Engaging the Generations: The World and Persona of Millennials and Screeners

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Abstract

For the next 20 years, youth ministry will be primarily about "Screeners," a distinctive generation following the enormous cohort of Millennials. Because of the robust Millennial focus, educators, youth workers and churches have barely glanced at this new generation. While in its infancy, research on Screeners indicates marked differences from Millennials in almost every way. Utilizing the lens of Generational Theory may provide a beneficial approach for identifying and strategizing our engagement with Screeners in our youth ministries and Millennials as their leaders.

Keywords: Generations, Generational Theory, Millennials, Screeners

Engaging the Generations: The World and Persona of Millennials and Screeners

Millennials constitute the largest generation ever recorded at 83 million, which includes 78 million US births and roughly five million cohort members who are immigrants (Rainer, 2011, p.2). Together they represent roughly 1/3 of the American population. Their sheer size and youthfulness draws an inequitable amount of attention by everybody from marketers to educators to municipalities to politicians and church leaders. Everyone is clamoring to connect with the Millennials, and these groups seem hungry for strategies and methods to make it possible. Even though the focus remains squarely fixated on Millennials, the diminutive generation in their wake is methodically populating our middle schools. Attentiveness to this dynamic declares that, for the next 20 years, youth ministry will be primarily about the Screeners (named Homelanders by Straus and Howe). While educators, youth workers and churches have barely glanced at this new generation, an understanding of Generational Theory may provide a beneficial lens through which we identify and strategize our engagement with Screeners as the next youth generation and Millennials as their leaders.

Generational Theory Defined

William Straus and Neil Howe are the gurus of generational theory who introduced their concept through their seminal work *Generations* in 1991. According to Strauss and Howe (1991), a generational cohort "[…] is defined, as everyone who is 'brought into being' at the same historical moment" (p. 436), and therefore share similar generational characteristics with the other members of their cohort. They all come from the same "special history" and share a unique "peer personality" that shapes the way their generation characteristically behaves throughout their lifetime (p.437). While great effort is given to the historical naming and sequencing of generations in basic 20-year cycles, attention is also devoted to the persona of

each generation influenced by the cyclical nature of the repeating archetypes every 80-year phase

(four 20-year cycles) called a saeculum. Strauss and Howe (1991) define peer personality as a

"generational persona recognized and determined by (1) common age location (2) common

beliefs and behavior; and (3) perceived membership in a common generation" (p.429). A

generation is composed of people whose common location in history lends them a collective

persona. The span of one generation is roughly the length of a phase of life, and generations

come in four archetypes, always in the same order - Artist, Prophet, Nomad, and Hero (Straus

and Howe, 1997, p. 74). At the end of the 80-year saeculum, the four basic archetypes repeat

themselves. This basic understanding of the repeating archetypes allows us to project

characteristics of the Screeners even though there are yet unborn members of this generation.

Generational Typologies and Characteristics

Describing the generational personas of the three older generation will provide a context

by which we can begin to grasp how both appreciation and frustration develop between the

cohorts. Consider the implications of the following similarities/differences and likes/dislikes in

this abbreviated glimpse of these generations.

1. Traditionalists (Artist archetype) were born between 1922-1945 and are 71-91 years old.

    They are also known as the Silent generation and like such things as being polite, more

    formal, respectful, and friendly as well as hierarchical structures. This generation dislikes

    being overly casual, cold, rude, and indifferent ("whatever" is not their go-to phrase).

2. Baby Boomers (Prophet archetype) were born between 1946-1964 and are 52-70 years old.

    There were 76 million born into this behemoth cohort, which is how they got their name.

    Boomers like recognition, caring, being knowledgeable and personal, and they like things

    focused on them. The Boomer cohort dislikes distracted, defensive and briskly efficient.

3. Gen Xers (Nomad archetype) were born between 1965-1982 and are 34-51 years old. They only total about 48 million and have been characterized as 'latch-key' kids who are entrepreneurial and enjoy working on their own. This generation likes things straightforward, brief, efficient and focused on outcome or product. Gen Xers dislike things that are overly perky, chatty, dumb and anything involving overselling (Are there any potential areas for clashes with other generational cohorts?)

