



Say Goodbye to "Generation Z"

The ongoing toll of disease and economic mayhem visited on the U.S. by the COVID-19 pandemic will one day be overcome. But no segment of American society will be more profoundly affected in the long run than today's youngest generation, commonly called Generation Z.

In May and June, graduating students (college and high school alike) will be awarded diplomas the same way they completed their course work – online. All of those high school graduates and 63% of the college graduating class are among the eldest cohort of Gen Z. The entire generation is now being educated at home. High school and college sports, likewise, are on indefinite pause. “March Madness” this year described something far different than college basketball's annual fest.

Not since the attack on Pearl Harbor has a generation entering adulthood awakened one morning to a world so suddenly turned upside down, and to futures so uncertain. The course of their lives is taking a detour. And while the challenges they will face as the months and years unfold can only be imagined in this moment, one change coming soon seems inevitable: we won't be calling them “Generation Z” much longer.

History shows that generations are defined by the common denominator that binds them, as a group, for life. Looking back 75 years, the arrival of the Baby Boom provides a text-book example.

There Are Just So Many of Them

Those born after the end of World War II might well have been called the “Victory Generation,” or the “Peacetime Generation,” though history (and the Korean War) soon would have erased those aspirational labels. The one inescapable fact about this group is that there were just so many of them, and their numbers defined them through their lifetimes. Schools were built from them at every stage of their young lives. Marketers adored them and churned out millions of Superman lunchboxes, Barbie Dolls, hula hoops, and ultimately Corvettes and Thunderbirds. Winemakers, too, found a bountiful audience as Boomers came of age and discovered Hearty Burgundy or Almaden Mountain Red. Lambrusco followed, and White Zinfandel. Eventually, the world of wine, from Cabernet Sauvignon to Carignan, became the splendid domain that Boomers ruled, and still do, to a significant extent.

Baby Bust Follows the Boom

The soaring birth rate that began in 1946 peaked in 1964, with growing use of the birth control pill. Birth rates sank in 1965 and remained low through 1976. Demographers referred to those born in that period as the “Baby Bust” generation – a name that would not endure.

A novel written by Doug Coupland – Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture – became a best seller in 1991, when the age range of the “Baby Bust” generation was 15 – 26. Coupland painted a vivid portrait of disaffected “20-something” Southern Californians who held in common a disdain for the generation preceding them and its culture. The term “McJob” originated in the novel, as did a generational protestation: “I am not a target audience.” Not long after the book's publication, “Generation X” was adopted by marketers, academics, and twenty-somethings themselves because it so perfectly described this cohort. To Coupland, the “X” in “Generation X” had nothing to do with alphabetical order but referred to an “unknown,” as in mathematics.

They became, of course, a target audience – like it or not. And because they rejected so many things Baby Boomers loved, wine seemed, at first, not to be a fit. The beer industry responded with flavored malt beverages like Zima, and Smirnoff Ice. Gen X young adults did not embrace wine as Boomers did in their 20s, but they are in their mid-forties to mid-fifties today and account for 1 in 5 of all high frequency wine drinkers. They also have the highest median household income of all generations, and buy a greater share of \$20-plus wines than their modest percentage of the population might suggest.

At First, They Were Called Generation Y

In 1977, a sudden and dramatic surge in the U.S. birth rate heralded the next generation, which would be nearly the size of the Baby Boom. Marketers and many in the media were quick to call them “Generation Y,” but as they entered adulthood in the new millennium, “Generation Y” became another place-holder like “Baby Busters,” cast aside in favor of a name referential to their common denominator: Millennials.

Marketers found in Millennials the same boundless potential as a consumer group that Baby Boomers had been – millions upon millions of young Americans in a prosperous economy with so much spending ahead of them. In fact, as they came of age, they resembled Baby Boomers in an interesting way – they had a taste for wine from the very start. Rather than reject all that their elders favored or embraced culturally, Millennials simply picked and chose whatever delighted them and made it their own. They knew they were a target audience and that was fine, because they understood the game and played it well. In recent years, the rising popularity of red blend wines, Prosecco and other sparkling wines, Provence rosé, and wine in cans have all been driven by the choices of Millennial wine drinkers.

The Long Road Ahead

The first wave of the generation following Millennials is now reaching legal drinking age (the oldest will be 25 in 2020, according to American Generations, while the Pew Research Center places them at 23). They are roughly the same in number as Millennials, but are even more racially and ethnically diverse, with only a slight majority (52%) identifying as non-Hispanic white.

A recent Wine Opinions survey found distinct, if not surprising, preferences among Gen Z wine drinkers. They most often buy white, rosé, and sparkling wines on the sweeter side. Weekly 750ml wine purchases among this group are primarily in the \$10 - \$15 price segment. And they have a strong interest in canned wines. It will be several years before there is a large enough and sufficiently representative cohort of these young wine drinkers to fully detail how their tastes will influence the wine market.

Today, they are thought of and referred to as “Generation Z,” but the end of alphabetical identifiers is near. After all, no one ever referred to Baby Boomers as “Generation W.” “Generation Z” will soon occupy the same demographic dust bin as “Baby Busters,” and “Generation Y.”

Demographers, advertising agencies, marketers, and academicians will offer suggestions, most likely referential to the common denominator of prolonged isolation and social distancing that may become their way of life. Whether we will come to call them the “Distanced,” “Virtual,” or “FaceTime” generation (or something else) remains to be seen. Their true name will emerge from the unfolding of the “Pearl Harbor” moment they now face. In the meantime, and more importantly, there is a long road ahead of them that promises only a future as unknowable as it must have seemed to an earlier generation of Americans on the morning of December 8th, 1941.

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