Neil Howe and William Strauss were highly influential in the labeling of generations and are credited with coining the popular names of every 20th century generation used today in their 1991 book *Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584 to 2069* with the exception of one, the Greatest Generation. Howe and Strauss (1991) originally classified individuals born from 1900 to 1924 as the

government-issued or G.I. generation, but this label was replaced after journalist Tom Brokaw published a best-selling novel centered around the cultural history of those who grew up during the Great Depression and fought in World War II titled “The Greatest Generation” (Rosenburg, 2020).

While humans have long felt connected to others close to them in age with similar life experiences, generational labels were popularized by marketers and researchers as a way to combine audience demographics and psychographics into distinct groups. Generations were primarily delineated by a span of 20 years and included a seminal moment that would shape its members. Once the media began writing stories about different generations and their stereotypes in the 1900s, labels entered the common vernacular and were solidified as a part of pop culture. Throughout history, use of these labels has been perpetuated by marketers and researchers, but generational lines are becoming increasingly more ill-defined. For example, Pew Research defines Millennials as individuals born between 1981–1996, while the Center for Generational Kinetics defines Millennial birth years as 1977–1995 (Dimock, 2019; Rosenberg, 2020). Varying date ranges for all generations can be found throughout existing research, and a lack of standardization makes it easy to question the effectiveness of the practice.

While few studies have been conducted around the subject of generational labeling and stereotypes, one 2013 study by Gardiner et al. tackles the topic by investigating the validity of generational segmentation through self-identification. In the study, common traits assigned to three generations were examined: Baby Boomers, Gen X, and Gen Y (Gardiner et al., 2013). Two focus groups were held for each generational cohort (Boomers, X, and Y), and researchers shared stereotypical characteristics and images commonly associated with each generation and explored with members whether they reflected an individual's self-identity. Questions were also

asked to discover whether individuals thought other members of their generation behaved similarly to themselves and how they viewed other generations. Results found that members of each generation had strong opinions about the characteristics of those in their generation, but many did not feel a part of the generation they were born into.

When compared to other generations, members of Generation Z are unique in the way they view identity. Members of Gen Z despise labels and see themselves as independent individuals, which is a stark contrast to those in the previous Millennial generation who embraced collaboration and collectivism (Kutlák, 2021). This new sense of individualism has led Gen Z to explore their sexuality and defy previously held gender norms. According to Gallup, 15.9% of Gen Zers identify as LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender), the highest percentage among any generational cohort, and 25% expect to change their gender identification at least once during their lifetime (Jones, 2021; Kenney, 2020). This trend demonstrates that Gen Z individuals avoid defining themselves in just one way and prefer to explore different ways to showcase their individuality and personality.

In this study, Henri Tajfel's and John Turner's social identity theory (SIT) was used as a constructive lens to gain more insight into generational labeling and its ability to communicate an individual's values. SIT governs that an individual's determination of who they are is based on their group membership (McLeod, 2019). Under this theory, Tajfel and Turner state that labeling or stereotyping is a natural cognitive process which results in individuals creating in-groups and out-groups of people they perceive to have similarities with and people who they perceive to be different from them. A hallmark of this theory is that members of an in-group will always project negative traits on an out-group in order to improve their own self-image.

This study is significant to the field of communication as it contributes to existing research on generational segmentation and communication. While there is extensive knowledge on past generations, there is less existing research on Generation Z, due to their recent emergence, especially when it comes to self-identification of Gen Z individuals. In addition, marketers rely heavily on generational cohort segmentation to launch targeted advertising campaigns based on previously established generational labels. These labels are automatically assumed to be representative of the populations they encompass but research has suggested otherwise. If such labels are false, they will fail to communicate intended marketing messages and result in wasted physical and monetary efforts. Therefore, making sure generational labels accurately communicate the characteristics of the individuals they represent is important to ensure the success of such marketing campaigns.

Many are divided on the effectiveness of generational labels and their ability to communicate the characteristics and values of those they represent (Cohen, 2021; & Pinsker, 2021). In addition, marketers have long promoted the use of such labels to target consumers, but Generation Z is actively rejecting labels given them and seeking individualized marketing, a divergence from previous cohorts set to disrupt multiple fields, including business, marketing, and communication. This study contributes to the conversation by evaluating the effectiveness of generational labels for Generation Z, and using social identity theory as a framework to analyze generational stereotypes.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Before proceeding with this proposal, it is critical to understand what a generation is. The invention and study of generations is a relatively new topic that emerged during the 20th century and is still actively being studied today. While there is a vast, existing knowledge base about generations, there is a limited pool of knowledge pertaining to generational labels and their role in communication. Therefore, this literature review will briefly define the term “generation,” discuss related theories, examine the concept through social identity theory, and review existing empirical literature on the topic.

A Brief Definition of Generation

Generation is a popular categorizational term used to identify subgroups within a society which is employed by professionals in a number of research fields, including marketing, communication, and psychology (Chen, 2010). Chen defines a generation as “a cluster of people born during a certain period of time, who share similar values, attitudes, and lifestyles shaped by the particular epoch, thereby representing the characteristics of that specific era” (p. 132). Naturally, different generations experience different events and have unique symbols which subsequently cause them to develop distinct characteristics, differentiating them from other generations. Individuals within a generation are further woven together as they commonly share similar ambitions, perceptions, and attitudes. Since each generation has its own distinct demographics and psychographics, it makes them ripe for comparison and dissection. Therefore, a list of related theories that can be used to further investigate the subject of generational differences are discussed in the following section.

Theories Related to The Study of Generations

Mannheim's Theory of Generations

The modern study and use of “generations” was begun by sociologist Karl Mannheim in his essay *The Problem of Generations* published in 1952 (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2020). Mannheim believed that generations provide a framework for understanding social movements while preserving cultural identity and traditions. He theorized that generations are not comprised of “concrete groups” of individuals who have specific knowledge of each other but instead are individuals who share a common “location” in time and are positioned to experience the same events (Mannheim, 1952). He detailed five processes through which generations foster social change: new participants emerge, former participants disappear, generational members can only participate in a limited historical section, cultural heritage must be continually transmitted, and that generational transitioning is a continuous process.

Mannheim (1952) also refuted the idea that generations occur at regular intervals and believed that cohorts could not purely be defined by biological factors, stating that sociological factors must be considered as well. In addition, he proposed that there is no consistent pattern or rhythm that occurs among succeeding generations, rather that each generation is shaped by the social and cultural processes that occur. According to Mannheim, “Whether a new generation style emerges every year, every thirty, every hundred years, or whether it emerges rhythmically at all, depends entirely on the trigger action of the social and cultural process” (p. 310).

Generational Cohort Theory

Generational cohort theory was a theory developed by Ronald Inglehart in his 1977 novel *The Silent Revolution: Changing Values and Political Styles Among Western Publics* (Dou et al., 2006). This theory maintains the idea that generations are shaped by large-scale historical events which will directly influence societal values and give birth to a new generational cohort. Within

this theory, Inglehart proposes two basic hypotheses: the socialization hypothesis and the scarcity hypothesis. The socialization hypothesis proposes that the values of adults are primarily influenced by, and reflective of, the socioeconomic conditions present during their childhood. Although changing societal conditions may impact the adherence to established values in adulthood, relative importance of such pre-established values for individuals in a generation remains stable (Chen, 2010).

In contrast, the scarcity hypothesis proposes that generational cohorts tend to primarily value the socioeconomic aspects that are scarce during their youth (Dou et al., 2006). Therefore, generations that emerge during periods of socioeconomic insecurity or social upheaval adopt survival values, such as rationality, economic determinism, and respect for authority (Chen, 2010). Those who grow up during periods of socioeconomic security adopt postmodernist values, such as individualism, trust, and diversity tolerance. Thus, it is common for a nation to have diverse generations throughout its history, with varying values, attitudes, and lifestyles, that mirror changes in the nation's socioeconomic status with these changes being most prevalent in countries with high economic growth (Abramson & Inglehart, 1995; Rogler, 2002).

