

Who are the Zillennials?

REPORT | 15 Feb 2023

Generational labelling is treated as gospel for collecting data, describing groups, and self-identifying. However, a surge of young people have found themselves in limbo between Gens Y and Z and are finding their voice outside of these labels – challenging established social structures and beliefs.

AUTHORS



Joey Levenson

LOCATIONS:

GENERATIONS:

GEN Z (BORN
1997–2010)

GEN Y (BORN
1982–1996)

SECTORS:

CITIZENSHIP
COMMUNITY AND GRASS-
ROOTS



EXPERTS



Jenk Oz



Erifili Gounari

HIGHLIGHTS

- 01** Some people born on the cusp of Gen Y and Gen Z are rejecting both labels, not feeling represented by either – they've been dubbed 'Zillennials'
- 02** As a microgeneration old enough to remember some of the cultural artefacts of Gen Yers yet proficient in the digital world of Gen Zers, Zillennials have their own distinct identity
- 03** A clear trend of alienation and lack of belonging among younger generations is leading them to seek out micro-communities and adopt self-imposed labels

DATA

- Almost one in five Gen Zers consider themselves Millennials, compared with just 8% of Gen Yers who think they're part of Gen Z
- 45% of Gen Yers associate themselves with their generational label, compared with 39% of Gen Zers
- 64% of Gen Z consumers want personalised experiences from brands

SCOPE

So often are the labels 'Gen Z' and 'millennial' thrown about, we often forget the group of people they purport to encompass and represent. That's where the portmanteau 'Zillennials' comes in, seeking to represent the oft-overlooked microgeneration on the cusp of Gen Z and Gen Y. According to Student Beans, Zillennial birthdays fall between 1993 and 1998. [1] The grouping is especially relevant now as Gen Y weathers a vibe shift, reluctantly passing the baton of digital and social relevance to Gen Z.

Yet generational analysis is not easy. Assertive statements about generations are tricky to take conclusively, "as cohort names are often used as a more exciting version of age brackets, but the term 'millennial' carries a lot more implicit baggage than '27- to 42-year-olds'," claims an Ipsos report. "When we use cohort names rather than age groups, we are making a subliminal statement that we believe what we are describing is a characteristic which is an enduring feature of the generation under question." [2] No better is this represented in the Zillennial conundrum, a generation stuck in limbo between two cohorts that have been exhaustively analysed and distinguished.

Almost one in five Gen Zers consider themselves Gen Yers, compared with just 8% of Gen Yers who think they're part of Gen Z. [2] There's clearly some ambiguous bleed between the two groups thanks to the misidentification of those in the Zillennial bracket, whose reduced sense of belonging has festered some confusion. The [generational wars](#) that have

ensued online reflect a lot of generational tension between the two cohorts – a search for [‘Millennials vs. Gen Z’ in TikTok](#) shows a cumulative 190 million views across videos on the topic.

Clearly, generational labels are powerful tools of analysis and self-identification, but they become riddled with error, especially when seeking to represent those at the fringes. A battle for the zeitgeist ensues from the ageing-out Gen Yers and the ageing-in Gen Zers, but there’s also a struggle to truly know where a person born in the latter half of the 90s lays stake to their claim. Hence, Zillennials reflect tensions between the two most “zeitgeisty” generations. Their constant protests against both labels, and desire to pick and choose how they want to be represented speaks to the influence of generational labels, as well as the exclusivity, strength, and problems of the labels themselves.

Naturally, there are similarities between the two generations. Deloitte found that both Gen Yers and Gen Zers make decisions about their careers and where they shop predicted based on their own ethical compass. Forty-four per cent of Gen Yers and 49% of Gen Zers surveyed said that, over the past two years, they have made choices about the types of work they would do – and the organisations they’d be willing to work for – based on their personal values. [3] The similarity in these two figures indicates that the values of Gen Yers very much lay the groundwork for the foundation of Gen Z. So who exactly are the Zillennials, who clearly align with these values, but resist such labels?

