

Gen Z in the generational cycle

GEN Z

GENERATIONS

SOCIOCULTURAL
CYCLE

This year, Gen Z (born after 2000) will become the largest generation in the U.S. To better understand different generations, the 1997 book *The Fourth Turning* describes generational cycles. By understanding Gen Z as the children of a crisis (2008-present), the book sheds light on several characteristics of Gen Z which could help us anticipate its future. By looking at their digital behavior we speculate on to which extent these characteristics have manifested.

Our observations

- In the 1997 book *The Fourth Turning*, William Strauss and Neill Howe describe [generational cycles](#). A generational cycle lasts 100 years (the length of a human life) and goes through four turnings, which occur every 20 years as all living generations enter a new life stage (childhood, young adulthood, midlife, elderhood). Every cycle ends with a Crisis (the fourth turning). The Crisis can take different shapes (e.g. the revolutionary war of the 1760s, the civil war of the 1850s, the depression and war of the 1930s-40s) and in 1997, the book predicted that around 2005, another Crisis would emerge. Indeed, a financial crisis occurred in 2007-08 which has now morphed into a political crisis of populism and inequality. Most importantly, the Crisis presents a different formative experience for all living generations because they are in different life stages. Gen Z is in childhood and entering young adulthood during the Crisis, which helps us to understand this generation.
- Gen Z has been raised more [protectively](#) than previous generations. The popular 2018 book *The Coddling of the American Mind* argues that Gen Z's highly [overprotective](#) nurture has made them "the most sensitive generation in America's history". A similar case was made in the 2017 book *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood*. Research shows that Gen Z prefers [staying home](#) to going out more than any other generation.
- Gen Z is highly sensitive to mental health issues. Of all living generations, Gen Zers are most likely to report their [mental health](#) as poor. [Depression](#), anxiety and loneliness have become major issues during their early formative years.
- Gen Z is more conservative than millennials. They [drink](#) less, take fewer [drugs](#), and have less [sex](#). Pew [research](#) shows that Gen Z is less concerned about traditional teenage problems (e.g. unplanned pregnancy, binge-drinking) than they are about mental health.

Connecting the dots

According to Strauss and Howe, Gen Z is the "Artist" generation. The Artist is one of four archetypal generations – all corresponding to being born during one of the four turnings. The Artist generation is born during a time of crisis. As a result, Artists grow up overprotected by adults preoccupied with the crisis and therefore become highly sensitive: Gen Zers struggle with mental health more than any other generation and show more conservative behavior. The popular Netflix show *13 Reasons Why*, which explores suicide and mental health among teenagers, captures the spirit of Gen Z ([protective parents](#) have even rebelled against its popularity). All in all, *The Fourth Turning* seems prescient. What could it teach us about the future of Gen Z?

The nature of Gen Z will change as Gen Zers grow older. That is because generations are not static objects with fixed characteristics. Instead, generations are life trajectories that change based on formative experiences. For instance, by growing up during the crisis, the Artist generation became overprotected, sensitive and conservative during childhood. But as they grow older, Artists long for a richer social life, which was suppressed by their protective upbringing. We can already see this by looking at the digital behavior of Gen Z. Since they strive to break free

from their "suffocated" upbringing, Gen Z's digital platforms establish [new](#) types of social networks. Indeed, digital platforms have become fundamental to Gen Z's social life. Videogames are not merely games, but also hangout spaces ([Fortnite](#)) and creative playgrounds ([Roblox](#)). Social media are not merely communication networks, but also supportive communities ([TikTok](#)). Furthermore, the intensification of [visual](#) communication (from text and image to video and livestreaming) creates a new type of [intimacy](#) between teenagers. For instance, teenagers share intimate videos of themselves on TikTok (e.g. sharing personal problems, dancing, comedy), compared to more superficial text- and image based communication on Facebook or Instagram. Lastly, the rise of augmented reality games (e.g. *Pokémon Go*, *Harry Potter: Wizards Unite*) add a physical social layer to the virtual world of Gen Z. All in all, generational cycles help us to understand Gen Z. Growing up during a crisis period, their overprotected upbringing has made them sensitive and conservative. As a result, their next life stage could be characterized by the longing for a richer social life, as we have already seen reflected in their digital behavior, which will boost the innovation of [virtual worlds](#) and intimate interfaces.

Implications

- It is likely that Gen Z will create more intimate social engagement in the virtual world in the coming years (e.g. [haptic suits](#), [social AR](#)).
- The digital economy could increasingly become characterized by "generational bubbles". Gen Z is highly overrepresented on platforms like TikTok and Roblox. The platform Famous Birthdays has been called a "[Wikipedia for Gen Z](#)" and is expanding to video.