Strauss-Howe Generational Theory

In 1991, William Strauss and Neil Howe published their book *Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584 to 2069*. In their literary work, Strauss and Howe detail a theory which describes generations as cyclical and delineates a specific amount of time for each generation lasting approximately 20 years (Strauss & Howe, 1991). Within their theory are four types of generations, each assigned a tarot-card based identity: prophets, nomads, heroes, and artists (Lichtenberg & Hoffower, 2021). These four generational types also have corresponding personalities including idealist, reactive, civic, and adaptive, respectively (National Academies

of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2020). According to the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine:

...idealists are an indulged and narcissistic generation of adults who raise a generation of underprotected and alienated reactives; who then raise team-oriented, overprotected but society-minded civics; who then raise an adaptive generation that comes of age in a time of crisis with an ethos of personal sacrifice. (p. 42)

This cycle of generations implies that characteristics of future generations can be predicted and will remerge. Strauss and Howe theorized that this pattern would repeat approximately every 80 years but also described that major historical events, such as the Civil War, could disrupt the cycle.

However, Strauss and Howe's (1991) work is often not regarded as a true scientific theory as they fail to provide solid empirical evidence to support their work (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2020). While the authors cite a number of case studies that prove to be accurately representative of their proposed generational personalities, Strauss and Howe appear to have selective bias and fail to criticize their own theory. One could easily provide counterexamples of cohorts that did not match their given generational type but the authors refrain from discussing such examples. Strauss and Howe's generational theory has further been criticized as it fails to account for marginalized sectors of society in their analysis (Wilson & Gerber, 2008).

Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory (SIT) was the result of a series of experiments conducted by British psychologist Henri Tajfel and his pupil John Turner in the early 1970s (Ellemers, 2020). SIT suggests that individuals define themselves through group membership and use such

identifications to determine how they relate to others. The creation of a group identity also involves the categorization of a similar “in-group” composed of like-minded individuals and an “out-group” whose members are perceived as foreign or impertinent (McLeod, 2019). The theory also states that members of an in-group tend to have a positive bias in the way they view themselves compared to the out-group and seek to find negative aspects of the out-group in order to further support this positive bias (Islam, 2014; McLeod, 2019).

Furthermore, SIT lists three psychological processes that are essential in the development of an individual’s group identity: social categorization, social comparison, and social identification (Ellemers, 2020). First, social categorization involves an individual assigning themselves to a group. Society naturally groups people into categories, (e.g., race, education, religion, etc.) because such people usually have something in common, which helps increase understanding of the social environment (McLeod, 2019). Therefore, the first step in the process is for an individual to select such a group. Second, social identification involves adopting the group identity specified by an individual in the categorization stage. Most individuals will typically develop an emotional attachment to their identified group and begin to conform to the norms of the group. Finally, social comparison involves individuals in a group comparing their group to other groups. Individuals in a group seek self-esteem and must accomplish this by ensuring that their group is favorable when compared to others. A person’s identity is then viewed as the result of these three processes (Ellemers, 2020).

While all of these theories could be used to further examine the subject of generational labeling, the one that offers the most promise is Tajfel and Turner’s SIT. SIT discusses group membership, a concept that goes hand-in-hand with generations and involves the categorization

of members into in-groups and out-groups which can directly lead to social labeling and stereotyping. Thus, the following section provides an in-depth analysis of SIT.

Exploration of Social Identity Theory

SIT was created after a series of studies in the 1970s, commonly referred to as the minimal group studies, in which Henri Tajfel and his colleagues sorted participants into groups based on meaningless criteria (Hornsey, 2008; Ellemers, 2020). For example, in one experiment participants were allocated into groups based on the flip of a coin and in another, participants were grouped by whether they overestimated or underestimated the number of dots on a page. After being told their group membership, participants were then asked to assign points to additional members of their own group (the “in-group”) and members of the other group (the “out-group”) (Hornsey, 2008). Participants had no interaction with each other and did not know who else was in their group. Members had no previous history with each other prior to the study and no planned future afterwards. Therefore, participants had no pressure and nothing to gain or lose from their point allocation strategy. However, results of the minimal group studies consistently showed that participants awarded more points to in-group members than out-group members (Ellemers, 2020).

Thus, the minimal group studies demonstrated that by simply categorizing individuals, people could be forced to think of themselves as group members instead of distinct individuals (Ellemers, 2020). This theory was revolutionary at the time and, with help from graduate student John Turner, Tajfel articulated that human interaction ranges on a scale from solely intergroup to solely interpersonal (Hornsey, 2008). Turner and his colleagues later built on the theory detailing how certain cognitive factors related to social identification could further effect how individuals

view themselves and other groups which became known as self-categorization theory (Ellemers, 2020).

When it comes to motivations behind the theory, “a need for positive distinctiveness drives social identity” (Huddy, 2001, p. 134). In other words, people like to maintain a positive image of the groups with which they have membership. Therefore, people are likely to seek out “positively valued traits, attitudes, and behaviours that can be seen as characteristic of their in-groups” (Ellemers, 2020, para. 12). This may also cause such individuals to have the opposite view of out-groups, focusing on negative traits or downplaying positive aspects. However, this treatment of out-group members is motivated by an effort to protect or enhance one’s self or group image (Huddy, 2001).

According to SIT, there are three cognitive components that are central to explaining how individuals identify as part of a group: social categorization, social comparison, and social identification (Ellemers, 2020). First is social categorization which is the psychological process through which an individual sorts themselves and other individuals into groups to understand their social environment (Vinney, 2019). For example, labels like Caucasian, British, Christian, student, and janitor are all considered social categorizations because an individual can then infer certain traits or behaviors about members in these groups. Second is social identification. Social identification is the process of identifying as a member of a categorized group and adopting behaviors of those already in the group. For example, if an individual identified as being an environmentalist, they would likely start recycling, lobby for climate change, and seek to reduce their carbon footprint, all common behaviors for those considered to be environmentalists. In this stage, members become emotionally attached to their groups and group status directly impacts their self-esteem. The third and final process is social comparison. Social comparison is the

process in which individuals compare and contrast their group status and performance with other groups (Ellemers, 2020). To maintain self-esteem, an individual must view their in-group as having a higher social status than an out-group (Vinney).

Since members of each generation often identify with and adopt the labels given to them, one can see how social identity theory and generational labeling go hand-in-hand. Each generation consists of individuals who have bought into their generational label through group membership and view themselves as an in-group. Thus, it is common for members of a generation to compare themselves to related out-groups (e.g., other generations) to unify and enhance individual self-esteem. This is frequently demonstrated in society by the way one generation views its successor. For instance, many Gen Xers, like Dr. Twenge (2013), were quick to label the succeeding cohort of Millennials as narcissistic, lazy, and entitled. This type of generational in-group/out-group comparison can lead to negative evaluations, hostile generational relations, discrimination, and stereotyping (Islam, 2014).

While studies have been conducted to investigate the accuracy of stereotypical generational labels according to Baby Boomers, Gen Xers, and Millennials (Gardiner et al., 2013), virtually no research has been done on the ability of such labels to accurately communicate the characteristics of Generation Z. Thus, the following review of empirical literature examines existing studies about generational labeling/stereotyping and reviews whether such labels have been accurate representations of members from previous generations.

Generations Explained

Before proceeding any further, it is important to define the existing generations today, as well as their perceived attitudes and characteristics. While there are currently varying date ranges from multiple sources that attempt to delineate generations, this thesis will discuss four

generations (Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z) and follow data provided by the Pew Research Center, which is found to be the most reputable and consistent (Dimock, 2019). Pew Research Center is a non-partisan fact tank that surveys public opinion on a variety of issues, including journalism, technology, media, and public life (Pew Research Center, 2021). The organization has operated since 1990, is funded by grants, and seeks to create a database of facts that encourages sound decision-making by valuing “independence, objectivity, accuracy, rigor, humility, transparency and innovation” (para. 2).

Baby Boomers (1946–1964)

The Baby Boom Generation was born during the years 1946–1964 (Dimock, 2019). This generation got its name from the dramatic fertility bulge that occurred at the time which was widely reported in the news (Rickles, 2016). The Baby Boomer generation is the second largest recorded generational cohort, with approximately 71.6 million members, and Baby Boomers quickly became a dominant cultural force during their time (Fry, 2020; Rickes, 2016). Baby Boomers were shaped by major events such as the Vietnam War, Civil Rights Movement, and the assassination of popular United States leaders, including Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and President John F. Kennedy (Kupperschmidt, 2000; Somla & Sutton, 2002). Baby Boomers were viewed as confident and optimistic risk takers who challenged social norms (Rickes, 2016). Members of the generation also placed an emphasis on work and saw it as an important means of self-fulfillment (Kupperschmidt, 2000).

