SERVING THE SPIRITUAL NEEDS OF GEN. Z

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PAULIST FATHERS

WHY STUDY GENERATION Z?

- The Church embraces the "joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties" of people from every age, and reading "the signs of the times" with the eyes of faith helps to evangelize. [1]
- The percentages of young people who participate in religious activities has been declining in the United States.
- Adolescents today must navigate technologies that did not exist during the formation of prior generations.
- Longitudinal surveys that ask identical questions over the years offer high-quality data tracking differences in behavior and perceptions across generational cohorts.
  - This project draws heavily from the annual Monitoring the Future survey of 12th graders (n>2,000) and the biannual General Social Survey respondents aged 18-24 (n> 220), updating data presented in Jean Twenge's 2017 book *iGen*.
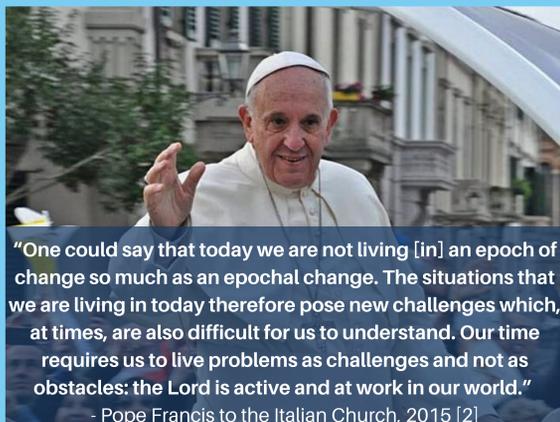
"One could say that today we are not living [in] an epoch of change so much as an epochal change. The situations that we are living in today therefore pose new challenges which, at times, are also difficult for us to understand. Our time requires us to live problems as challenges and not as obstacles: the Lord is active and at work in our world."
~ Pope Francis to the Italian Church, 2015 [2]

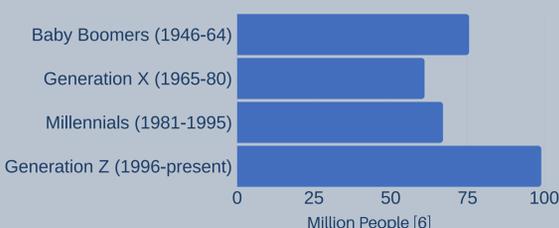CC BY-SA 4.0 Zebra8844

WHO ARE GENERATION Z?

- Gen. Z begins with those born in the late 1990s
  (no consensus on the exact birth-year cut-off)
  - Pew Research Center: those born 1997 & following [3]
  - Jean Twenge: those born 1995 & following [4]
  - Barna Group: those born 1999 & following [5]
  - *This project uses 1996 as a middle-ground.*

- Largest & most diverse US generational cohort in history

Major Events during their Lives

- **2001:** Terrorist attacks of Sept.11
  - Oldest were in Kindergarten, most not yet born.
  - Parental concerns were shaped by sense of physical insecurity.
- **2006:** Facebook opens to anyone over 13
  - Oldest were approx.~10 years old.
  - Facebook and other social media channels have been widely available throughout the adolescence of Gen Z.
- **2008-2009:** Great Recession
  - Oldest were in 12 to13 years old.
  - Insecurity of job market heightened parental perceptions of the need to focus on competitive educational achievement.
- **2012:** smartphones reach 50% of American cellphone marketshare
  - Oldest were ~16 years old.
  - Smartphone use has been widespread in high school and college.
- **2020:** COVID-19 Pandemic
  - Oldest ~24 years old.
  - Majority are 18 or younger.

HOW DO THEY BEHAVE DIFFERENTLY?

Gen. Z. seniors are less likely to socialize in person and engage in illicit or risky behaviors than did millennials.

- Gen. Z. seniors are less likely to have a driver's license.
  - 68% had D.L. in 2015 vs. over 80% in 2005 [7]
- Gen. Z. seniors are less likely to have tried alcohol or cigarettes.
  - 59% had ever tried alcohol in 2018 vs. 71% in 2007 [8]
  - 28% had ever tried cigarettes in 2018 vs. 47% in 2007 [8]
- Gen. Z. seniors are less likely to have ever had sex or given birth
  - 39.5% had ever had sex in 2017 vs. 47.5% in 2008 [9]
 - 11.5 births per 1,000 females in 2018 vs. 41.5 per 1,000 in 2008 [10]

Gen. Z. seniors spend more time on social media and texting and less time working, playing sports, studying, and sleeping than did millennial seniors. [11]

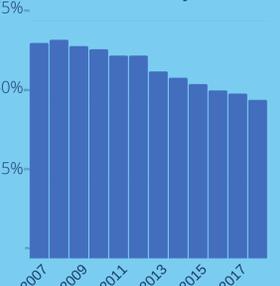- 48% spend 3 or more hours per day on social media

