

GENERATIONS

The way we use and understand the word “generations” in modern science goes back to a sociologist named Karl Mannheim, who wrote about it in his 1952 book *The Problem of Generations*. Later, two writers, William Strauss and Neil Howe, made the idea of different generations more popular. In their 1991 book *Generations: The History of America’s Future 1584–2069*, they gave names to different groups of people based on when they were born. Since then, sociologists have kept using these labels, although some still argue about how helpful they really are and even what dates they cover. Still, most people agree that there are at least five important generational groups.

The Silent Generation. 1925-1945

Growing up during the Great Depression, WWII, and the Dust Bowl, the Silent Generation is characterized by traditionalism and social conformity. The “Silent” label first appeared in a 1951 *Time* magazine article referring to the generation as cautious, unadventurous, and withdrawn. Many members of this generation were able to take advantage of a post-WWII economic boom, working in large corporations, buying homes in the growing suburbs of America, and building families. Silents often listened to radio programs in their homes. Their favorite form of communication was the telephone. Despite the stereotype of conformity, some Silents worked to change existing institutions through art and political engagement. Among the most famous examples are the Beat poets and Elvis Presley, as well as some important leaders of the Civil Rights Movement.

Baby Boomers. 1946-1964

Dubbed Baby Boomers because of the sharp increase in birth rates after World War II, this generation grew up during the turbulent Vietnam War, the social and political upheaval of the Civil Rights Movement, the 1960s countercultural movement, and the space race. Often characterized as ambitious, competitive, and resourceful, Boomers strive for self-fulfillment and personal growth. Stereotyped as materialistic, they generally worked hard to be able to buy homes, cars, and other consumer goods, including the latest technologies. They were the first generation to grow up with television in their homes; by 1964, 9 out of 10 homes had one. Some favorite television shows Boomers grew up with were *I Love Lucy*, *Leave it to Beaver*, and *The Lone Ranger*. Listening to music was another important pastime for many. This generation was the first to grow up with Rock and Roll music played on transistor radios, 45 records, and long-playing albums. Iconic bands like the Beatles were wildly popular. Countercultural music events like Woodstock gave a face to rock music of the boomer generation. Boomers would also be rocked by the first television coverage of violence in the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and Robert F. Kennedy.

Generation X. 1965-1979

Referred to as Gen X, or even the “latchkey generation” due to an increasing number of working parents, this generation is often described as self-reliant and independent. Generation X was one of the first to grow up with more single-parent and divorced families than previous generations. One other distinctive about this generation is its small size, due in part to the birth control pill, which became available in the 1960s. Gen Xers strongly believe in work-life balance and value other aspects of life over their careers. The social and historical events they experienced in their childhood and youth included the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union; the AIDS crisis and the U. S. Government’s war on drugs; the economic recessions of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s; and the rising cost of college tuition. On the whole, Generation X was identified as likely to be the first generation whose members would not be more financially well-off than their parents were. Gen Xers grew up in the early days of personal computers and are very comfortable with technology. They were the first generation to grow up with cable television, providing almost constant access to news and entertainment. Common cultural icons of their generation are MTV, grunge music (epitomized in the music of Kurt Cobain and Nirvana), and hip-hop (personified by performers like Tupac Shakur).

Millennials. 1980-1994

The generation that followed Generation X was the millennial generation, a term first used by the sociologists William Strauss and Neil Howe in their 1991 book *Generations*. The label seemed appropriate for a group that would come of age in the new millennium. By 2019, millennials surpassed baby boomers as the largest generation, with numbers reaching 72 million. The early years of the millennial generation were marked by economic growth in the United States, but crises like 9-11, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the economic downturn referred to as the Great Recession all affected millennials' sense of well-being and security. Overcoming these emotional setbacks, however, has helped the generation be adaptable, not only in life but in the use of technology. The millennial generation is the first digital generation. They easily acclimated to smartphones, social media, and streaming entertainment. Most notable is the fact that they came of age with the rise of the Internet. All of these technologies made millennials the first young adults to curate their own entertainment, fitting their tastes to a broad range of options. Performers like Beyoncé, Taylor Swift, Rihanna, and Lady Gaga were among the most popular female musicians of interest. And streaming television series like *Insecure* and *Broad City* resonated with millennials.

Generation Z. 1995-2009

The Americans who follow the Millennials are significant in being labeled digital natives. They have never known a time when technology, including the World Wide Web, was not available to them. By the time Gen Zers were in their teens, for example, the primary means by which they connected with the web was through mobile devices, WiFi, and high-bandwidth cellular service. Researchers are just beginning to study the effects of this “always-on” technological environment. Sharing some characteristics with millennials, including similar views on political activism and care for the environment, Generation Z is sensitive and supportive of diversity. In fact, Gen Z is the most racially and ethnically diverse generation. Gen Zers have been affected not only by technology but also by global insecurities such as climate change and COVID-19. They focus on causes and believe in accountability. Gen Zers learn much about their world through podcasts instead of other forms of media. Although this generation consumes large amounts of online media, they often restrict their own social media presence by having small numbers of followers and by being anonymous online. Generation Z listens to more music than previous generations do. They listen to a wide variety of streaming music, including hip-hop, pop, and international music. Some of their music interests are inspired by social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok. Popular icons include Olivia Rodrigo, Sabrina Carpenter, and Billie Eilish.

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