Generation X (1965–1980)

After the Baby Boomer Generation came Generation X. Generation X, or those born from 1965 to 1980, encompasses approximately 65.2 million individuals (Dimock, 2019; Fry, 2020). The cohort was originally titled the Baby Bust Generation but the name was changed after

the release of Douglas Coupland's 1991 novel *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (Pew Research Center, 2015b). Early on, Gen X was painted as being cynical and disconnected by the media (Rickes, 2016). In addition, since many Gen Xers grew up in households where both parents worked, they learned how to be resourceful and independent. This led members of the generation to become entrepreneurial and skeptical, learning to trust their own instincts. Generation X was further influenced by the Iraq War, President Bill Clinton's sex scandal, reality television, and the AIDS epidemic (Kupperschmidt, 2000; Somla & Sutton, 2002).

Millennials (1981–1996)

Generation X was succeeded by Generation Y whose members are more commonly referred to as Millennials. Millennials are individuals born between 1981–1996 and are the largest generational cohort with 72.1 million members (Fry, 2020). Millennials grew up to witness 9/11, the second Iraq War, and the election of the United States first African-American president, President Barack Obama (Zabel et al., 2017). Many Millennials were born to overprotective Baby Boomer and Gen X parents who were later deemed “helicopter parents” (Rickes, 2016). Nevertheless, Millennials are viewed as team-oriented, conventional, inclusive, and confident (Howe & Strauss, 2000; Rickes, 2016).

Generation Z (1997–2012)

The most recent generation to emerge is Generation Z. While originally given a host of names, including iGeneration, Post-Millennials, and Homelanders, Generation Z was the title that stuck and consists of those born from 1997 to 2012 (Dimock, 2019). Generation Z is the most diverse generation in history with 48% of Gen Zers being in a racial or ethnic minority (Fry & Parker, 2019). Members of Generation Z are also considered to be the first true digital natives and have grown up online (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2021). While Millennials were

considered “digital pioneers” who witnessed the expansion of technology and social media, Gen Z was born into a technological world with instant access to information and rapidly growing social media apps. Members of Generation Z have been shaped by the Great Recession, the constant war on terror, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the presidency of President Donald J. Trump (Dimock, 2019; Tanner, 2020). Gen Z is seen as realistic, tolerant, independent, and creative (Account Planning Group, 2019; Francis & Hoefel, 2018).

History of Labels

One of the main factors that began and popularized the use of generational labels was the release of William Strauss and Neil Howe’s 1991 book *Generations: The History of America’s Future, 1584 to 2069*. In their book, researchers Strauss and Howe (1991) theorized that a new generation occurs approximately every 20 years and that four generational personalities emerge in a repeating pattern roughly every 80 years. In *Generations*, Strauss and Howe assign a name and traits to each generation and are credited with naming all of the current living generations with the exception of the Greatest Generation which they called “the G.I. Generation” (Rosenburg, 2020). Their book was one of the first of its kind and helped launch, as well as perpetuate, the practice of generational naming among writers, researchers, and those in pop culture. *Generations* is often viewed as the “holy” text and an essential guide when it comes to generational research. However, the book has been criticized by some for its lack of empirical evidence and the use of selection bias in the case studies it discusses.

While Strauss and Howe solidified public interest in generational naming, use of generational labels in the news media can be found much earlier. Kitch (2003) explores the use of generational labels in American newsmagazines and notes that the first major story about a generational label was published in *Time* magazine in 1951 and defined those ages 18–28 as the

“Silent Generation.” According to Kitch, this article set a precedent and mirrored the style and tone of similar generational articles published in the future. However, generational labels did not become popular in news media until the 1980s. During this time, use of the term “Baby Boom” in articles became increasingly popular, and the first use of Generation X was recorded shortly afterward in 1990. Interestingly enough, Baby Boomers were found to be the most discussed generation in newsweeklies. While early coverage of Baby Boomers was unflattering and painted them as selfish and incapable of commitment, it quickly became nostalgic in an attempt to draw Baby Boomers in as readers and explain them to the previous generation of Silents.

Similarly, Generation X was originally scrutinized by the media in the 1990s and described as lost and indecisive with a refusal to grow up (Kitch, 2003). However, this criticism was also short-lived when both *Time* and *Newsweek* published articles several years later admitting that Baby Boomers had given unfair stereotypes to Generation X, describing the cohort as a “go-getter” generation and spotlighting Gen Xers who were already shaping the business world. Generation Y or Millennials first appeared in magazines in 1990, the same year as Gen X. While stories initially accused Millennials of being in a rush to grow up, they were later described as spiritual, ambitious, and optimistic. In addition, these articles frequently drew comparisons between Millennials and Baby Boomers with no mention of Generation X, which likely further contributed to members of the Gen X cohort feeling like a lost generation, being largely passed over by the media.

While generations and generational labels are still discussed in print media, the introduction of the internet has caused the topic to explode in the modern era with varying age ranges and labels making studying and defining generations increasingly difficult. For example, researchers at Zion and Zion (2018) found that four different organizations (Pew Research

Center, Time Magazine, PricewaterhouseCoopers, and The Center for Generational Kinetics) all list different birth years for the Millennial generation. According to Markert (2004) "... There does not appear to be a definition in the marketing literature as to what constitutes a generation or cohort" (p. 20). Since no standard method or definition exists, this has resulted in a free-for-all of generational speculations and cohort birth dates. Rudolph et al. (2020) also note in their summary of myths about generations that Myth #2 is "Generational explanations are obvious," (para. 11) explaining that ways in which generations emerge are often oversimplified in literature. In addition, Rudolph et al. define Myth #3 as "Generational labels and associated age ranges are agreed upon," (para. 11) citing the presence of ranging birth years, labeling inconsistencies, and varying research approaches.

Why Does Generational Stereotyping Exist?

Since this paper examines the accuracy of stereotypes bestowed upon members of Generation Z, it is important to get a sense of why generational stereotyping takes place. Research has shown that it is common for individuals to hold stereotypes towards different age groups and generations (Weis & Zhang, 2020). For instance, younger generations are often viewed as entitled, self-centered, and lazy while older generations are seen as responsible and experienced. These types of stereotypes originate through social perception (Riggio & Saggi, 2015).

Through the lens of Tajfel and Turner's SIT, a generation can be viewed as an in-group and when a generation is dominant in society, in-group/out-group bias can occur causing one generation to view successive generations negatively (Riggio & Saggi, 2015). As a result, such younger generations can be stereotyped as "unmotivated," "unfocused," or "disloyal," (p. 341). This idea is also demonstrated in how most literature written by older generations, like Baby

Boomers, tends to focus on the behavior of younger generations, such as Generation X or Millennials, from a problem-focused perspective.

Confirmation bias then also plays a role as members of the dominant generation will look for evidence that is consistent with their preconceived stereotypes, while evidence that is contrary will often be ignored (Nickerson, 1998; Riggio & Saggi, 2015). Such stereotypes can then become perpetuated through stories and various forms of media. As notions of these stereotypes spread, members of the target generation may hear them and begin to believe them, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy (Riggio & Saggi, 2015). These stereotypes then become increasingly difficult to dispel, as the original generation believes them due to confirmation bias, and the target generation believes them due to dissemination and imitation to maintain the perceived generational norm.

Common Generational Stereotypes

Although perceived generational stereotypes vary from person to person, there are several prevailing stereotypes that exist for each generation. First, Baby Boomers are often cast as self-centered, technologically incompetent, resistant to change, and old (Kuster, 2018). Individual responses from members in the generation have also discovered that Baby Boomers feel like they are too often blamed for causing the problems that following generations have and are all viewed as elderly hippies. Second, Generation X is frequently portrayed as cynical, lazy, disconnected, and self-centered. Gen Xers have further voiced that they feel unfairly painted as bad parents and money-focused.

Third, Millennials have seemingly been one of the most criticized generations in history being stereotyped as lazy, entitled, technology-obsessed, and overpraised in an “everyone’s a winner/gets a trophy” culture (Kuster, 2018, para. 9). Individual Millennials have also voiced

frustrations for being viewed as uneducated or for being behind in life for marrying or starting a family later than their previous relatives. Finally, Generation Z is depicted as individualistic, sensitive, depressed, and tech-dependent (Green, 2019; Howard, 2018; International Congress of Youth Voices, 2018; Trinko, 2018). However, members of Generation Z are actively rejecting negative stereotypes ascribed to them and have their sights set on creating a safer, healthier, more inclusive world (International Congress of Youth Voices, 2018).