Gen. Z. seniors are less likely to attend religious services than did millennials

- 24% attend weekly or more often vs. 36% in 2007 [12]
- 27% never attends vs. 20% in 2007 [12]

12th Graders Going on Dates at least Monthly [13]
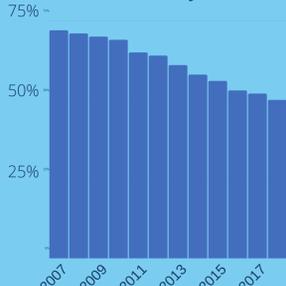
12th Graders Attending Parties at least Monthly [14]

HOW DO THEY FEEL DIFFERENTLY?

Gen. Z. seniors are more likely to report feeling lonely and less likely to report satisfaction with themselves or life in general than did millennials.

- Percentage who report feeling at least somewhat satisfied or better
  - "Satisfied with myself:" 64% in 2018 vs. 79% in 2007 [15]
  - "Satisfied with life as a whole:" 67% in 2018 vs. 76% in 2007 [16]
- Percentage of seniors "agreeing" or "mostly agreeing" with the statement:
  - "A lot of time I feel lonely." 40% in 2018 vs. 22% in 2007 [17]
 - "I often feel left out" 39% in 2018 vs. 22% in 2007 [18]

The suicide rate among 15-19 year olds within Gen. Z has been higher than it was for the same millennial cohorts.

- 11.8 per 100,000 in 2017 vs. 8.8 per 100,000 in 2008 [19]

Gen. Z. respondents report declining confidence in God's existence and declining importance of religion in their lives.

- 34% confident in God's existence in 2018 vs. 52% in 2007 among 18-24 year olds [20]
- 28% say religion is not at all important vs. 19% in 2007 among 12th graders [21]

12th Graders Reporting Feeling Lonely [17]
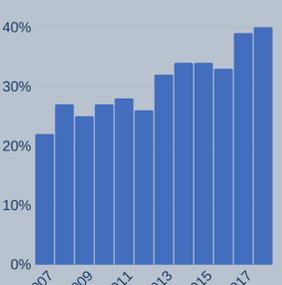
12th Graders Reporting Feeling Left Out [18]
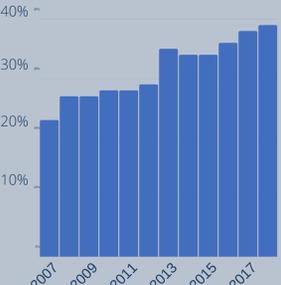
WHAT'S BEHIND THESE CHANGING FEELINGS AND BEHAVIORS?

A reminder: correlation does not imply causation!

- Theories that explain causation are generally speculative.
- There are numerous factors that can influence human behavior, and it is impossible to control for all these variables to isolate causative factors across generations.

Religious participation has been correlated with lower depressive symptoms. [22]

What aspects of religious participation might lower depressive symptoms is an open question. Some hypotheses include:
- Communal encounters build relationships and sense of belonging.
- Religious communities help people process feelings of inadequacy with hope in God's unconditional love and offer of forgiveness.
- Prayer facilitates mindfulness and healthy brain development, in contrast to the negative affects of constant stimulation.

Theory of Biochemical Changes relating to Social Media [23]
- Overstimulation of brain can affect development of neural pathways.
- Slower neural pathways associated with empathy and other emotions may be stunted by the non-stop flow of digital stimulation.

Theory that People have an Innate Need to Belong
- "People need to perceive that there is an interpersonal bond or relationship marked by stability, affective concern, and continuation into the foreseeable future" (Baumeister, Leary, Steinburg, 1995). [24]
- Digital communication lacks the multi-sensory dimensions of frequent face-to-face interactions, so there are likely grave risks to human development when relationships differ drastically from the conditions through which humans have evolved. [25]

The Social Rank Theory of Depression
- Depression can be caused by feeling subordinated to others who have more success in the competitive pursuit of finite resources. [26]
- Social media feeds flood the user with images of others' successes, causing feelings of envy and inadequacy that fuel depression.
- Social media changes people's perceptions of reality as they see others only putting forth their idealized versions of themselves without flaws.

HOW CAN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH BETTER SERVE GEN. Z?

1. Educate pastoral leaders on the changing demographics, behaviors, and perceptions of Generation Z.
- Emotional harms associated with social media (loneliness, envy, cyberbullying, sexting) need to be given consideration during religious education alongside the usual issues of premarital sex, underage drinking, etc.
- "Stay Home" orders due to the Coronavirus can give parish leaders a real-time glimpse of what life is like when interactions shift to digital spaces with all its limitations. These experiences may offer insights into the lifestyles of Gen. Z.

