

A dense collage of various photographs of young people, likely Gen Z, is overlaid with a semi-transparent blue filter. The images show individuals in different settings: some are smiling broadly, some are looking thoughtful, and some are in social interactions. The collage includes a woman with face paint, a man with a beard, a woman with a headscarf, and a couple embracing. The overall mood is diverse and represents the generational focus of the content.

Early Thoughts on the Generational Impact of the Pandemic

Generational and youth experts share preliminary thinking on how Gen Z will forever be shaped by the Coronavirus and its impact today on key lifestages



Preface: A ‘Discontinuous Event’

By Peter Zollo
Chairman, Collaborata

No question. The pandemic will affect each of us in different and similar ways. But, for those who are young now, this event will likely shape how they see the world throughout their lifetime.

As my friend and former TRU colleague, Scott Hess (who’s now the CMO at Spark Foundry), writes: “This is where my head is at right now, exploring what role current events will play in the emerging mindset of our youngest generation.” I’m happy to share with you Scott’s

early (and I’d say brilliant) take on how this “discontinuous event” will shape this next generation. He synthesizes this moment so well: “I tend to remind people that, when we’re considering the crucible of adolescence, there often arises a ‘discontinuous event’ – something that’s nearly outside of our imagining, that doesn’t represent a natural progression and/or a recognizable repeat of previous events, and that when it appears in our lives, can change many of our ideas about what ‘normal’ means.”

The Impact Now on Key Lifestages

We've probably all seen the recent videos of college students on Spring Break, throwing all caution to the wind. Let's be clear: what they're exhibiting are lifestage, not generational, attitudes and behaviors. These are kids being kids. (There's even an article making waves on social media, written in 1918, complaining about young people during the Spanish Flu continuing to go to bars.) So, I wonder, as you read Scott's thoughts and ponder how today's youth will forever be shaped by this massive disruption to their lives, how those in other lifestages are faring. For example:

- Teens are compelled to experiment, rebel, and strive to fit in. These are key need states that drive behaviors. Now literally sheltered, will today's teens be delayed in manifesting these and/or will they find more virtual solutions and/or seek to un-shelter?
- How do college students navigate the uncharted waters of transitioning from Spring Break back to their parents' home without a real timeline of when (or if) they'll return to campus? Recent graduates always deal with some uncertainty with the job market; these "Corona" graduates will be facing a tougher-than-ever job market as they try to begin to pay off their student loans.
- How are parents of young children making this all feel "normal"? How are they conveying all of this to their kids

in ways that are healthy, instructive, and loving? Are they leveraging this "quantity" time together to teach lessons that can last a lifetime?

- How about those who are single and isolated, especially the elderly (many of whom are already faced with varying degrees of loneliness and isolation): What social nourishment, if any, are they receiving?
- How are those at the youngest end of the now-dangerous 60-something lifestage grappling with the idea that their age is more than a number -- that their age puts them at greater risk. Are they listening to their Millennial children, who are warning them that they're not as young as they feel, and should therefore actually act accordingly?

As I consider Scott's piece as well as my now 30-plus years of researching youth, I'm encouraged by what we've seen in the past when it comes to the resilient power of the human spirit to overcome the unimaginable. And, this is exactly that. And, as a particularly curious researcher, I'm excited to start digging into new data, including the spring release of Generation Nation 2020, to see the stories that emerge that tell the tales of generation and lifestage.

Looking forward to sharing those with you as well. For now, enjoy this read and take care.

The Wind-Up

By Scott Hess
CMO, Spark Foundry, a Publicis Agency

These are strange times. Not surprisingly, I've been gazing at the present and into the future through a unique lens.

Please excuse the long "wind-up," but I need to clarify a few things before I begin my more central argument.

For roughly the past two decades, I've been learning and talking about generational theory – the notion that birth cohorts (people born around the same time, in similar geography and/or broad social circumstances) often coalesce around a shared set of attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors – and how this can, in broad strokes, help to uncover a kind of "operating system" by which to understand and connect with large groups of people more effectively.