Generational Similarities

While it is clear that generational differences and stereotypes exist, members of generations are often more alike than they are made out to be. For instance, Millennials are frequently viewed as “lazy” and are believed to have less work ethic than previous generations (Kuster, 2018). However, a study by Zabel et al. (2017) found “no effect of generational cohort on work ethic endorsement” (para. 1). Millennials have also been found to have lower job satisfaction scores than Gen Xers, but the same was also true early on for Gen Xers when compared to Baby Boomers (Costanza et al., 2012). This would make sense as a young individual in their first job is likely to have a lower job satisfaction score than an experienced individual in a third or fourth job (Costanza, 2018). Thus, such is an example of an age effect, not a generational difference, as members of all generations experience this same effect at some point during the life of their cohort.

Another example can be seen in the portrayal of Gen Z mental health. Generation Z has been deemed “the loneliest generation” and is portrayed in the media as having a mental health crisis (Combi, 2016; Trinko, 2018). However, a study surveying happiness levels among members of Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z found “no statistical difference between the happiness and well-being in [the] three generations” (Khan et al., 2021, p. 70).

Combi interviewed approximately 2,000 members of Gen Z, reporting that the cohort is not in crisis like the media claims and that, while some Gen Zers do struggle with mental health issues, they are more equipped to handle it than previous generations (Combi, 2016). According to Combi:

This is a generation that has grown up with the language of psychotherapy, the knowledge of what mental health is and the absence of stigma about talking about what is going on inside your head. They are very good at diagnosing their own problems and recognising problems in each other. (para. 5)

Additionally, the biggest threat to Gen Z's mental health may be the perpetuation of the idea that they are in crisis, causing hyper aware young adults to view any bump in the road or emotional period as worse than it really is.

Cohorts also share similarities as certain values or traits are passed down through generations. Since one generation gives birth to and raises the next, the next generation of youth will frequently adopt similar values or attitudes as those in their parent generation. For example, the individualism present among members of Generation Z is believed to have directly stemmed from their Gen X parents who are highly independent and view the ability to be independent as a valuable life skill (Rickes, 2016). This often causes generations to have shared characteristics that are frequently overlooked in favor of more controversial out-group stereotypes.

Accuracy of Generational Labels

While the delineation of generations and accuracy of cohort stereotypes has become largely a muddled mess left to individual interpretation, it primarily began with the Baby Boomer generation and had a solid foundation. Baby Boomers are the only living cohort with a defined birth range (1946-1964) which directly corresponded to a large rise in pregnancies

during the late 1900s (Rickes, 2016). In addition, the stereotype of Baby Boomers being selfish or self-centered is based in truth (Kuster, 2018). Baby Boomers were dubbed the “Me Generation” and were no strangers to self-indulgence at events like Woodstock and made their voices known by protesting the Vietnam War (Kitch, 2003). Writers like Bruce Gibney have also blamed the generation for selfishly exploiting the United States economy, saying, “The boomers inherited a rich, dynamic country and have gradually bankrupted it” (Illing, 2019, para. 13). Baby Boomers were viewed as a large group of individuals who thought alike, acted alike, and enjoyed many of the same activities (Kitch, 2003). A 1986 *Time* article painted an unflattering portrait of the generation describing it as “the pig in the python” which distorted and distended everything around it (Thomas, 1986, p. 190). Therefore, a large mass of vocal and indulgent Baby Boomers did live up to the self-obsessed stereotype.

However, generational stereotypes and labels have become consistently less and less accurate since the Baby Boomer generation and mainly rely on generalizations (Pinsker, 2021). Since there is no one authority in charge of establishing or naming generations, this leads cohorts to be created through a chaotic process led by journalists, editors, advertising executives, and the general public (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2020). This lack of consistency and standardization has caused the use of generational labels to be called into question (Pinsker, 2021). Many experts, like University of Maryland sociology professor Philip Cohen, now describe such labels as obsolete and are calling for the end of generational labeling (Cohen, 2021). Generational members are also becoming increasingly dissatisfied with the labels given to them.

A study conducted by Pew Research (2015a) found that most Millennials resist their generational label, as only 40% of Millennials consider themselves to be a part of their cohort.

Millennials had the lowest percentage compared to 58% and 79% for Gen X and Boomers respectively (Pew Research Center, 2015a). This data mirrors what Gardiner et al. (2013) found in a survey studying self-identity in generational segmentation. Gardiner et al. discovered “participants tended to resist adherence to the stereotypical portrayal of their generational cohort and viewed themselves as behaving differently from the group” (p. 644). In addition, society appears to be split on the effectiveness of generational labels as 38% say they are a helpful tool for having conversations about the differences among people of different ages while 36% disagree and 26% are undecided (Pinsker, 2021).

Effects of Generational Labels

One could also argue that labels have made it easy to pit generations against each other and dismiss members of another generation. This can be seen in Generation Z’s recent adoption of the phrase “Ok Boomer” (Lorenz, 2019). The phrase, which originated on TikTok, has become a common retort used by members of Gen Z to dismiss anyone older than them who seems out of touch or does not share their modern views. “Ok Boomer” is seen as the perfect response as it is short and blasé, yet cutting. However, the effectiveness and widespread use of the phrase has made it cool or popular for members of Gen Z to completely dismiss and ignore members of the Baby Boomer generation. Such an act demonstrates the rumblings of intergenerational conflict, which could easily lead to greater societal tension and hostility between members of the two cohorts.

As is customary when employing labels, another effect of generational labeling is the potential for discrimination. Since individuals often have preconceived perceptions about members of different generations or are aware of generational stereotypes, this may lead them to consciously or subconsciously treat individuals from different cohorts differently. For example,

since Baby Boomers are commonly stereotyped as “too old” and “not tech savvy,” this may lead fewer employers to hire them (Kuster, 2018). Cox et al. (2017) found direct evidence of this by conducting a study in four workplace scenarios, which found that the use of the term “Baby Boomer” instead of “older worker” made employers less likely to hire and more likely to fire senior-age employees. Similarly, a Gen X manager may be more likely to hire a Gen X candidate than a Millennial one, because the manager perceives the Gen X candidate as being part of his or her in-group while the Millennial is perceived as a member of an out-group.

Summary

Although there are a number of theories relevant to generational research, including Mannheim’s theory of generations, generational cohort theory, and Strauss and Howe’s generational theory, Tajfel and Turner’s SIT was used in the study to gain greater insight into how an individual's group membership can affect perceptions of themselves and others. While there have been many generations throughout history, the four largest and most studied today are Baby Boomers (1946–1964), Generation X (1965–1980), Millennials (1981–1996), and Generation Z (1997–2012) (Dimock, 2019). The study of generations first became popular in the 1990s when Strauss and Howe published their book *Generations*, but generations were discussed in the media beginning in the 1950s (Kitch, 2003). Those in the media and other generations have always tried to enhance their own self-esteem by assigning negative stereotypes to succeeding generations, and these stereotypes are then reaffirmed by their own confirmation bias (Riggio & Saggi, 2015). While perceived stereotypes of a generation vary from individual to individual, there are common ones ascribed to members of each generation, such as how Millennials are often viewed as lazy and technology-obsessed (Kuster, 2018).

Even though each generation is perceived as being different, they often have more in common than meets the eye, as all generations have been found to have a similar work ethic and level of happiness (Khan et al., 2021; Zabel et al., 2017). While generation labels and stereotypes began as an accurate snapshot of the Baby Boomer generation, their accuracy has continually waned for subsequent generations, as fewer and fewer individuals identify with their generational label as time progresses (Pew Research Center, 2015a). Labels have also been viewed negatively as they can lead to intergenerational conflict and discrimination (Cox et al., 2017; Lorenz, 2019).

Observing this past research, one can see that generational labels and stereotypes are becoming less popular and accurate for members of existing generations. While studies have been conducted to assess the accuracy of given labels and stereotypes for past generations (Gardiner et al., 2013; Kuster, 2018), no such study which examines the accuracy of stereotypes for Generation Z can be found in the existing body of literature. Therefore, the goal of this study was to fill this knowledge gap by finding how members of Gen Z perceive their generational label and common stereotypes assigned to them.