2. Build a "village square" that emphasizes communal experiences during faith formation.
- Countless opinions on the internet can relativize the doctrines of the Church unless such teachings can be reinforced through experiential knowledge of the faith within a Christian community.
- Experiences in which students feel heard, cared for, and loved can discover their capacity to do likewise will help them to internalize Church doctrines.
- Safe spaces for students to share their vulnerabilities with one another will help them to discover that their perceptions of reality formed by social media are incomplete and often unattainable.

"Thus, go out into the streets and go out to the crossroads: call all those whom you find, excluding no one (cf. Mt 22:9). Accompany especially those who are on the roadside, 'the lame, the maimed, the blind, the dumb' (Mt 15:30). Wherever you may be, build neither walls nor borders but village squares and field hospitals."
- Pope Francis to the Italian Church, 2015 [2]

3. Teach adolescents and young adults to use technology responsibly.
- Facilitate experiences of prayer and contemplation during their religious formation.
- Encourage habits of intentionally setting aside technological distractions in order to make time for daily prayer.
- Explore how liturgical worship can draw a variety of senses into the celebration of Christian mysteries.

SOURCES

[1] Paul IV, *Gaudium et Spes*, (Vatican City, 1965); 1, 4. http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council /documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

[2] Francis, "Meeting with the Participants in the Fifth Convention of the Italian Church: Address of the Holy Father," Libreria Editrice Vaticana, November 10, 2015, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/n ovember/documents/papa-francesco_20151110_firenze_convegno-chiesa-italiana.html

[3] Michael Dimcock, "Defining generations: Where Millennials end and Generation Z begins," Pew Research Center, January 17, 2019, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/

[4] Jean M. Twenge, *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy--and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood* (New York: Atria Books, 2017), 4-9.

[5] Barna Group and Impact 360 Institute, *Gen Z: The Culture, Beliefs and Motivations Shaping the Next Generation* (2018); 10.

[6] United States Census Bureau, "Annual Estimates of the Resident Population by Single Year of Age and Sex for the United States: April 1, 2010 to July 1, 2018," last revised July 30, 2019, https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/popest/2010s-national-detail.html.

[7] *Monitoring the Future* (MtF) 12th Grade item number 11960. https://www.icpsr.umich.edu/icpsrweb/ICPSR/.

[8] *MtF* 12th Grade item numbers 00760, 00790.

[9] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 1991-2017 High School Youth Risk Behavior Survey Data, https://nccd.cdc.gov/youthonline/App/.

[10] Gretchen Livingston and Deja Thomas, "Why is the teen birth rate falling?" Pew Research Center, August 2, 2019, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/08/02/why-is-the-teen-birth-rate-falling/.

[11] See Twenge, iGen, 61-2, 66-7, 113-4 citing MtF and American Freshman surveys; *MtF* item 34730.

[12] *MtF* 12th Grade item number 00370.

[13] *MtF* 12th Grade item number 00630.

[14] *MtF* 12th Grade item number 00570.

[15] *MtF* 12th Grade item number 1620.

[16] *MtF* 12th Grade item number 06840.

[17] *MtF* 12th Grade item number 12650.

[18] *MtF* 12th Grade item number 12690.

[19] Oren Miron, Kun-Hsing Yu, Rachel Wilf-Miron, and Isaac S Kohane, "Suicide Rates Among Adolescents and Young Adults in the United States, 2000-2017," JAMA 321, no. 23 (June 18, 2019): 2362–2364

[20] Smith, Tom W., Davern, Michael, Freese, Jeremy, and Morgan, Stephen L., *General Social Surveys, 1972-2018* [machine-readable data file]. NORC ed. Chicago: NORC, 2019, https://gss.norc.org/.

[21] *MtF* 12th Grade item number 00380.

[22] Jean M Twenge, Thomas E Joiner, Megan L Rogers, and Gabrielle N Martin, "Increases in Depressive Symptoms, Suicide-Related Outcomes, and Suicide Rates Among U.S. Adolescents After 2010 and Links to Increased New Media Screen Time" *Clinical Psychological Science* 6, no. 1 (January 2018): 12-13.

[23] Nicholas G. Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010), 220-1.

[24] Roy F Baumeister, Mark Leary, and Robert Steinberg, "The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation." *Psychological Bulletin* 117, no. 3 (May 1995), 500.

[25] Twenge, et. al., "Increases in Depressive Symptoms...", 4.

[26] Edson Tandoc, Patrick Ferrucci, and Margaret Duffy, "Facebook Use, Envy, and Depression Among College Students: Is Facebooking Depressing?" *Computers in Human Behavior* 43, no. C (February 2015): 142-144.

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