I'm always quick to stipulate that generational theory is soft (social) science; is built on vast generalizations; and is, in one's tool belt, a blunt instrument, more akin to a large mallet than a Phillips head screwdriver. While it can be useful for some jobs, it's hardly the be-all and the end-all of anything.

Nonetheless, I have personally seen the value of generational theory in helping large entities to develop a

Birth cohorts often coalesce around a shared set of attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, which uncovers a kind of 'operating system'

thinking framework within which they can develop better products, messages, and policies for targeted groups. Using generational frames, I helped a major sports brand connect with Millennials who viewed its athletes less as remote superheroes, more as people they might engage with. I helped our government compose anti-drug and anti-tobacco messaging for a generation that is able to do its own research. And I helped retailers transition from their "a few of us are cool" positioning to a more big-tent approach, something more resonant with reflexively inclusive Millennials.

Of course, these are but a few examples of many. (I've also helped scores of employers to understand and engage their young workers, and helped their senior leaders to appreciate the unique talents and points-of-view of younger generations.)

Shaping the Emerging Generation

Often when I speak, I'm addressing the current generation that occupies the stage of adolescence and young adulthood. For years, that meant I was discussing and describing "Millennials," folks born roughly between 1980 and 2000, and who were the target of brands and governments, who aimed to connect with them in varied ways either to develop or sell messages, not to mention actual products and services. Of late, I've transitioned to describing a cohort I've named the Post Generation (or "PostGen"), and who the mass of media have taken to calling "Gen Z."

Regardless of whom I'm addressing and talking about, I tend to remind people that, when we're considering the crucible of adolescence, there often arises a "discontinuous event" – something that's nearly outside of our imagining, that doesn't represent a natural progression and/or a recognizable repeat of previous events, and that when it appears in our lives, can change many of our ideas about what "normal" means. Some recent-ish examples include the Challenger disaster; 9/11; the 2008 market collapse; the election of Barack Obama, and then of President Trump; and now, the COVID-19 crisis.

You can imagine how the Challenger disaster, among other events, might have inspired a generation of skeptical Gen X "slackers," more attuned to opting

When considering the crucible of adolescence, there often arises a 'discontinuous event,' which can change many of our ideas about what 'normal' means

out than in; how 9/11 and the election of a black president with a "funny name" might have opened up the worldviews of Millennials, making American geographic and racial and ethnic insularity seem anachronistic; and how the 2008 collapse and the 2020 pandemic might...

Aha! This is where my head is at right now, exploring what role current events will play in the emerging mindset of our youngest generation.

It's true, a global pandemic is not entirely a surprise. It's happened before, at varied scale. And yes, some experts have been warning of an event like this one for years. But let's be clear: nothing like this was in our broad public consciousness before now. We are all, more or less, in shock.

Certainly we've seen nothing of this magnitude, pandemic-wise, since 1918; nothing like it since we've become a globally connected media community, able to parse updates from every corner of the globe in real time; and nothing that has so completely captured the public consciousness across so many borders at once.

Why Youth Are Particularity Impacted

Not even 9/11 had such an immediate impact on so many lives in such a short time. This single event is, perhaps, the most globally relevant event in more than 100 years, with the exception of World War II. (Perhaps the most obvious analogue for what we're seeing today is the AIDS crisis. Sadly, that crisis felt for years largely confined to a single population – a misjudgment, practical and moral, that cost far too many lives.)

Given its uniqueness and also its scale, this COVID-19 pandemic will certainly be a defining event in the lives of all of us; but it will be profoundly impactful on those who are children, adolescents, and young adults, all of whom are forging worldviews, consciously or unconsciously. Unlike 9/11, which offered Americans a common enemy to confront, and a common purpose to enact (“We won’t let them change our way of life”), this virus is much harder to ally ourselves against, on a personal level. We are at the mercy not only of our leaders and our medical community, but more importantly we are at the mercy of the virus itself.

For young people, it must seem as if nobody has any real answers, that there is no expertise or power strong enough to confront this crisis in a meaningful way. Why didn’t we anticipate it?

For young people, it must seem as if nobody has any real answers

Why can’t we stop it more decisively? Isn’t there anything more active and impactful that we can do, other than shelter in place, buy gift cards for local businesses, and hope for the best?