Chapter 3: Methodology

According to Lee (2014), “Qualitative research is used for addressing ‘how’ questions rather than ‘how many,’ for understanding real life from the perspective of those being studied, and for examining and articulating processes” (p. 94). Since this study evaluated how individuals within Gen Z perceive generational stereotypes, a qualitative research approach was used in order to allow participants to open-ly share their thoughts and feelings on the topic that could then be collected and analyzed by the researcher. More specifically, the researcher hoped to answer the question: Can generational labels, such as those applied to previous generations, accurately communicate the characteristics of individuals in Generation Z?

Studying the ability of labels to communicate characteristics of Generation Z helped fill a research gap in the existing literature, as similar studies had been conducted involving past generations, but none had yet been conducted involving Generation Z. The findings of this study were also important to the field of communication as marketers rely on generational labels and stereotypes to provide accurate segments of a target market. However, if prevailing perceptions of Generation Z were determined to be inaccurate, this could radically change the way marketers target and communicate with Generation Z as well as other generations.

Social identity theory (SIT) was also used in the study to investigate the role of in-group/out-group bias on the perpetuation of generational stereotypes. Since one of the hallmarks of SIT is the assumption that an in-group will inevitably assign negative traits or stereotypes to an out-group in order to enhance their own self-image, this idea was further investigated by assessing the accuracy of traits assigned to the out-group of Generation Z by other generational in-groups (Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Millennials).

Participants

Participants for this study were primarily selected based on age. Since members of Generation Z are defined as those born between the years 1997–2012, the only qualification for participating in the study is that a participant was between the ages of 9 to 24. (Dimock, 2019). In an effort to survey a diverse pool of participants, members of Generation Z from across the United States were interviewed. These participants were part of a convenience sample involving personal acquaintances of the researcher who hailed from or currently lived in different regions of the United States.

Procedures

Due to the desire of the researcher to interview participants from across the United States, interviews varied based on the participant's geographic location. Participants living or attending a university close to the researcher were interviewed face-to-face in a location of the participant's choice. This was done in an effort to maintain convenience for the participant and create a relaxed environment in which the participant felt able to safely express their honest personal opinions in response to interview questions. However, participants living outside of the researcher's home state were interviewed via video chat (e.g. Facetime, Zoom) on a platform and time agreed upon by the researcher and participant for the purpose of saving time and travel costs.

The interview consisted of approximately 16 questions (see Appendix A) and varied from asking participants to describe their generation to assessing the validity of common, individual stereotypes assigned to Generation Z. Individuals were kept anonymous and assigned a pseudonym for reporting. As part of the process, the researcher recorded interviews with a tape recorder to ensure quality and accurate transcription of participant responses. The researcher also used pen-and-paper to take notes while conducting interviews. To help keep both the researcher

and participant on track, a list of interview questions was provided to the participant immediately prior to the interview. This was done in an attempt to provide more structure and help the participant more clearly articulate his or her responses. In order to prevent bias, the researcher asked open-ended questions, which prevented leading inquires and encouraged participants to share their true opinions.

Data Analysis

After all interviews were conducted, the researcher transcribed then used thematic analysis to search for common threads or patterns between participant responses. Thematic analysis is a method for recognizing, examining, and reporting themes within a data set (Du, 2011). This method is known for its flexibility, as it is not limited to one theoretical framework, and thus can serve as “a flexible and useful research tool, which can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex, amount of data” (Braun & Clark, 2006, p. 78). The researcher reported all major findings in an effort to prevent any research bias.

In addition, the researcher analyzed the data by following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six step approach for thematic analysis. These steps are as follows:

1. Familiarizing oneself with the data (transcribing, reading, and taking down initial ideas).
2. Generating initial codes (coding is “the process of organizing the material into chunks or segments of text to develop a general meaning of each segment,”) (Creswell, 2009, p. 227).
3. Searching for themes (grouping similar codes into themes and gathering data relevant to each theme).
4. Reviewing themes (refining and mapping out present themes).

5. Defining and naming themes (clearly define each theme and the overall narrative they tell by working together).
6. Producing the report (constructing a vivid, detailed analysis of the findings that relate back to the research question and empirical literature).

Summary

This study used a qualitative approach to examine the accuracy of stereotypes given to Generation Z by previous generations. Individual members of Gen Z from across the United States were interviewed, and their responses were analyzed using a thematic analysis to identify similar themes. Patterns were highlighted and discussed in the following section in an attempt to better understand the topic and reach a conclusion about the effectiveness of generational labels as well as the implications of such findings for marketers and researchers.

Chapter 4: Results

Responses from a 16-question interview conducted with 14 members of Generation Z were collected and analyzed using thematic analysis. The researcher stopped at 14 interviews as data saturation was achieved and it provided an evenly split sample of male/female participants (7 males, 7 females).

Table 1

Participant Demographics

| Name | Sex | Age | Race | State of Residence | Occupation |
|----------------|-----|-----|----------|--------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Amanda Everton | F | 22 | White | North Carolina | Restaurant worker/College student |
| Andy Wallen | M | 23 | White | Florida | Delivery driver/College student |
| Chris Taylor | M | 22 | White | California | Resident assistant/College student |
| Grace Howard | F | 20 | White | Indiana | Restaurant worker/College student |
| Harper Lewis | F | 20 | Biracial | Indiana | Restaurant worker/College student |
| Leon Wright | M | 24 | White | New Jersey | Accountant |
| Lucas Wood | M | 19 | White | Tennessee | College student |
| Makalya Evans | F | 23 | White | Virginia | Biologist |
| Marshall Moore | M | 22 | Black | Virginia | Athletic trainer |
| Merrin Ellis | F | 22 | White | Virginia | Unemployed |
| Olivia Blevins | F | 23 | White | Alaska | College student |
| Ricky Adams | M | 21 | White | Virginia | College student |
| Sean Phillips | M | 16 | White | Tennessee | High school student |
| Shelby Smith | F | 16 | White | Tennessee | Restaurant worker/High school student |

After all interviews were conducted, they were transcribed and thematically coded. 16 themes were identified throughout the data set, and these themes have been grouped into six different categories, which are discussed in greater detail below.

Impact of Technology/Social Media

One of the largest themes present throughout interviews was the perceived influence of technology and social media on members of Generation Z. Nearly all participants expressed the

belief that social media and technology have impacted their generation and will continue to do so. One of the major ways participants believe technology has influenced their generation is by dividing up the population into various subcultures. According to Gen Zers, increased connectivity via the internet has created niche groups or cliques that individuals can be a part of and use to further define their personality. Amanda Everton, a 22-year-old college student and participant, expressed: “I feel connected to members of my generation within like different subgroups, like within music scenes or like people that have similar interests to me” (Everton, 2022). In addition, 23-year-old Olivia Blevins spoke on the subject saying, “Through little things like TikTok trends... it creates these mini communities that people get to be a part of and identify themselves with, which I think is really special and really rare” (Blevins, 2022).

Similarly, as they discussed subgrouping, participants expressed the idea that Gen Z could be split into multiple generational cohorts, as older Gen Zers felt they should be differentiated from younger members of their generation. One individual mentioned that technology has advanced so much within the span of the Gen Z that it could easily be divided into three different generations. While another participant commented saying, “I feel like there’s a huge difference between like the older half of Gen Z and the younger half... I can tell that there’s just such a difference in even just clothing and stuff” (Evans, 2022).

The majority of Gen Zers also agreed that social media and increased access to technology is what sets them apart from other generations. Participants recalled witnessing the rise of social media apps, like Instagram and Snapchat, and referenced their status as digital natives, being born into a world full of technology and not knowing an age without a screen. Some participants expressed they felt members of their generation were at least partially raised or parented by technology and that members of the next generation will be even more dependent

on technology than they are. Interestingly, this also led to the idea that Gen Z parents may try to restrict the exposure of their children to technology with one participant saying:

I honestly think that my generation sees more of the dangers of technology than our parents do. So, I feel like when we have kids, we're going to be much more discerning with how we're going to let our kids use it. Like every person I've talked to is like 'Oh yeah, my kid's not getting a phone till they're like 16!' because we all got phones so young, and we saw horrible things and like got ourselves into trouble with friends and false information and stuff. (Everton, 2022)

However, participants also noted that technology works to positively empower Gen Z.