Who are Millennials?

Millennials (Hero archetype) were born between 1983-2002 and are 14-33 years old. This generational cohort is the largest generation at 83 million strong with 5 million of the ranks being immigrants, which represents a significant increase over any previous generation. They also represent the most studied and most educated generation to date (Dupont, 2014, p.75). A record number of people from this generation either attended or currently attend college. (Hartman & McCambridge, 2011). This cohort likes things positive, cheerful, engaging, helpful and meaningful while disliking things/people who are snide and snippy, too formal, condescending and slow. Diversity for this group has become a norm with over 42% indicating something other than "white" in surveys. Millennials are different in racial and ethnic backgrounds as well as religious and lifestyle backgrounds. As much as there are differences, Millennials "accept and tolerate" those differences (Rainer & Rainer, 2011, p. 34). The sheer enormity of the Millennial generational cohort accounts for 1/3 of the US population. It is no wonder that significant attention, resources and efforts have been expended to understand and reach this group from every sector of the business, political, educational and church worlds.

Some of the most common characteristics of Millennials that inform their generational persona include:

1. *Technologically fluent (or tech fluent).* While Gen Xers are considered tech *savvy* since they were introduced to and learned new technology in school and at home, tech *fluent* describes Millennials who grew up with technology as one of their basic life languages. Many of them use Google to find an answer to a question (Roberts et al, 2012). They stay connected 24/7 to friends, parents, information, and entertainment (Zemke, 2013).

2. *Cause-driven.* A hallmark of this cohort involves a deep sense of justice and a new realization of their potential impact through social media and sheer numbers. Everything from Tom's shoes to Kony 2012 to crowdfunding have a momentum fueled by Millennial involvement. About every eight decades, a new, positive, accomplished, and group-oriented 'civic generation' emerges... The Millennial Generation is America's newest civic generation" (Greenberg & Weber, 2008).

3. *Outcome-focused.* Closely aligned with 'cause-driven,' Millennials desire change as the outcome of their cause involvement. The prevalent idea that they can 'change the world' is not only an adage, it is an embedded belief and motivation for transformation. The view that Millennials are usually inclined toward helping others is so widely held that companies have instituted recruiting programs for young workers involving volunteer services and helping the environment (Twenge & Freeman, 2012).

4. *Need feedback.* More and more their lives are continuous feedback loops due to social media. While social media feedback provides one level of critique, Millennials want to hear from employers, teachers and parents regular updates on how they are doing in their efforts. Unfortunately, they also do not take criticism well, therefore the need for small adjustments rather than one potentially-devastating quarterly review is much preferred. This generation desires frequent feedback and does not follow rules (Bell & Griffin, 2010). They also desire

transparency from their co-workers and managers (Ferri-Reed, 2014). Millennials will leave an organization if managers lie to them too often. They want to "feel valued, respected and rewarded for their contributions." (Zemke, Raines, and Filipczak, 2013, p.139). In one study of 6,500 managers across six companies, researchers found the most important engagement drivers were the employee's relationship with the immediate supervisor responsible for "managing [the employee's] performance" and the employees' own "career opportunities" for advancement in the company (Gilbert, 2011, p. 2). In fact, "managing performance" was the most frequent engagement driver. This indicator refers to Millennials need for getting immediate, frequent, and direct feedback on their job performance.

5. *Desire mentors*. "Mentor me" is a cry for most Millennials because they are keen to access the experience of the older, more veteran generations. This generation is self-motivated and believes they possess the skills and knowledge they need to achieve their goals. When Millennials feel empowered they believe they can achieve anything (Ng & Gossett, 2013). While some of the Millennial 'dislikes' are in direct opposition to Gen Xer 'likes' (i.e. dislikes of 'snide and snippy' as opposed to likes of 'straightforward and brief'), some mentoring relationships can be forged. The match made in heaven, however, is between the Millennials and the Boomers! The list of Boomer 'likes' includes recognition, caring, personable, focused on me and knowledgeable while the Millennials like positive, engaging, helpful and meaningful. This matchup provides an extremely strong potential for successful mentoring between these two behemoth generations.

