



## Why Gen Z stereotypes aren't working

Taylor Orford – a Gen Z – at WPP's Ogilvy comments on generational generalisations and how brands can use subcultures to connect authentically

In between crocheting a new pair of jorts and selling my soul for T Swizzle tickets, I thought I'd cast my roller skates aside and explore the bizarre generalisations bestowed upon Gen Z.

Apparently, Gen Zers love fly fishing. We love soap-making, 19th-century clothing and taking a stand against monogamy. We can't find time between skateboarding and winding our cassette tapes back up to get our heads down and work, while somehow still grinding on our side hustles and desperate to own our own businesses. Clearly, I'm exhausted... and very confused.

### A firsthand account

I speak from experience, having taken on the role of resident Gen Z in most instances throughout my career. Admittedly, I fall within the older cohort of Gen Z. At 23, I stand too young to call myself a Zillennial (don't get me started) but more chronically online than my millennial counterparts.

I've also fallen prey to being the yes-man in meetings. "Gen Z loves (insert rogue, niche hobby here) don't they, Taylor?" "Yes!" I reply, "I love collecting tinned fish! Just can't get enough!"

Watching older colleagues solve a brief by discussing how Gen Zers spend their spare time is a truly surreal experience. Because it doesn't apply to me, are they wrong? Or am I even doing Gen Z right? I'd like to think that the problem here does not fall upon the individual but on our reliance as an industry to group entire generations as an audience.

### It's not just me – it's you too

It's worth noting that generalisations aren't exclusive to Gen Z. As far as we're concerned, millennials love an avocado or two during a Harry Potter marathon and boomers just can't get enough of that thumbs-up emoji. But that's exactly it: If audiences are struggling to associate with most stereotypes surrounding their own generation, why is it the standard to group audiences by birth year?

In a 2020 BBHLabs essay, Harry Guild points out the lack of strength behind generational cohesions. He has attempted a way to calculate the relative like-mindedness of a group of people, using a mechanic he developed named 'The Group Cohesion Score'.

The findings are more than insightful, but to massively summarise a personal, core takeaway from his research: Gen Z have a lower cohesion score (+0.2) than people who drink Orangina (+4.5). If the term "apples to oranges" is going to be applied anywhere, it's here.

### Gen Z is the hardest to summarise

I particularly disagree with grouping Gen Z together in this way because we move faster than any other generation. The velocity of Gen Z trends is faster than millennials' because of the way we consume social media. With memes and cultural conversations evolving at the rate they do, there is always something new to keep up with. With masses of fast-moving trends, everyone can't be clued in on the same content.

This piece isn't so much about inaccuracies of stereotypes, because just this morning I saw a group of girls rollerblading around London's Finsbury Park filming TikToks. It's more how generalising them to an entire generation isn't always effective when setting a brief.

That being said, short-form content does play a large role in upselling niche hobbies and unsuspecting trends to younger audiences. So, while the variation in pastimes among my generation is vast, it's far from all-encompassing. Often, the key to cracking your audience isn't by generation, but by subculture.

### The beauty of subcultures

Subcultures are an ever-growing ecosystem of communities, seedlings from larger trends that fall away and sprout new ones. And in my view, they're where the most interesting insights are born. For example, there are countless subcultures that fall under gaming. They've got streamers, cosplayers, LARPers and cosy gamers – and we're only just scratching the surface.

"Subculture is the new pop culture," says Highsnobiety founder David Fischer. Brands should look to these subcultures as a network of dots surrounding their audience and see what bits feel right for them to plug into. They should first approach where they feel comfortable to feel authentic, then expand through the network of subcultures as they grow confidence and authority in that space.

There's a difference between "Gen Z love streetwear" and "x% of Harajuku fashion wearers are Gen Z." It feels much more authentic to confidently speak to a niche audience without lazily slapping a generational claim on it.

I would love brands to delve deeper when considering their audience. Be confident in exploring niches and nuances and then seeing how Gen Z interacts with them. Try considering which subcultures within Gen Z are best for the brand to approach, rather than the whole generation.

Lastly, please don't assume the Gen Zer sitting opposite you in the office has a million-pound side hustle and a black belt in roller skating – but she certainly wishes she did.

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