Another perceived impact of technology on members of Generation Z is that it can serve as a means of inspiration or a creative outlet for individuals. Technology allows Gen Z to express themselves while also seeing others showcase their talents and, thus, be inspired to try new things. One participant noted, "With technology there's a lot of exposure to cool people doing cool things and you're like 'Hey, maybe I can do a cool thing,' and you go do a cool thing" (Phillips, 2022). Participants also believed their generation will use technology to change the world by furthering existing innovations, such as non-fungible tokens (NFTs) and cryptocurrency, as well as making new technological advancements that will benefit society. In addition, while most participants discussed the impact of social media on Generation Z, they admitted it had both positive and negative effects.

On the positive side, many participants described social media as an effective tool which enables them to easily connect with other members of their generation. Gen Zers use social media as a way to make friends, communicate with friends, and keep tabs on what their friends are doing. Participants also noted that social media allows the ability to see the world through

somebody else's eyes and observe what anyone is doing at any point in time. When asked how Gen Z is different from previous generations, 20-year-old participant Grace Howard responded, "Social media is probably the biggest difference just because like we have access to everything and to see what everyone we know is doing at any point in time. It's weird and no one's ever experienced that before" (Howard, 2022). This type of constant connection has led Gen Z to live in a hyperconnected world where friends are just a click away and allows them a direct window into the lives of others. This enables Gen Zers to be exposed to individuals with different beliefs and views, which can lead to greater understanding or greater conflict. However, this global connectivity allows Gen Zers the chance to appreciate other cultures and experience the lives of people all around the world in a unique, interactive way without even leaving their homes.

Another pro of social media for Generation Z is that it provides a platform for individuals to showcase their creativity and unique talents. Social media apps, like Instagram and TikTok, give Gen Zers a place to unashamedly express their individualism and creativity. Other members can then follow along, form connections with an individual, and be inspired to make their own content. Participants discussed that one final benefit of social media for their generation is that it helps empower or give some members of Gen Z a voice. Social media helps embolden shier members of Gen Z to share their opinions or stories with others, who otherwise may never speak up. According to 16-year-old high school student Shelby Smith:

There's so many funny people on TikTok who I feel like would be too scared in-person to be like 'Hey, I did this,' but they can go on TikTok and tell the whole world 'I just did this, let's laugh about it,' you know? (Smith, 2022)

On the other hand, participants also discussed negative impacts of social media on their generation, first and foremost being that social media can isolate and cause feelings of loneliness

among individuals. While participants cited social media as a great way to connect with other individuals, many also noted that sitting alone while seeing pictures of friends hanging out in group settings can cause Gen Zers to feel lonely and excluded. In addition, participants mentioned that most Gen Zers only post the best version of themselves or their lives on social media, which creates a false reality. According to 22-year-old Chris Taylor, “Social media only shows off the best of us... so everyone lives these falsely amazing lives and then we get these expectations of life should be exciting, traveling the world, and Instagram pics every day that look amazing” (Taylor, 2022).

Participants stated that another downside of social media is that it leads to less meaningful interactions with others. Even with the emergence and popularity of digital communication, participants expressed the importance and value of face-to-face communication, especially when seeking to build or maintain relationships with others. Members of Generation Z expressed the idea that digital friends are not the same as physical friends and that digital communication leads to less meaningful conversions, with one participant stating:

Technology makes it so much easier to have acquaintances and talk to people, but I don't think it's meaningful conversation. And I think as human beings, we're created for deep conversation... and I don't think you get that on technology. (Everton, 2022)

In addition, one final drawback of social media participants discussed was the ability for individuals to hide behind a screen. While participants mentioned social media can be a tool that empowers and encourages individuals to freely express themselves, a few participants voiced concerns that it has made some members of Generation Z shier and more sensitive. One interviewee expressed their belief that when members of Gen Z see something on social media they dislike, they are quick to transform into “keyboard warriors” who share their opinions

online but, when the same individuals are addressed in-person, they refuse to say a word (Wallen, 2022). Although, participants certainly had a lot to say when it came to discussing innate traits found in their generation, a topic discussed in the next section.

Generation Z... According to Generation Z

While conducting interviews, the researcher noticed that participants described Generation Z using several recurring, and largely unprompted, traits that were present across interviews. Chief among these traits was the belief that members of Gen Z are naturally creative. Participants believed that social media and technology have allowed their generation to be more expressive as well as generate new ideas. In addition, several participants cited creativity as one of the most important values to them and members of their generation. These participants then went on to note that Gen Z has a way of open-minded and out-of-the-box thinking that enables them to solve problems and be more entrepreneurial. Similarly, individuals expressed that this same creative, entrepreneurial spirit has caused Gen Zers to break out of traditional work life as well.

Many participants shared similar ways in which they believe Generation Z is redefining modern workplace and career norms. From investing in cryptocurrency to starting Etsy shops to driving for Door Dash, participants provided numerous examples of how many people their age are increasingly looking for side hustles and quick ways to make money. Interviewees mentioned this drive is being fueled by technology where Gen Zers see others trying new things and are inspired to take risks and make such opportunities for themselves. Participants also noted that Gen Zers are looking for more flexible and creative work opportunities that are outside of traditional 9-to-5 jobs. Individuals expressed the belief that 9-to-5 jobs are becoming a thing of the past, as Gen Zers are tired of old work ways, which has led them to seek new and

individualized employment opportunities. Similarly, participants mentioned Gen Z will no longer work in roles they do not care about but will instead find ways to make money doing the things they love. According to Olivia Blevins:

Taking what they love and teaching people how to invest in it, I think is just the heart of Gen Z, being like I don't want to work a job that I hate. I'm going to do what I want. So, let's do this. (Blevins, 2022)

In addition to the workplace, participants also expressed beliefs that Gen Z is breaking down barriers when it comes to mental health.

Across interviews, many participants expressed the belief that Generation Z is destigmatizing mental health issues by openly talking about their feelings and internal struggles, like anxiety and depression. Members believed that this is a major departure from previous generations who have a history of suppressing and bottling up their feelings. Participants felt proud of Gen Z for making progress on this issue with one participant saying, "Now you have this generation that's like 'Hey, let's all go to a therapist, let's talk about the problems that we have.' So we don't just bottle it up," and another putting it simply, "I like that we're not scared to talk about the hard stuff" (Lewis, 2022; Moore, 2022). Participants believe this open communication of thoughts and feelings will further improve the world moving forward by helping people be more honest with one another and as positive mental health helps promote positivity in all other areas of life.

When asked if members of their generation were technology-obsessed, most individuals agreed but several clarified stating their belief that Gen Z is not so much technology-obsessed as it is technology-reliant. Interviewees elaborated saying that since they have been raised with technology, it powers many aspects of their everyday lives and allows them to accomplish tasks.

However, when technology is removed, many individuals their age do not know how to complete certain tasks, which can give the impression that Gen Z is tech obsessed. In addition to technology-dependent, the various words used by participants to describe Generation Z were collected and inserted into a word cloud generator which produced the result in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Words Used by Participants to Describe Gen Z



Words used more commonly by participants appear larger than those only mentioned once. One can see that both positive and negative words were ascribed to the generation, “selfish” being the most popular followed by “outgoing” and “creative” with 5, 4, and 3 mentions, respectively.

Table 2

Frequency of Words Used by Participants to Describe Gen Z

| Frequency | Word(s) |
|-----------|---|
| 5 | selfish |
| 4 | outgoing |
| 3 | creative |
| 2 | justice-oriented, kind, lazy, passionate, passive, short-attention span |

- 1 accepting, activists, addicted, adventurous, arrogant, artsy, blunt, bold, confident, confused, determined, distracted, dreamers, driven, easily-offended, entitled, ethically-driven, focused, hidden, hypocrites, immature, impatient, individualistic, introverted, irresponsible, kind, less-judgmental, loving, misinformed, not-committed, open-minded, opinionated, original, perfectionists, self-centered, social media driven, spiritual, spontaneous, spunky, supportive, unique, unmotivated, vocal, yearn for drama

While there was clearly little coherence on descriptors for the generation, participants had a much more unified view when it came to assessing generational stereotypes.

