



THEME 01

Gen Z in The Fourth Turning

GEN Z

COVID-19

GENERATIONAL
CYCLE

Gen Zers are experiencing their formative years against the backdrop of the former financial crisis, the corona crisis and the climate crisis. In the famous book *The Fourth Turning*, the authors posit that in this time, the last turning of a generational cycle is unfolding. A period marked by crisis. According to this model, a generation growing up in this kind of time will develop in a certain way. How does Generation Z fit into this theory?

Our observations

- Gen Z was expected to enter an economy characterized by growth and historically low unemployment. Because of the corona crisis, this image was [suddenly](#) turned on its head as it is now predicted that a huge economic crisis will unfold with historically high unemployment, in which young people will be hit hardest, according to [Pew Research](#).
- Traditions give a society something to hold onto, but precisely in these uncertain times, traditions, some of which centuries old, cannot proceed. Traditions such as [Easter celebrations](#), [Ramadan](#), and weddings, funerals, birthdays, graduation ceremonies and cultural festivities (such as the Dutch [Kingsday](#) or [4th of July](#) in the U.S.) have not taken their usual form because of the corona crisis. In addition, many cultural events such as music festivals, art events and theatre shows have been cancelled altogether.
- Naomi Klein holds that this crisis has made us more aware of [interconnectivity](#), giving rise to more compassion and a sense of communion. According to Business Insider, this especially applies to Generation Z, 87% of which claim to be feeling more connected to others because of the pandemic.
- We've [written](#) before about *The Fourth Turning* (1997) by Strauss and Howe, in which predictions are made based on cyclical patterns they perceive in modern Western history. According to this model, there would be a crisis around 2005; in 2007-2008 a global financial crisis occurred. A crisis mentality would be maintained until a new cycle begins in 2027. Especially in light of Brexit, populism, growing isolationism, protests, the climate crisis and of course the corona crisis, this theory seems worth considering.
- Before the pandemic, we already [wrote](#) that Generation Z would grow up in a time of crisis. Initially, the financial crisis of 2007-2008 was identified as this crisis. However, now that the corona crisis and the climate crisis are here, notwithstanding the fact that the timing of these events is arbitrary to a certain degree, the members of Generation Z appear to be in the midst of an even larger crisis than was predicted.

Connecting the dots

According to the theory of William Strauss and Neil Howe, a generational cohort meets three criteria. First, they are in the same age stage (from child to young adult) when an important historic event and/or social trend occurs. Second, this event or trend shapes the world view of this generation, resulting in certain collective convictions and behaviors. Third, all of this leads to a sense of community. Each generational cohort follows a cyclical pattern with [four turnings](#) (The High, The Awakening, The Unraveling, The Crisis) that each last about 20 years. In accordance with the cyclical pattern of Strauss and Howe, Generation Z is growing up in a time of crisis and will therefore be categorized as the archetype of "The Artist". Previous generations of this type were the Silent Generation (who grew up during, or right after WWII) and before that the Progressive Generation (who grew up during or right after the American Civil War). What these generations have in common is that they are known for their quiet image as children and young adults. This is because their parents are overprotective and they are consumed with worry about the crisis that's unfolding. Generation Z has indeed been characterized as responsible and virtuous. A generation that prefers to stay home, uses drugs less, has sex at a later age and is more environmentally conscious than previous generations. The way they were raised and circumstances have made the "Artist" generation a sensitive generation. Generation Z has been [characterized](#) as a generation with mental health problems such as depression, anxiety disorders and loneliness. The frequent use of social media especially is identified as the cause of this sensitivity. It makes members of this generation [aware](#), at a young age, of global problems such as climate change, inequality and scandals involving large-scale abuse, more so than previous generations. Now that the corona crisis poses a threat to their dreams and opportunities, their mental health problems seem to be [getting worse](#). If the archetype is correct, members of Generation Z will

become flexible, consensus-seeking adults. They will aim to solve the crisis they find when they leave the nest, being conscience of co-dependency. The most positive attributes of this generation will be pluralism, expertise, a preference for fair play and political inclusivity. Their most negative attributes will be a sentimental personality with an inclination to complicate matters, and a certain degree of indecision. How would these attributes apply to the current Generation Z? What specific convictions will they display when it's their turn to shape the world?

Elements of the fourth turning currently taking place leave Generation Z to clean up the mess made by the previous generations and their lifestyles. An economic system geared towards ever-more growth, which mainly benefited baby boomers, has turned out to be detrimental to the environment and the division of wealth. Previous generations are held responsible for the overheated housing market, insecure retirement benefits, student debt and the climate crisis Generation Z is presented with. And the coronavirus outbreak is attributed to an uncontrolled and thoughtless form of globalization and an irresponsible way of dealing with nature. Values that were crucial in the crisis, could therefore be reassessed by Generation Z. The collective conviction of this generational cohort could be that an economic system should not be geared towards growth but towards circularity, with respect to both humans as well as nature. Freedom of the individual, which was long held to be the highest good, may have to give way to solidarity. Generation Z has shown solidarity with those confronted with [racial discrimination](#), [gender discrimination](#), but also with [future generations](#) when it comes to the environment. Because both the corona crisis and the climate crisis are global, young people around the world seem to be feeling more connected and therefore feeling more solidarity with each other than with previous generations.

Implications

- **To achieve solidarity or stimulate, for example, a circular economy, young people will indeed, in accordance with their archetype, have to be flexible. They will have to weigh their own interests against those of others. Striving for consensus, also an attribute of the archetype, seems crucial to creating a world where people seek to uphold political inclusivity and responsibility for the environment and each other.**
- **The corona crisis has so suddenly and deeply affected the daily lives and traditions of all world citizens that the vulnerability of life as we know it is burned into our minds. Young people are hit especially hard by the corona crisis; they're losing their jobs, are unable to go to school and are missing out on a lot, such as a graduation ceremony or social events that usually herald the summer holiday. Many of them expect to have slimmer chances of finding permanent employment, and think they'll have to work freelance. It's therefore [been predicted](#) that Generation Z will strive for security and stability over personal dreams, money or freedom. This could eventually lead to an embrace of, for example, [basic income](#).**