By definition each generational cohort is shaped by a common location in history, which lends them a collective persona. Based on our general understanding of adolescent development and the individuation process, we understand that value-shaping events tend to 'stick' when they

occur in the developmental years of adolescence. Born between 1981 and 2002, their developmental years of ages 12 to 23 would fall basically between 1993 up through 2025. Looking into that historical window, events that could be shaping forces on Millennials would include things like:

1. Mass shootings in schools, theaters and other public arenas create a new normal for safety in their world. With this developing reality, an existential view of life becomes more prevalent.

2. 9/11 and the war on terror, which further demonstrates the vulnerabilities that exist in their lives, create deep feelings that 'the world is not safe.'

3. The Clinton sex scandal identifies for a generation what sexual relations is and isn't. For many Christian youth, a defining line such as this becomes a welcome definition of what can and can't be done in the physical realm of a relationship. Additionally, DOMA (Defense of Marriage Act) followed by a subsequent redefinition of marriage and sexual identity roles provide further options.

4. The economic recession of 2008 stripped many entry-level jobs from the ranks of adolescents with preference given to people with families and adult needs. Additionally, Millennials relied more heavily on parents and debt for college while understanding moving back home after college as a smart economic move. Many Millennials are already deeply in debt.

5. The internet delivers information and knowledge to the fingertips of Millennials in a way unprecedented in human history. Some sociologists compare the impact of the internet to be comparable to that of the printing press. Millennials have become life-long learners.

6. Social media presents the ultimate platform to voice and opinion, thus creating the democratization of both. This becomes a means for voicing causes and changing the world

through changing opinions. It also creates a new demand for managing the 'online presence' in all of social media's glamor and cruelty.

7. Globalization brings an awareness of people and things beyond the personal radius of life. Connection and collaboration are possible outcomes that have never existed with such immediacy and depth. The world has become an open book ready to be engaged. Nearly nine out of ten respondents in a study conducted by Rainer & Rainer (2011) stated they feel responsible to make a difference in the world.

8. Smartphones tender an alternative to historical interactions through offering constant connectivity to people and information. This 'always on' possibility creates a new pace-of-life that reduces current attention spans to 8 seconds (McSpadden, 2015). Smartphones and other 'screens' become essential for living life in the 21st century.

David Kinnaman of the Barna Group quotes Bob Buford in You Lost Me (2011) describing the Millennials as 'discontinuously different' (p. 37), based in part to their historical location. Parents and grandparents have historically (since the beginning of time) been the familial instructors for their children on learning and navigating the essential tasks of life. There is now a "reversal of the parent as teacher and child as a student" (Beaven, 2014, p. 72). Today, Millennials are training their parents and grandparents on essential life skills from using their smartphones to setting up an online bank account to staying in touch through Skype, Instagram, Facebook, etc. Basic technological proficiency has become crucially important to traverse the social structures of our current world, and, unlike any time in history, the young Millennials have been equipping the older generations with the necessary skills.

When it comes to Millennial thinking, a string of descriptive words would include accepting, collaborative, distrusting authority, user friendly, justice-focused, cause-driven,

instantaneous, moralistic, visionary, holistic, and narrative/story-formed. The defining question

for Millennials is 'does it work?' rather than 'is it true?' This cohort wants authentic community,

meaningful action, intelligent/honest dialog, and for other generations not to try to be

Millennials. In a mentoring conversation, a 25-year old Millennial put it this way, ""We're young,

impulsive, idealistic, passionate, and in need of direction, mentorship, patience, and grace (lots

of grace). We need help; we have no idea what we're doing! Which is why the way you 'preach'

the gospel is incredibly important."

Who are Screeners?