Accuracy of Gen Z Stereotypes

During the interview, participants were asked to identify the accuracy of five common stereotypical traits assigned to Generation Z: individualistic, lonely, technology-obsessed, sensitive, and entrepreneurial. Participants overwhelmingly agreed that the five traits mentioned were accurate for members of their generation and all members agreed that Gen Z could be described as entrepreneurial. However, for all stereotypes besides entrepreneurial, at least one participant disagreed or stated that it depended on the individual and/or circumstance. Yet, when participants were asked if they felt their generation was accurately portrayed by the media and other individuals, many interviewees stated they felt as though the media often fails to fully understand their generation.

Several participants expressed that they felt media data on Generation Z is often skewed by only pulling data from a specific sample rather than a broad survey of individuals which they believed would be more accurate. 16-year-old Sean Phillips noted “What the media says about our generation is such a small, tiny sampling of our generation that I think... a lot of times they get the wrong idea” (Phillips, 2022). Other individuals noted that they think older generations’ perceptions of Gen Z can generate negative stereotypes saying, “I think the way people view our

society affects the way we take it, because if people are negative to us, we see it negatively” (Smith, 2022). Although, most participants voiced disapproval for stereotypes in general, saying they can sometimes be accurate but calling it unrealistic to expect a single label to apply to an entire generation of individuals. However, this belief of being misrepresented by the media yet confirming the accuracy of perpetuated stereotypes creates a generational paradox and is not the only paradox that exists within Generation Z.

Gen Z Paradoxes

Participants both wittingly and unwittingly admitted that a number of paradoxes exist within Generation Z. First, individuals acknowledged that members of their generation have a high sense of individualism and strive to be unique, but many end up following the same trends and becoming just like everybody else as a result. According to 20-year-old Grace Howard, “Everyone kind of just follows the same trends and ends up being the same person for like four months, and then it changes to a different person for another four months” (Howard, 2022). Participants expressed that this is particularly evident in Gen Z fashion, believing that many members of the generation dress the same in an effort to feel unique, yet blend in as part of the “cool” crowd.

Second, another paradox presented by the generation is that many Gen Zers feel stereotypes given to them by the media are accurate but also feel that the media fails to fully understand them. This idea was reiterated by several participants, one of whom commented, “It’s really interesting actually how the media reacts to Gen Z because one day they’re calling us snowflakes, the next day, they’re upset because we’re doing too much” (Blevins, 2022). As mentioned previously, many participants believed the media only looks at a small sample of their generation instead of the entire population, which leads to inaccurate representation. They also

noted that the media tends to focus on the bad things members of their generation do instead of their positive aspects and achievements. However, regardless of these views, the majority of participants still agreed that both positive and negative media stereotypes about Gen Z were true.

Third, another paradox posed by one participant was a belief that Gen Zers crave authenticity but would rather be appreciated. Several participants cited honesty and authenticity as key values important to members of their generation, but 22-year-old college student Chris Taylor expressed “For most people, Generation Z, they don’t want truth, they want acceptance... so they’d rather have a snake come tell them ‘Wow, you looked great! Oh, I loved your post! Ah beautiful!’ because they just want to feel good” (Taylor, 2022). According to Taylor, this dichotomy is further fueled by social media and the desire of Gen Zers to fit in and be liked rather than hearing people’s true opinions about themselves.

The fourth and final paradox presented by Gen Z is that their generation promotes kindness while simultaneously tearing others down. While many participants expressed their belief that Gen Z embodies and is trying to spread kindness, several participants also voiced concerns that their generation is quick to cancel or fight others who disagree with them. One interviewee noted, “There’s so much hate, not just with my generation, with the world in general. I think my generation is also trying to be kind to one another, even though at the same time we tend to tear each other down” (Smith, 2022). Participants further added to the paradox by stating that their generation is fueling cancel culture even though most participants agreed the practice of canceling others is unnecessary and unfair. This led individuals to identify and express that Generation Z needs better boundaries and to work on respecting and showing kindness to individuals moving forward.

Other Noteworthy Findings

In addition to the themes already discussed, there were several interesting themes that emerged that could not be easily grouped into a singular category. One such finding was that participants were split on whether they were proud to be members of Generation Z. When asked if they were proud to be in Generation Z, seven participants answered yes, five answered no, and two stated that they were indifferent. Those that answered yes cited that they liked their generation's ability to be passionate, supportive, and creative, while those that responded no stated they felt Gen Z has failed to achieve much, posts too much embarrassing content on social media, and felt more connected to older individuals.

Another interesting theme that became apparent across interviews is that several participants noted they preferred the company of members in other generations or felt more a part of other generational cohorts than their own. Four individuals of varying ages independently mentioned that they felt they connected and communicated better with individuals older than them. 19-year-old Lucas Wood said, "For the most part, I generally talk better and communicate better with like adults or older adults than my generation" (Wood, 2022). These individuals also expressed that they had more friends who were older than them compared to those younger than them or in their generation. While this may merely be personal preference, it might also have something to do with the way Gen Z was raised.

One additional finding noted by the researcher was that participants believed the way they were parented played a direct role in shaping their generation and parents are at least partially responsible for how Gen Z has turned out. Two younger participants mentioned that they felt sheltered by their Gen X parents and that Generation X has a tendency to be overprotective, directly influencing their Gen Z children. One participant said, "I feel like a lot of Gen Xers are very sheltering of their kids and they don't let their kids experience the real-life

world and then that causes the children to act out in a way” (Smith, 2022). Another participant described a similar example. One interviewee expressed the belief that since most Gen Z parents are more affluent and monetarily driven this has resulted in Gen Z pivoting and pursuing more meaningful jobs/work rather than primarily being motivated by money. While this pattern of behavior could be argued for all generations, participants arrived at this conclusion without any prompting, which made it worth noting. However, it quickly became evident that a great deal of confusion still exists surrounding the generation cycle when discussing the topic with participants.

Confusion about Generations

While attempting to assess the behaviors of their generation, it became common for interviewees to reference and inquire about previous generations. However, it soon became apparent that many Gen Zers were not aware of the order or cutoffs of established generations. At the beginning of the interview, several participants asked what the birth range of their generation was and, when asked about the perceived characteristics of other generations (Baby Boomers, Gen X, and Millennials), participants commonly asked how old individuals in those generations were. Two older participants noted that they had been told they were in the Millennial Generation when they were younger but had learned more recently, they were actually a part of Generation Z. Several participants also frequently confused the names of Gen Z and Gen X and accidentally used them interchangeably.

In addition, when asked about the traits or stereotypes of members in Generation X, a number of participants struggled to answer and admitted they lacked knowledge about members of Gen X. One participant expressed: “I feel like they’re just kind of lost in the sauce,” while another stated, “In my mind, it skips... from Baby Boomer to Millennial. Gen X, they’re just

kind of there in my opinion” (Ellis, 2022; Wood, 2022). This discovery was somewhat ironic, considering many Gen Zers have Gen X parents and are still living in their households, but further adds validity to the frequently voiced belief of Gen Xers that they are a lost generation forgotten by society.

When it came to participants’ views about members of other generations, a variety of answers were given that included both positive and negative traits. Common answers given for Baby Boomers included hardworking, old, stubborn, selfish, “Karens”, judgmental, driven, and family-centered. To describe Generation X, participants used words such as hardworking, security-oriented, career-focused, caring, sheltering, emotionally-hardened, loyal, and family-focused. On the other hand, lazy, cringy, weird, individualistic, physically healthy, fun-seeking, directionless, and self-obsessed were the words Gen Zers ascribed to Millennials.

Summary

This chapter detailed the significant findings of the study that emerged from across 14 interviews. From the profound impact of social media and technology on Gen Z to a series of paradoxes that arose from within the generation, the researcher made a number of notable discoveries. These findings are dissected further and considered within the context of the entire research study in the following chapter.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Over the course of this study, it became clear that the majority of participants agreed with common labels given to their generation, but many questioned the effectiveness of stereotypes and lacked knowledge about generations including their own. When participants were asked to use words to describe Gen Z, a variety of 67 adjectives were used, some complementing and some conflicting. From supportive to selfish, participants used both positive and negative characteristics to describe Gen Z. This further supports the idea that Generation Z is a diverse and individualistic cohort whose members have unique attitudes and opinions. However, when asked to assess the validity of five common labels given to their generation, the vast majority of participants agreed that such labels were true, which suggests that the practice of generational labeling is still accurate.