THE RISK OF MISREPRESENTATION

As generational labels become a staple of global conversations, blanket associations ignore and misrepresent whole cohorts of people. Continuous misidentification of a generational label happens with each passing generation: 74% of Boomers associate themselves with their generational label, 53% of Gen Xers, 45% of Gen Yers, and only 39% of Gen Zers. [4] In fact, nearly half of Britons find labels like ‘millennial’ and ‘Gen Z’ to be ‘unacceptable’ because they do not reflect a person's personality. [5] Ipsos found that cohorts with higher awareness of such labels have a lower sense of identity. [2]

“Generations have long been identified, treated, and spoken about in a monolithic manner,” says Jenk Oz, founder of Thred Media, a Gen Z-focused social change organisation. “It allows for ease and speed when communicating to and about them, but the labels have never truly represented any one generation holistically and accurately enough to drive in-depth strategy and media buying across an entire generation.” [6]

Zillennials represent the blindspot that comes with these broad-brushstroke references to surface-level behaviours and interests because they’re able to pick and choose habits of both Gen Y and Gen Z. Consider that while 27% of Gen Yers are buying more private-label products to save money, only 13% of Gen Zers do so. [7] In this instance, it becomes hard to conclude what a Zillennial's shopping habits may be, as they may have realistically answered in either category and a 14-percentage-point difference does not generate enough similarity to lump them together.

“Today, technology has given the youngest generations an unprecedented degree of connectivity among themselves and with the rest of the population,” says Oz. “This paradigm shift toward digital public sharing has allowed for a deeper, more detailed, and widely available generational understanding that has produced behavioural science-focused research with unprecedented immediacy and accuracy.” [6] Yet, advanced data collection and access such as this runs the risk of producing generational heterogeneity. “Six Sigma thinking about generations is great for producing plain t-shirts, but it makes no sense in a world where the modulation and shading around each local community are in plain view,” argues Oz. Pew Research Center demonstrates this rigid generational heterogeneity in its advanced data collection, hence people pushing back against its research to ask that it stops heavily relying on labels – even as far back as 2018. [8][9]



Zillennials find themselves on the cusp of Gens Y and Z but feel part of neither

Wthmags | Tiktok (2021)

THE PIVOT TO MICRO-COMMUNITIES AND SELF-IMPOSED LABELS

There's a clear trend of alienation and lack of belonging happening in today's younger generations. According to Boston College, 40% of Americans feel physically and emotionally isolated in the workplace, and a lack of belonging causes physical and psychological pain. [10] Looking more acutely at the younger cohort, a global survey of full-time employees found that 93% of Gen Zers believe that feeling they belong at work is important. [11] In fact, 65% of Gen Zers believe that belonging is more important than pay. [12]

That's where micro-communities and labels such as 'Zillennial' come in – they can appeal to the more fragmented Gen Y/Gen Z crossover by satisfying their needs for belonging. As a result, there comes a more carefully considered appeal to the many interests of the younger cohort, especially when 91% of those aged 18 to 25 say there is no “mainstream” pop culture to follow and 64% of Gen Z consumers want personalised experiences from brands. [13] “Any micro-community can foster a nice sense of belonging and identity for some young people because it's always nice finding groups that someone can relate really well to,” says Erifili Gounari, founder and CEO of Z-Link, a global Gen Z-led social media agency that helps brands reach Gen Zers. “Connecting with people that belong in the same micro-community or self-imposed label can often make people feel very seen or validated.” [14]

[TikTok](#) hashtags and trends can make people feel they're part of something, especially as nearly 50% of the app's active users are 10 to 29 years old. [15] Nextdoor and Whatsapp groups with a name (or title) also give people a sense of belonging in a community, hence they've skyrocketed since the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic. [16] In fact, 62% of young people say they love “meeting and engaging with people from all over the world.” [17] This demonstrates that when young people are left to their own devices, they much prefer to find belonging and community in niche subcultures or by self-imposed labelling.



