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# All-Digital Generation, With Eyes Wide Open

By ALEX WILLIAMS

Hear the word "millennial," and plenty of images spring to mind.

There's Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg, in his hoodie, earning his first billion by the age of 23. There's the singer Miley Cyrus, preening for the cameras in a flesh-baring act that recalls a Snapchat sexting session.

They're brash, they're narcissistic, they're entitled. Or so the cliché goes.

But what about "Generation Z," the generation born after millennials that is emerging as the next big thing for market researchers, cultural observers and trend forecasters?

With the oldest members of this group barely out of high school, these young people are primed to become the dominant youth influencers of tomorrow. Flush with billions in spending power, they promise untold riches to marketers who can find the master key to their psyche.

They are "the next big retail disrupter," according to Women's Wear Daily. They have "the weight of saving the world and fixing our past mistakes on their small shoulders," according to an article on Fast Company's Co.Exist site by Jeremy Finch, an innovation consultant. Lucie Greene, the worldwide director of the Innovation Group at J. Walter Thompson, calls them "millennials on steroids."

While it is easy to mock the efforts of marketers to fit tens of millions of adolescents into a generational archetype, it is also clear that a 14-year-old in 2015 inhabits a substantially different world than one of 2005.

Millennials, after all, were raised during the boom times and relative peace of the 1990s, only to see their sunny world dashed by the September 11 terrorist attacks and two economic crashes, in 2000 and 2008. Theirs is a story of innocence lost.

Generation Z, by contrast, has had its eyes open from the beginning, coming along in the aftermath of those cataclysms in the era of the war on terror

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and the Great Recession, Ms. Greene said.

"When I think of Generation Z, technology is the first thing that comes to mind," said Emily Citarella, a 16-year-old high school student in Atlanta. "I know people who have made their closest relationships from Tumblr, Instagram and Facebook."

Sure, millennials were digital; their teenage years were defined by iPods and MySpace. But Generation Z is the first generation to be raised in the era of smartphones. Many do not remember a time before social media.

"We are the first true digital natives," said Hannah Payne, an 18-year-old blogger and student at the University of California, Los Angeles. "I can almost simultaneously create a document, edit it, post a photo on Instagram and talk on the phone, all from the user-friendly interface of my iPhone."

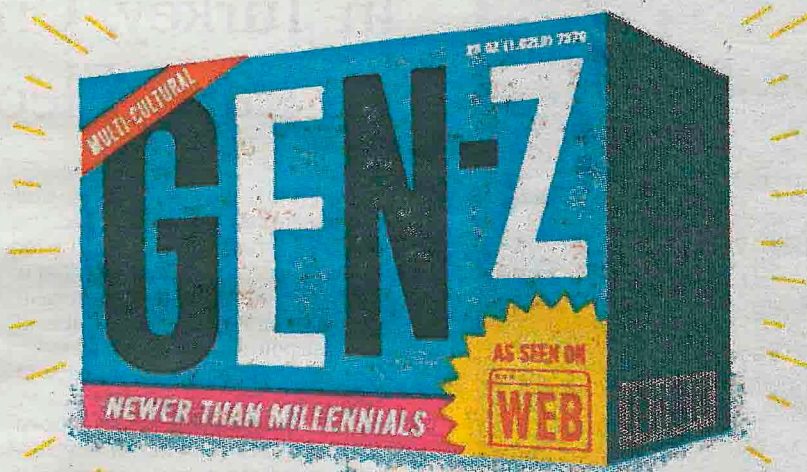
"Generation Z takes in information instantaneously," she said, "and loses interest just as fast."

That point is not lost on marketers. In an era of emoji and six-second Vine videos, "we tell our advertising partners that if they don't communicate in five words and a big picture, they will not reach this generation," said Dan Schawbel of Millennial Branding, a New York consultancy.

So far, they sound pretty much like millennials. But those who study youth trends are starting to discern big differences in how the two generations view their online personas, starting with privacy.

While the millennial generation pioneered the embarrassing selfie posted to Facebook, many in Generation Z have embraced anonymous social media platforms like Secret or Whisper, as well as Snapchat, where any incriminating images disappear almost instantly, said Dan Gould, a trend consultant for of Sparks & Honey, an advertising agency in New York.

"As far as privacy, they are aware of their personal brand, and have seen older Gen Y-ers screw up by posting too openly," Mr. Gould said.



MIKEY BURTON

But the difference between generations goes much deeper than choosing Snapchat over Facebook.

Attitudes on social issues have shifted, in some cases seismically, in the decade since millennials were teenagers.

Same-sex marriage, for example, has gone from a controversial political issue to a constitutional right in the United States. And America's first African-American president is less a historic breakthrough than a fact of life.

"America becomes more multicultural on a daily basis," said Anthony Richard Jr., 17, of Gretna, Louisiana. "It's exponential compared to previous generations."

The parents of Generation Z teenagers play a powerful role in shaping

## Cautious teenagers who make silly cat videos but work hard.

their collective outlook. Millennials, who are often painted, however unfairly, as narcissistic brats who expect the boss to fetch them coffee, were largely raised by baby boomers (those born between 1946 and 1964), who, many say, are the most iconoclastic, self-absorbed and grandiose generation in history.

By contrast, Generation Z tends to be the product of Generation X, a relatively small, jaded generation that came of age in the post-Watergate, post-Vietnam funk of the 1970s, when horizons seemed limited. That group, who grew up on Nirvana records and slasher horror movies while their parents were off working, have tried to give their children the safe, secure childhood that they never had, said

Neil Howe, an economist and the co-author of more than a dozen books about American generations.

"You see the mommy blogs by Generation X-ers, and safety is a huge concern: the stainless-steel sippy cups that are BPA-free, the side-impact baby carriages, the home preparation of baby food," Mr. Howe said.

Part of that obsession with safety is likely due to the hard times that both Generation Z members and their parents experienced during their formative years.

"I definitely think growing up in a time of hardship, global conflict and economic troubles has affected my future," said Seimi Park, a 17-year-old high school senior in Virginia, who always dreamed of a career in fashion, but has recently shifted her sights to law, because it seems safer.

"This applies to all my friends," she said. "I think I can speak for my generation when I say that our optimism has long ago been replaced with pragmatism."

That sober sensibility goes beyond career, it seems. A Sparks & Honey trend report asserted that Generation Z places heavy emphasis on being "mature and in control."

Put it all together — the privacy, the caution, the focus on sensible careers — and Generation Z starts to look less like the brash millennials and more like their grandparents, Mr. Howe said.

But that comparison only goes so far for a generation predisposed to making Vine videos of themselves doing cartwheels over their cats.

"Kids are witnessing start-up companies make it big instantly via social media," said Andrew Schoonover, a 15-year-old in Olathe, Kansas.

"We do not want to work at a local fast-food joint for a summer job," he said. "We want to make our own business because we see the lucky few who make it big."