

THEME 01

The Elastic Generation

GENERATIONS

OLD AGE

REDEFINITION

Traditionally, generations are categorized according to the typical circumstances of their youth, also referred to as the formative years of our lives. The rationale for this is that the world you grew up in determines your worldview and therefore influences the way you behave, the values you have, the goals you hold dear, etc. However, recently, a group of people were labeled a generation, not based on their formative years but on the distinctive characteristics of the present combined with their present life phase. Those who are currently between the ages of fifty and seventy are labeled the Elastic Generation. Why are they approached in this a-typical manner and why is it important to understand their perspective?

Our observations

- A generation is mainly defined by three things: (1) the general characteristics of a certain life phase, mostly linked to the physical aspects of life (e.g. puberty, midlife); (2) the characteristics of the time in which their formative years took place (e.g. an economic crisis, first trip to the moon); (3) the present time with its own characteristics that a generation has to face (e.g. digital era, emphasis on sustainability). To label a generation, the second aspect is traditionally used: baby boomers, millennials, Gen Z are all labelled according to the characteristics of the world they inhabited in their youth.
- Recently, JWT [Intelligence](#) published a report on those who are currently in their fifties and sixties, which they labeled *The Elastic Generation*. They are mostly bound together by characteristics that have to do with the first and third aspect of what shapes a generation: the time they're currently facing after living through midlife. What typifies them is the fact that they are healthier than previous generations were in those years, have a longer life expectancy, can or will have to work longer and have access to and understand how to use the technology of the 21st century.
- When it comes to the second aspect that traditionally characterizes a generation, the members of the Elastic Generation differ. When you are in your 50s or early 60s, for example, your formative years were during the second oil crisis and finding a job after graduation was more difficult than before. This generation is referred to as [Generation X](#). Those who are in their late 60s, however, experienced their forming phase just after WW2. Those born in America experienced economic prosperity, those born in Europe the rebuilding of society: the [baby boomers](#).



Connecting the dots

One of the main reasons to reflect upon a generation is to anticipate the future. Painting a picture of the circumstances a generation faced during its formative years, and analyzing how this can affect one's worldview, may offer clues about future behavior. Younger generations are often more discussed than older ones, since they determine the future and are the pioneers of dealing with the latest developments during their formative years. What surprises will they bring the world? Currently, the spotlight is mostly on Gen-Z and millennials, who (partly) grew up as the first digital natives.

Older generations, such as baby boomers and Generation X, have already been analyzed with respect to how their formative years have affected their worldview. Baby boomers are plentiful, have aimed to live a better life than their parents did, started a sexual revolution and pursued wealth and freedom. Generation X, on the other hand, are a much smaller group and are characterized as a generation that lacks ambition, ideals and color in general. When the legacy of these generations is discussed at present, it is often disdainfully: their endangerment of healthcare systems, their lifestyle having helped cause [climate change](#), sky-high house prices, debts and evaporating pensions. Moreover, in more general terms, the stage of our lives between fifty and seventy is often thought of as the fall of our lives: there is no growth and the best we can hope for is to be able to enjoy the results of past achievements. Besides a negative stigma on physically aging and the cliché that after midlife, we are heading for the end of our (professional) life, older generations might be thought of as not adding anything new to the world, nothing unexpected.

However, life expectancy has increased and in a relatively short period and technology has penetrated every corner of society, rapidly sending us into a [digital era](#). Those who are now in the so-called fall of their lives are the first to experience it in good health, who are able or forced to retire later than previous generations and have access to the countless possibilities that technology currently has to offer. From this perspective, they too are pioneers that can offer clues about the future. For no other generation that has faced life after midlife has been able to participate in society in such vital condition and with such endless technological possibilities. How are they handling these new circumstances?

According to the report by JWT-intelligence, the members of the Elastic Generation display a very different sort of life than is traditionally expected of them. They're [starting new businesses](#), are beginning to [date again](#), live with [roommates](#), are [studying again](#), are [conquering a spot](#) among the more youthful influencers on the web, and aren't wistful about not being in their twenties anymore. Their activities, wishes, insights and spending patterns show a hodgepodge of youthfulness, resilience, but also of wisdom and self-assurance that colors outside the lines of the identity that was previously associated with these years. In this sense, they show a perspective on the years after midlife that was inconceivable before: an appealing phase in its own right, in which we can have a fresh start at almost anything without the pressure and insecurities that come with earlier age. In that sense, they have brought something new and surprising to the world: they have disproven the traditional clichés of old age, thereby demanding a new definition of the phase that was heretofore referred to as the fall of our lives.

Implications

- The Elastic Generation is an attractive target group for advertisers because of their size and financial resources. However, they are also a difficult group to please because of their wiliness: this group is not easily misled, they know who they are and are not ready to take a backseat. They prefer an age-agnostic approach and since they are not in search of an identity anymore, they are not interested in the promise of "becoming who you truly are" that is so often used in advertising targeting younger generations.
- A-typical behavior in certain life phases is currently most visible in those who are in their fifties and sixties. However, there are also signs of a-typical behavior in other age categories. Gen Z, for example, is having less sex and less alcohol abuse than those before them and they start their own business more often, all due to the possibilities of the online world. Some of our more cliché ideas on the stages of our lives might therefore be in need of redefinition.