This sense that adults and authority figures are imperfect, fallible, foundering...is something that most of us arrive at in time. Yet it’s happening for the Post Generation (Gen Z) during their childhood and adolescence. After seeing how vulnerable many adults were in 2008, they’re seeing it again in 2020. For a generation already attuned to fact-checking parents and teachers in real time and to seeing the vast divisiveness that characterizes our current political climate, adults and authority figures must look less trustworthy and more suspect than ever.

The Millennial trend toward distrusting experts and crowd-sourcing truth – relying on the so-called “wisdom of crowds” – might actually intensify. And yet, as disinformation and “deep fake” videos become ever easier to create and disseminate, and as foreign governments have successfully influenced our elections, it’s becoming increasingly clear that even crowds have their limits.

The Search for Trust

What becomes of a generation that grows up with precious few people they can trust? Without anything, individual or institutional, upon which they can rely? How does that shape their thinking, their actions, their emotional wellbeing? We've already seen data that suggests Gen Z is the most anxious generation in modern history. Will this pandemic and its fallout exacerbate that sad fact?

At the moment, much of life feels tenuous. As sports and school at all levels go on hold; as restaurants and movie theaters and gyms close; and as plays and performances and graduations and even college decisions are postponed, what thread of normalcy and reliability remains for our youth?

We have, for the most part, our handheld devices; our wi-fi and our streaming services; our online profiles and digital commerce platforms. These offer us personal(ized) windows on the outside world which allow us to choose what and who we see, when and how we interact or consume. For Gen Z, this feels perhaps more natural, more "the way things are," than it does for the rest of us. They've never known anything else. Is it possible their sense of loss during this time will be less profound than the rest of us?

What thread of normalcy and reliability remains for our youth?

In the preceding years, I've written about four "P's" that could define the Post Generation. I suggested the data pointed toward them being Precocious; Pragmatic; (Women-)Powered; and Pluralistic, among other attributes that hadn't yet taken shape for me. At present, it seems clear that the fifth "P" of the Post Generation is going to be "Pandemic."

What's not yet clear is how this discontinuous – and sadly all too real – event will forever alter the worldview of our youngest citizens. Absent data, poised in the earliest days of this global crisis, I'm loathe to make any major guesses. Save for this one:

Gen Z, the Post Generation, will be searching for something they can trust; someone they can believe in; someplace that is safe and constant. They will crave reassurance, stability, and safety. Perhaps most important, their "bar of belief" will be higher than ever, and harder to clear.

For those of us whose job it is to connect with them, we'd do well to begin contemplating how we're going to reach these heights.

About Generation Nation 2020

In this time of great change, brands need to deeply understand how consumers themselves are changing. "Generation Nation" demystifies generational and lifestage differences and traits and why they matter, enabling brands to anticipate what's next. GN2020 shows where generation intersects with lifestage and examines the the unique dynamics of eight product categories, helping marketers more resonantly connect with their consumers of today and tomorrow.

About Collaborata

Collaborata incubates large-scale, original insights projects, bringing together strategic partners to collaborate and fund the work, executed by full-service research agencies paired with subject-matter experts. Clients share the insights and the costs.

About Scott Hess

Scott Hess is the Chief Marketing Officer at global Publicis Media agency Spark Foundry. He's also one of the leading experts on American youth in general, and the Millennial generation in particular. Scott is also one of the most quoted experts on the "Post Generation," his name for the cohort that follows Millennials that is often referred to as "Generation Z."

About Peter Zollo

Peter Zollo, Collaborata's Chairman, was described by Business Week as "America's youth-marketing guru." The author of three books on teen insights, Zollo founded TRU, the firm that contemporized the field of youth research en route to becoming the largest youth insights agency in the world. TRU was catapulted by the talents of many notable alumni, including Scott Hess of Spark Foundry, Michael Wood of 747 Insights, and Oliver Pangborn of Pangborn Design, all of whom have collaborated on this eBook and Generation Nation.

To learn more more about Generation Nation 2020:
Contact: jimmy@collaborata.com