

FAMILY

'Gen Z' Only Exists in Your Head


The dividing lines between generations are a figment of our collective imagination.


By Joe Pinsker



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You know there's drama in research circles—or at least what qualifies as drama in research circles—when someone writes an open letter.

Earlier this year, that someone was Philip Cohen, a sociologist at the University of Maryland at College Park. His request: that Pew Research Center, the nonpartisan “fact tank,” “do the right thing” and stop using generational labels such as *Gen Z* and *Baby Boomers* in its reports. Some 170 social-science researchers signed on to Cohen's letter, which argued that these labels were arbitrary and counterproductive.

After Cohen laid out his arguments in a *Washington Post* opinion piece, Kim Parker, Pew's director of social-trends research, issued a response that both acknowledged the “limitations to generational analysis” and noted that “it can be a useful tool for understanding demographic trends and shifting public attitudes.” She told me recently that Pew is now in a “period of reflection” on the merits of using generational labels, during which it is having internal discussions and inviting outside researchers, Cohen among them, to share their perspectives.

Cohen is not arguing that when you're born doesn't matter for your life trajectory. Being an 18-year-old in today's economic and cultural climate is a very different experience than being the same age in 1990 or in 1960. The period someone grows up in can shape how, when, and whether they form a family, own a home, pursue higher education, and attain financial stability. Cohen and Parker agree on all that.

Generational labels capture some of the basic fact that people who are born in different eras lead meaningfully different lives. But these labels are clumsy and imprecise—and getting more so all the time. They flatten out the experiences of tens of millions of very different people, remove nuance from conversations, and imply commonality where there may be none. The social scientists are right: Generational labels are stupid.

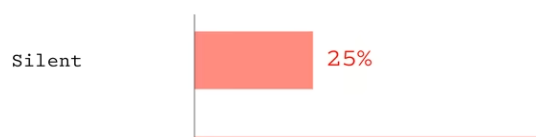
Read: How generations get their names

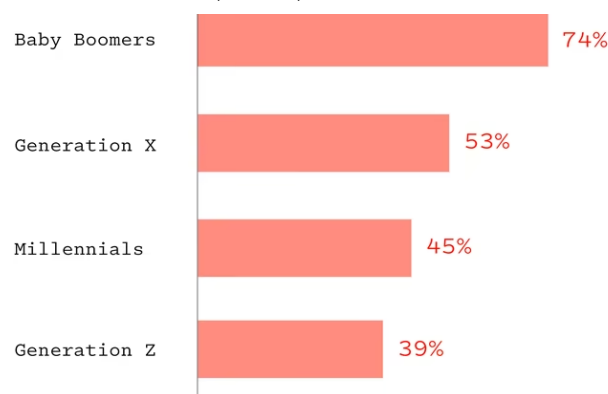
First of all, they are essentially made-up. *Baby Boomers* are the only currently living cohort defined by an actual demographic event—in this case, the postwar baby boom. As Cohen pointed out in his open letter, the rest have arbitrary parameters and lengths: The Silent Generation was born over a span of 18 years before the end of World War II; Millennials entered the world over a span of 16 years from 1981 to 1996. No official body certified these categories and verified the rationale behind them—they just eventually became accepted after getting repeated over and over.

In a sense, generational labels have gotten even less real in the past few decades. The average age at which Americans become parents has been rising, meaning that generations have technically been lengthening—and yet, Gen X, Millennials, and Gen Z span shorter lengths of time than Baby Boomers and the Silent Generation. Although this could reflect the sense that social and technological changes are happening more quickly than in the past, another possible explanation, Cohen thinks, is that as marketers and pundits have observed the profits and attention that come with labeling a generation, they scramble to be the first to do so.

The labels have also gotten progressively less meaningful to each new group they purport to represent. According to a recent YouGov survey of American adults commissioned on behalf of *The Atlantic*, 74 percent of Boomers associate themselves with their generational label, and the share declines with each successive generation: 53 percent of Gen X, 45 percent of Millennials, and 39 percent of Gen Z said the same.

The percentage of U.S. adults in each generation who associate themselves with the label that's applied to them





The Atlantic | Data: YouGov

The Silent Generation, born from 1928 to 1945, was an anomaly, with only 25 percent of survey respondents associating themselves with their label; perhaps people are reluctant to embrace the identity of being “silent.” As Louis Menand pointed out in [a recent takedown of generational labels in *The New Yorker*](#), *silent* is a preposterous descriptor for Silent luminaries such as Gloria Steinem, Muhammad Ali, Nina Simone, and Martin Luther King Jr.

Pew Research Center’s own polling reflects the instability of these categories. In [a somewhat bizarre set of survey data from 2015](#), 33 percent of Millennials identified as Gen X, and 8 percent said that they were Boomers. Fifteen percent of Gen Xers said that they identified as Boomers, while a baffled 2 percent of Boomers and 4 percent of Silents thought of themselves as Millennials. Whether these results reflect confusion about how generations are defined or intentional resistance to those labels, it’s clear that many people don’t identify with the generation they’ve been slotted into.