During the interview process, participants frequently offered unsolicited commentary on stereotypes, agreeing that such labels typically stem from truth but can still falsely represent groups, as 23-year-old Makalya Evans noted, “I think that all stereotypes come from truth, but I think that they can be blown out of proportion” (Evans, 2022). Again, suggesting that Gen Zers dislike being labeled but revealing that they do view such labels as accurate. However, the lack of knowledge from participants about the birth range and delineation of their own generation, as well as others, demonstrates that generational labeling is a practice primarily being perpetuated by older individuals and marketers, which once again makes the effectiveness of the practice questionable.

When looking at these results through the lens of Tajfel and Turner’s Social Identity Theory (SIT), the theory offers insights into participant responses correlating with the ideas of social identification and social comparison. One of the foundations of SIT is the belief that there

are three stages that lead to group membership: social categorization, social identification, and social comparison. According to McLeod (2019), “In the second stage, social identification, we adopt the identity of the group we have categorized ourselves as belonging to” (para 11). This includes mimicking the behaviors of other group members and developing an emotional connection to the group. Throughout interviews, when asked if they felt connected to other members of their generation, participants commonly expressed the idea that they felt less connected to their generation as a whole but more connected to other members of their generation through various subgroups. This can be explained as a direct manifestation of social identification as Gen Z members admit to identifying and developing emotional connections to smaller subgroups, or in-groups, of their population. Participants also expressed beliefs that members of Gen Z tend to follow trends and adopt the looks and behaviors of others; a pattern detailed in the secondary stage of SIT.

Similarly, the final stage of SIT is social comparison. According to McLeod (2019), “Once we have categorized ourselves as part of a group... we then tend to compare that group with other groups. If our self-esteem is to be maintained our group needs to compare favorably with other groups” (para 14). This comparison leads to the creation of an in-group (individuals who are perceived to be in a group) and an out-group (those perceived to be outside of a group) where members of an in-group will seek to find negative aspects of an out-group in order to improve their own self-image. Generational labeling further encourages this idea, as members of a generation perceive themselves to be members of an in-group while considering other generations as out-groups. The idea that Generation Z sees itself as an in-group was supported by the answers of participants who reiterated common stereotypes for other generations and felt that other generations failed to fully understand them or, in other words, that they were subject to

outgroup bias. Thus, social comparison can be viewed as a phenomenon that exists both within and outside of Generation Z.

The finding that participants believe Gen Z should be further delineated or broken into multiple generations also directly ties into SIT. Multiple older participants noted that they felt different from those on the younger end of their generation and that they should be categorized differently. This suggests that older members of Gen Z may have formed their own in-group and view younger members of the generation as an out-group and/or vice versa. This finding also further demonstrates the presence of SIT's three stages of group membership within Generation Z, especially the social identification and social comparison stages.

In addition, this result has implications for those in the fields of marketing and communication. Since members of Gen Z identify more with subgroups and feel their generation is split, this suggests that marketers should employ more niche, targeted marketing to reach subgroups of Gen Z rather than broad, mass-media campaigns that target the generation as a whole. While this trend has been on the rise in recent years, the study suggests that such tactics should continue, and more direct channels of communication should be utilized in order to most effectively reach members of Generation Z.

Another interesting finding as a result of the study is that Gen Z is split on their sense of generational pride. With participants in a seven to five split, proud versus not proud (two participants indifferent), this mixed sense of generational pride is consistent with previous research which shows a downward trend in individuals embracing their generational label. Pew Research (2015a) found that while 79% Baby Boomers considered themselves to be a part of their generation, only 40% of Millennials identified themselves as part of their generation. Therefore, the fact that the small sample of 14 Gen Zers surveyed in this study was split almost

evenly on embracing their label, displays that this trend is likely to continue and adds further support to the argument that generational labels are becoming obsolete.

In the study, participants also demonstrated a surprising lack of knowledge about the generational cycle. Many participants were unaware of the birth years or ages of Gen Z and confused the order of past generations, such as Millennials and Gen X. This is likely due to the lack of standardization and proper education about the generation cycle. Since there is no single entity that delineates generations, lines have been drawn by a number of organizations which has created a great deal of generational confusion that has been passed down to and is clearly evident among members of Generation Z. This confusion and lack of knowledge raises questions about the effectiveness of the practice and the sustainability of the generational cycle. Since generational labels are continually being created by older individuals, it remains to be seen if Gen Z individuals will continue this cycle as they get older, or a lack of knowledge and wariness of stereotypes will cause them to break the cycle and end such labelling.

Limitations

This study had several limitations first of which is that, while the researcher sought to interview a diverse group of participants, using a convenience sample resulted in many participants being the same race and having similar political and religious beliefs as the researcher. Therefore, greater result variation or differing opinions may be present among more racially diverse members of Generation Z or those with different faith backgrounds and political ideologies. Second, is that only Gen Z participants living in the United States were interviewed. Given that every country has a different culture and a unique history of influential national events, Gen Zers in other nations may have different views or attitudes toward such generational labels than those in the United States. Finally, the research methodology itself served as a

limitation, preventing more statistics and hard data on Gen Z perceptions of labels from being obtained. However, this limitation may be overcome in future research.

Suggestions for Future Research

While this study sought to interview a mixed sample of Gen Z participants from across the United States, the researcher was only able to interview individuals ages 16–24. Therefore, more research should be conducted to assess the attitudes of younger individuals in Gen Z (those ages 9–15) on generational labels. Adding a question to the study that directly asks whether participants believe generational labelling is effective would help further identify Gen Z's views on labels and stereotypes. Similar studies conducted with international participants would also be beneficial, as Gen Zers in other countries may offer different opinions or insights that could further contribute to the body of research. A future study with a quantitative research design could also help further evaluate Gen Z stereotype perceptions and provide valuable statistics for marketers and researchers.

Summary

As mentioned previously in Chapter 1, the research question for this study was as follows: Can generational labels, such as those applied to previous generations, accurately communicate the characteristics of individuals in Generation Z? After conducting research and interviewing members of Gen Z, the short answer is yes. However, a closer look reveals that Generation Z is a complex group of individuals. Gen Z is a generation in paradox, striving to be unique yet assimilating into various subcultures from which they draw their identity. Members connect to each other within subgroups and develop similar traits and behaviors which can be communicated via labels and stereotypes. However, Gen Z is one of the largest and most diverse

cohorts in history, which means that any attempt to assign labels to the generation as a whole will result in some inaccuracy.

Such was the case with previous generations but the divergence of Gen Z embracing individualism over collectivism shows a direct shift from their Millennial predecessors and Gen Z's tendency to define themselves through tight-knit communities means that marketers and strategic communicators must adapt their strategies to reach such individuals. However, marketers and researchers should proceed with caution when using generational labels as a research tool, knowing that they will never be 100% accurate. In addition, Generation Z's dislike of stereotypes, paired with participants' lack of knowledge about generations, shows that labels are being perpetuated by older generations and may lead Gen Zers to phase them out as they get older. Regardless, Generation Z is a cohort sure to make their own mark on society as summed up by 24-year-old participant Leon Wright:

I feel like 15-20 years from now, I think definitely we're going to have a strong impact on the world. It's not going to be the same world that our ancestors helped shape, but I definitely think we're going to have our own say. (Wright, 2022)

Therefore, one can certainly see that Gen Z is a unique generation, whose members admit they have positive and negative traits, but sit ready and eager to change the world as they grow and step into the societal spotlight.

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Appendix

Appendix A

Interview Questions

1. What is your name and age?
2. What words would you use to describe members of your generation?
3. Do you feel connected to other members of your generation? Why or why not?
4. How do you believe your generation is different from previous generations?
5. Do you feel your generation is portrayed accurately by the media/other people? Why or why not?
6. - 10. Generation Z has been described as ____ do you feel like that is accurate? Why or why not?
 - Individualistic
 - Lonely
 - Technology-obsessed
 - Sensitive
 - Entrepreneurial
11. Do you feel proud to be a part of Generation Z? Why or why not?
12. What values do you think are important to you and others in your generation?
13. Do you believe Generation Z will change or impact the world? In what way?
14. What do you believe are the traits of Baby Boomers?
15. What do you believe are the traits of Millennials?
16. What do you believe are the traits of Gen Xers?