Screeners (Artist archetype, like the Traditionalists) are being born between 2003 and

2022 and are now (6)-13 years old. Projected to be fewer in numbers than the Millennials, they

will reflect a generational cohort persona much like the Traditionalists who are 71-91 years old

according to the cyclical nature and the turnings recorded in Straus and Howe's generational

theory (1997, p. 74). Steinmetz (2015) anticipates that Screeners will be well behaved and

develop a culture of 'blanding' – playing it safe - in many ways like the Silent generation

(Traditionalists). This ability to project Artist attributes coupled with some early studies of these

children and emerging adolescents allows us to begin developing a generational persona in this

vastly different, technological age. 'Screeners' (called 'Homelanders' by Straus and Howe and

the White House) will always observe, know and experience life through the framework of

screens – usually 4-5 screens at a time. A Screener "has access to more viewing screens than any

preceding demographic category." Nickelodeon calls this new arena "multiscreen sandboxes"

(Umstead, 2013). This cohort likes diversity, individualism and technology while disliking

personal reflection, old-style teaching and lacking technology. The generation makes up about

25% of the current population of the United States. Ethnically, biracial and multiracial groups are

the fastest growing groups of young people in America (Turner, 2015, p. 104). They are also the most sexually diverse generation due to the blurring of gender roles in American culture (Sparks and Honey, 2014).

Tim Elmore (2014), the founder and president of the Growing Leaders organization, states that they are: "Cautious and safety preoccupied; Green-biased; focus on conservation; Insecure; seeking identity; Calculated; Frugal stewards of resources; Self-reliant; Realistic and pragmatic; Issue-oriented; Globally savvy and aware" (p.1). Therefore, some of the most common characteristics of Screeners that inform their generational persona include:

1. *Tech immersed*. Beyond being savvy or fluent, these youngsters understand technology like fish understand water; technology is not some*thing*, it's just life. It is the environment in which they swim, and they exhibit and unconscious reliance on it for their connectivity. (Mihelich, 2013). According to Turner (2015), "With technological advances in multimedia, such as tablets, the smartphone, social media, and flat-screen televisions, Generation Z (Screener) youth have become accustomed to interacting and communicating in a world that is connected at all times" (p. 104). Technology is a natural part of life for the Screeners, and they have never known a world without the internet and interactive screens. For previous generations, this has not been the case, and the number of people who are connected via mobile phones jumped from 340,000 in 1985 to 302 million in 2011, which represents 75 percent of teens (Rainie and Wellman, 2012, p. 84). The Screeners live in a world where technology is constantly at their fingertips, and Steinmetz (2015) refers to them as technological umbilical cords always connecting the parent and child.

2. *Globally savvy*. Screeners are not only more globally connected, they actually are engaged with international news and macro events. They are informed and concerned about the

implications for people across the world. This is an area where they are already surpassing

the Millennials in going beyond the headlines with significant knowledge and interaction

with world events.

3. *Individualistic*. Screens allow Screeners to interact with each other and the world as

    individuals, and they like it that way. Being a smaller generational cohort, there is less of a

    communal identity and more of a personal interface with the world. Much like the 'latch-key'

    GenXers, Screeners are more independent operators than Boomers or Millennials, but there is

    also a toll to be paid for the individualism. James Steyer (2012) says, "In a world of limitless

    connections and hundreds or even thousands of 'friends,' many relationships are bound to be

    shallow and unreal" (p. 25). Research suggests that while virtual communities have

    contributed to early adolescents being connected with a larger number of people, these

    "communities" have not contributed to the deep and meaningful relationships that every

    adolescent needs.

4. *Traditional teaching averse.* Lecture-style classrooms and learning will drive this group

    insane. Their multi-tasking minds are becoming fashioned by stimulation on multiple screens

    concurrently coupled with the expertise to pursue information on their own. Lecture – no,

    discovery – yes. According to Steyer (2012), the ability for adolescents to gain information

    extremely quickly has shifted many of the ways in which an early adolescent belonging to

    the Screener generation focuses, reads, writes, and reflects. An early adolescent can find an

    answer to a particular question or information about a particular topic in the matter of

    seconds, making much of what is learned in the classroom irrelevant to retain (p. 36).

    Evidence shows that the Screener generation thinks differently. They no longer learn best by

    sitting still and reading a book or by doing worksheets or sitting for 25 minutes listening to a

sermon. In his book *Rewired,* Larry D. Rosen notes that "While Baby Boomer and older Gen-Xers prefer either visual or auditory modes [of receiving information], Net-Geners and iGners learn best by touching, moving and enjoying" (2010, p. 45-46). "Literally, their minds have changed – they have been 'rewired'" (p. 226). Erica McWilliam (2015) states,

> Gen Z's intolerance for being lectured to or talked at, is greater than any previous
> generation. Because they are a smart and globally connected group, they don't relish
> listening quietly to parents or teachers, even charismatic ones. Because their on-line
> world is one of constant interruption and distractibility, they take their information in
> bite-sized chunks, not in long-winded lumps (p.1).