Y2K nostalgia is rife, as demonstrated by the enduring popularity of brands like Claire's

Claire's Accessories | Facebook (2023)

ZILLENNIALS SPEAK THEIR OWN LANGUAGE

"There are tons of differences between Gen Zers, Zillennials, and Gen Yers," says Gounari. "Gen Zers are full digital natives, older Zillennials are less so, so they may feel more out of touch with Gen Z trends and the level of social media use seen among Gen Zers, but still more in touch than Gen Yers." [14] As a microgeneration old enough to remember some of the cultural artefacts of Gen Yers yet proficient in the digital world of GenZers, Zillennials speak their own language. They remember the advent of the internet, perhaps even 9/11, but are too young to remember dial-up internet and [the y2k bug](#). "To put it simply," explains one article on Refinery29, "Gen Z is an iPod and millennials are a Walkman, Zillennials like me are the MP3 players caught in the middle of the evolutionary cycle." [18]

This unique blend between nostalgia and futurism is making its comeback. Think of the return of the early 00s Motorola Razr, or the Samsung Galaxy flip phone – both evoking the physical handheld mobile phones that appeared shortly before the smartphone. Accessories brand [Claire's](#) has also remained popular thanks to its commitment to its original 00s aesthetic, and movie sequels of the Zillennial childhood era like [Hocus Pocus 2](#) are a dime a dozen these days. [19]



Nostalgia, community, and individualism are key to connecting with young people

Wildflower (2023)

INSIGHTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

STRAY FROM LABELLING THE YOUNG

“Brands need to focus on Zillennials not based on age but rather life-stage targeting,” Oz argues. “Think of living arrangements, disposable income, spending priorities, tech preferences, social change interests, moral compass, and level of cross fertilisation and outward influence, etc.” [6] People are sick of being reduced to labels that they don’t identify with because they feel it to be reductive and ineffective. There’s an opportunity for brands to market to individual behaviours, desires, and interests (perhaps by harnessing data) beyond generational profiles. VICE reached a similar conclusion, arguing that today’s youth cannot be defined by demographics but by who they are and what they believe in. Vice found that 67% of today’s global youth express their identity through their opinions and thoughts, 49% through their appearance, and 43% through the people they surround themselves with. [20] Surprisingly, only 17% said that personal labels (e.g. queer, female, biracial, etc.) define them.

CONSOLIDATE IDENTITY THROUGH ‘DIGITAL CAMPFIRES’

Despite sometimes viewing labels as reductive, people are making their own self-imposed labels as a form of belonging, because for many it is better to be given a name than to be excluded from the conversation altogether. [21] There’s an opportunity for brands to recognise people and build trust by marketing directly to micro-generations and micro-communities. “As more Zillennials and Generation Z enter the workforce and Boomers retire, academia will not survive without addressing Zillennial values more closely,” says Kirsten Westmoreland, a psychology professor at the University of Houston. [22]

“Micro-communities, aka digital campfires, are an increasingly important digital and IRL home for younger generations,” says Oz. “Evidence shows that the pandemic solidified the values and attitudes research had already attributed to younger generations. They are perpetually connected digital dependents – interminable creators, anxious thinkers,

deeply expressive, and often paradoxical.” [6] Today’s youth’s willingness to adopt nascent technology and build shared technology multiplied throughout lockdown. “This was evidenced by the meteoric growth rates of youth-dominated platforms such as [TikTok](#), and community-based platforms such as [IRL](#) and [Discord](#),” Oz adds. [6] The decentralisation of digital campfires is fuelling their rapid growth. To tap into this, brands should look to their mode or purpose: messaging ([WhatsApp](#), [Telegram](#), [Signal](#), [Snapchat](#)), community ([Slack](#), [Discord](#), [IRL](#), [Geneva](#), [Reddit](#), [Depop](#)), and experimental ([Fortnite](#), [Roblox](#)).

IMMEDIATE NOSTALGIA IS KEY

Zillennials can identify with two different generations because they’re at the cusp of both. This means that nostalgia looks different for Zillennials – 90s and 00s nostalgia is more personal for them than for Gen Zers, yet more directly linked to their young childhood years than for Gen Yers. So there’s an opportunity for brands to tap into immediate nostalgia to cater to Zillennial sentiment. “It’s that sweet spot of being responsible like a millennial but also being relevant like Gen Z,” says one survey respondent in a recent VICE article. [23] Zillennials are of age to make big life and purchasing decisions, but are still hugely culturally relevant and dictate the zeitgeist perhaps even more so than Gen Zers. Recently, [Wildflower](#) phone cases reminisced on their past case styles from 2014 and brought back [a Tumblr-era throwback](#) to their collection. Influencer Addison Rae initiated the campaign, [tweeting](#) that she was ready for “a comeback.”

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