

It's Not the Age it's the Mileage

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Generational Culture is an interesting and complex topic. Because of its complexity there are unfortunately many misconceptions about the topic. One of the major misconceptions is that if a person was born during a certain range of years then that person necessarily falls into a specific generational culture. That is not at all true. Much has been written and many people have been trained using this inaccurate assumption. This has led to considerable misunderstanding and confusion.

It is more correct to say that during a certain range of years is when a specific generational culture was created. A Generational Culture doesn't disappear simply because a certain arbitrary date has passed. The fact that a new Generational Culture is beginning to come into existence doesn't mean the previous one no longer exists. Multiple Generational Cultures coexist for extended periods of time. In fact because there are many factors besides age which contribute to Generational Culture often children are being raised in different Generational Cultures at the same time. Because of this a young person may associate more with an "older" culture or vice versa.

Let's take a brief look at the different Generational Cultures now present in society and some characteristics of each.

Probably the "oldest" Generational Culture is variously called the **Veterans or the Greatest Generation or the Silent Generation among others**. When I first started studying Generational Culture I was strongly impressed by how much influence the media had on Generational Culture so I call this group the **Radio Babies**.



The Great Depression had a major influence on Radio Baby culture. Because of this many of their characteristics relate to that depression. For example: members of this generation tend to save everything; because you never know when you might need it! Radio Babies tend to be fiscally conservative. You borrow money to buy a house but you pay it off early and hold a mortgage burning party. You might borrow money to buy a car, probably from a relative. Anything else, if you can't pay cash for it you can't afford it. If you have a good job you put up with anything in order to keep it. Also you don't want anyone else to know how to do your job because if they do then they might take it away from you. Many if not most members of this generation never traveled more than 50 -100 miles from where they were born. Consequently their world view and exposure to diversity among other things is quite limited.

Another major misunderstanding about Generational Culture has to do with the **Baby Boomers**. In reality the Boomers are two separate and distinct generational cultures even though they encompass only about 25 years. The literature on generational culture is beginning to call them the "**Leading Edge**" boomers and the "**Lagging Edge**" boomers. I call them the **Black and White TV babies** and the **Color TV babies**.

The **Black and White TV babies** are in many ways similar to the Radio Babies. They still tend to be fiscally conservative. There are strong societal roles: male and female; parent and child; etc. and you are expected to stay within your role. You have dinner (or supper) at 5:00 pm every day. You **will** be home for supper. There is unlimited overtime at the local factory or mill so you can afford whatever you want as long as you are willing to work enough hours to pay for it. In fact this generation is known as the workaholic generation. If you are male expect to have the same job your father did. If you are female expect to be a housewife. In fact ladies, if you want to have some fun read a home economics book from the late 50s or early 60s. You will laugh so hard it will put you on the floor.



This generation could be described with two words; conservative and stable. Stable on the surface at least. However there was a lot going on underneath the surface. During WWII women entered the workforce in numbers never before seen. Once the war was over many of them were not willing to go back into their former societal roles. There were many social and civil rights issues that were not being addressed but rather brushed under the carpet. And how soon we forget. This is also the generation where we held the drills in school; “What do you do when the bombs fall?” We have blocked this out of our national memory. It was all of these things and more going on below the surface that led to the radical changes in the next generation; the Color TV babies.



The **color TV babies** grew up with “Sex, Drugs and Rock and Roll!” This was the rebellious generation: rebelling against the work ethic of their parents; rebelling against the Viet Nam War; rebelling against the status quo in regard to civil rights, women’s rights etc. The previous generations were family and group oriented; this generation focused on self. In fact one of the names for this generation is the “Me” generation. This generation also discovered credit! The very real fear that we were going to wipe ourselves off the planet sometime within their lifetimes led to the “Live for the moment” approach to life. Another term we invented for this generation is “Conspicuous Consumption.” This generation also grew to be distrustful of government and almost any established institution.



There is perhaps more misunderstanding about **Generation X** than any other generation. You will read things like: Gen Xers are lazy and don’t want to work; Gen Xers aren’t loyal to organizations; Gen Xers have the attention span of a gnat. Gen Xers grew up in a “sound byte” world where everything happened quickly. When Gen Xers first started entering the work force over the next 10 – 15 years we downsized 30 million jobs in this country. The reality for Gen X is that organizations are not loyal to people. More Gen Xers are starting their own businesses than any previous generation however they work very differently from the previous generations. Gen X is the generation where friends replaced family and there is a good reason for this. This is the first generation where a significant percentage of kids came home from school and neither parent was there. They learned to rely on their friendship group for support and that has carried forward into their adult lives.

For previous generations (not as strong for the Color TV babies) their identity was wrapped up in their job. Not so Gen X; they work to support their real lives which usually aren't focused on the workplace. Numerically Gen X is a small generation: there are less than one third as many Gen Xers as there are Baby Boomers. They are sometimes called the sandwich generation; sandwiched between aging parents on one side and adult children who still need help on the other.

GENERATION Y

Gen Y or the Millennials have been the subject of much discussion and debate. Many people (mostly from previous generations) tend to view them negatively. It is important to understand some things about Gen Y for a number of reasons. Probably the most important one is there are more than three times as many Gen Yers as there are Gen Xers and there are more Gen Yers than there are Baby Boomers. It is the largest population bubble in American History. Just like the Boomers forced dramatic change by sheer weight of numbers Gen Y is already starting to do the same thing.

Gen Y is the most collective generation in more than a century. They like to do things together. They are technologically savvy in a way that previous generations will never fully understand. Voice Mail messages and email are likely to be ignored however send them a text and you'll have a response within two minutes. Recognition is important to Gen Y. In the workplace lunch with the boss may be more motivating than a raise. They need constant feedback; the closer to the actual behavior the better. Interestingly there is a strong shift back to traditional family values in Gen Y. Gen Y is more accepting of diversity than any previous generation. Many Gen Yers have no intention of ever owning a home or buying a car. They saw their parents work for 30 years to do so and then lose much of the value in a matter of months. For previous generations adolescent culture revolved around getting a license and a car. Not true for Gen Y. Their culture revolves around getting their first cell phone.



There is yet another Generational Culture that has not of yet had a major effect on society because they are too young. They were originally called Gen Z but that name didn't stick. The one that does seem to be sticking is the **Net Generation**. One thing we do know about them is they tend to think in a fundamentally different way than previous generations. Previous generations were taught to think action – consequence; a kind of if/then thinking. Not so this generation. They tend to use what is called matrix thinking. When asked to do something they go online, pull from multiple sources and put together something that has never existed in that form before

Every generation tends to think the next generation is the end of the world as we know it. It is not a downhill slide but rather a cycle. We have been through it before and we will go through it again. Obviously this article is just a cursory view of generational culture. It is much more complex than there is time and space to discuss here. Hopefully this will pique your interest and you will learn more about this incredibly complex, important and fascinating topic.