McWilliam suggests that taking a Blue Man Group-type approach with a mix of interactive, kinesthetic elements and their actual performance will amp up both the retention of information obtained and the action taken on that information. For youth groups, it looks like bit-sized lumps of learning followed up with "experimentation" (immediate action taken on what was learned).

5. *Extrinsically focused*. What people 'out there' think of Screeners becomes a driving obsession. Each Screener must learn to be proficient in image management on multiple social media platforms, therefore focusing on what is projected into the public forum is crucial to social interaction. Shifting from the prioritization of intrinsic goals such as meaningful relationships, personal growth, and community contributions to a heavier focus placed on extrinsic goals like money, looks, status and fame and social media has only contributed to the focus on extrinsic goals. This attitude increases the pressure placed on adolescents in a culture to succeed and achieve, but it also leads to isolation (Greenfield, 2009, p. 403).

6. *Anxious*. Being isolated and always on in a globally perilous world brings an angst that permeates daily life for a Screener. A deepening insecurity is labeling this generation. They have grown up "developing their personalities and life skills in a socioeconomic environment marked by chaos, uncertainty, volatility and complexity" (Sparks and Honey, 2014). Another contributor to the anxiety, and closely connected to being tech immersed and extrinsically-focused is what Steinmetz (2015) refers to as a 'highly documented life.'

Beginning in 2014, middle schools and youth ministries began welcoming this newest generation whether they knew it or not. In only 3-4 years, all of high school ministry will be Screeners, and in 5 years they will be entering college! This generational cohort has been born mobile, always on, building worlds (think gaming), under surveillance, homebodies, and loyal soldiers (like the Traditionalists before them).

Millennials vs Screeners

The lens of Generational Theory can become a beneficial method for identifying and strategizing our engagement with Screeners. While in its infancy, research on Screeners indicates marked differences from Millennials in almost every way. In a basic comparison of Millennials and Screeners, with a cyclical reach back into the Traditionalist's persona, it becomes obvious that the two generations bear some striking dissimilarities. With Millennial characteristics listed first, the differences include:

1. Adventurous vs Cautious and safety preoccupied. The Screener world is more threatening, and they are more electronically observed and documented than Millennials.

2. Optimistic and progressive vs Realistic and pragmatic. This is a move away from "I can change the world" to "How can I affect specific change in the world."

3. Naïve vs Globally savvy and aware. Screeners are interested in the news of the world and the impact of events on humankind.

4. I want (entitled to) it all vs I seek balance and tradeoffs. This attitude is tied to being pragmatic and a bent toward conservation rather than extravagance.

5. Dependent on parents/adults vs Self-reliant. As a smaller generation and one prone to individualism, the self-reliance is claimed as a virtue and skill.

6. Secure; high self-esteem vs Insecure; seeking identity. While Millennials have always believed in themselves, Screeners are developing an insecurity in their smaller numbers, and their individualism and external focus is creating an identity anxiety.

7. Cause-oriented vs Issue-oriented. Dissatisfied with broad, encompassing causes, Screeners will be fixated on issues that will bring about change; it's a pragmatic approach.

Implications for Youth Ministry and the University

As educators and practitioners, generational theory may provide a helpful lens through which to observe both the Millennial and Screener generations. They are not the same. They value different approaches to life and express different needs as generational cohorts. Both cohorts' strengths and weaknesses are different. Their cohort position in the cycle of generations places them as Hero and Artist archetypes, which identifies very different historical, societal functions. With teaching pedagogy and youth worker methodology as a means of frontline engagement with each generational cohort, perhaps there are lessons to be learned and arguments to be proposed from generational theory that will increase effectiveness. Whatever the response, it is clear that youth ministry over the next 20 years will be about Screeners and Millennials will be their leaders.

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