They may simply be resisting the stereotypes that have come to be associated with their generation. “Once word gets out (through research or other means) about a particular trait or practice associated with a ‘generation,’ like [avocado toast](#) or [student debt](#), it gets processed and reprocessed reflexively by people who don’t, or do, want to embody a stereotype or trend for their supposed group,” Cohen [has written](#). In this way, a label “falls irretrievably into a vortex of cultural pastiche.”

RECOMMENDED READING



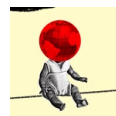
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JOE PINSKER



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DEREK THOMPSON



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EMMA GREEN

Many of these generalizations and stereotypes end up as fodder in generational warfare. Insults are slung between the young, the old, and the middle-aged: Boomers are out of touch. Gen X are apathetic. Millennials are narcissistic. Zoomers like to dine on Tide pods. Some amount of intergenerational animosity is unavoidable—older and younger people will always disapprove of each other to a degree. But giving people ready-made, oversimplified labels to weaponize their disapproval does not help, and contributes to exasperating, dumbed-down conversations that offer stereotype-based explanations for structural problems.

Millennials, for instance, have a lower homeownership rate than previous generations not because they stubbornly refuse to grow up, but because housing has gotten so unaffordable. Likewise, the generation's financial struggles have less to do with their inability to resist purchasing small everyday luxuries like coffee than with beginning their adulthood during a historic stretch of economic turbulence and the rising costs of health care and education.

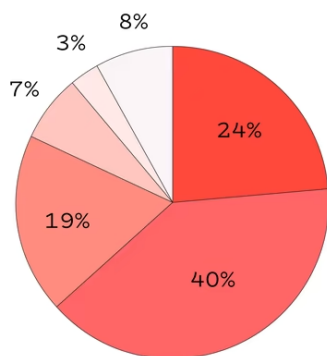
Annie Lowrey: Millennials don't stand a chance

Worse, consultants and marketing experts take advantage of the appetite for these sorts of narratives by framing generations monolithically and presenting themselves to clients as authorities on entire segments of the population. "Someone will create this sense of difference [between generations] in order to give you a solution to that difference," Bobby Duffy, the author of the forthcoming book *The Generation Myth: Why When You're Born Matters Less Than You Think*, told me. Cultural commentators and pundits, too, stand to get more attention when they make sweeping statements about the character of a certain generation.

Even if generational labels are fake, they speak to something real. They have such a hold in the culture partly because they are a simple shorthand for talking about complex forces. “The labels are a way to recognize [how] we are shaped by our times and to understand social change,” Dan Woodman, a sociologist at the University of Melbourne who studies generations, told me.

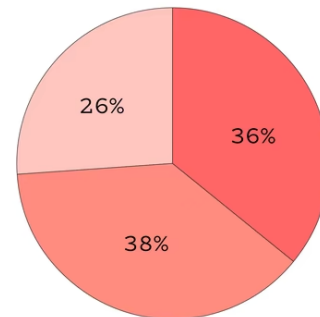
The problem with the shorthand, though, is that it steers every conversation toward generalization, fairly or not. Yes, Gen Z grew up with the internet. No, not all of them think that being a TikTok star is the pinnacle of success.

Do you agree or disagree that there are meaningful differences in the personalities and characteristics of people in different generations?



■ Strongly agree ■ Somewhat agree ■ Neutral
 ■ Somewhat disagree ■ Strongly disagree ■ Don't know

Do you feel that generational labels are a helpful tool for having conversations about the differences among people of different ages?



■ Yes ■ No ■ Don't know

The Atlantic | Data: YouGov

People seem to understand this tension. Sixty-four percent of respondents in the YouGov survey strongly or somewhat agreed that members of different generations have meaningfully different personalities and characteristics, while only 10 percent strongly or somewhat disagreed. (Twenty-seven percent either were neutral or said they didn't know.) However, respondents were less sold on the value of these labels as a way to discuss those differences: 38 percent didn't think they were useful, 36 percent did, and 26 percent said they didn't know.

Other sorts of labels I heard about during my reporting might lessen the chaos, but would present similar issues: Referring to cohorts by the decade they were born in might make conversations marginally more precise, but decades are also arbitrary, and people born at the end of one might have more in common with people born at the beginning of another. Standardizing the length of generations and assigning each one, say, a Greek letter, would suffer from the same problem. Parker told me that in a recent conversation with Pew, a political scientist mentioned the idea of dividing people into four-year cohorts, based on the first presidential election they were eligible to vote in. But it is hard to imagine a system with two dozen mini-generations catching on with the general public. And even if we were to settle on a different taxonomy, Duffy told me he suspects that the unproductive stereotypes would persist.

Besides, he thinks the lively generational discourse is only natural. “We love to tell ourselves these stories about who we are and aren’t,” he said. “Fiddling with how we do it is a fairly technocratic response to a deeper human characteristic and need.” At any rate, Duffy thinks that the current labels are too entrenched to tinker with. “They’re out there, and our job is to improve the analysis,” he said.

That seems tricky, but the desire is understandable. It is a bit sad to think of all the other ways we could spend the energy that is currently devoted to bickering over stereotypes or which generation had it hardest. Duffy particularly laments that the

focus on generational warfare seems to distract from the fact that society is more age-segregated than it used to be. We're so busy dramatizing the symbolic differences between generations that we miss the real harms of being alienated from one another.
