

AN HONEST CONVERSATION

with

GEN Z



ROB HOSKINS



GEN Z

Born between 1995 and 2015

**They are driven.
They are relational.
They are level-headed.
They are compassionate.
And sadly, they are leaving our churches.**

I'm referring to Generation Z, our world's rising youth.

Research shows us that in the United States alone, 60%¹ of Christian young people are anticipated to abandon the church between highschool and college. Looking beyond the States, in 12 of 21 European countries studied, over half of young adults (55%-91%) don't identify with a religion or denomination at all.²

Something is happening with our young people globally, but before we try to solve the problem and throw our time and resources into various efforts, why don't we take a moment to listen and try to understand the lives behind these numbers. Let's have a long honest conversation with Gen Z before we try to change them. Let's seek to understand, then strategically make steps to grow together.

WHAT WE'RE SAYING ABOUT GEN Z

Generational behavior tends to swing to opposite ends of the spectrum. To understand Gen Z, we must look at the prior proximal Generation Y—also known as Echo Boomers or Millennials—to understand the “swing” that Gen Z is pushing back against.

Generation Y is:

- Incredibly tech savvy
- Immune to traditional marketing and sales pitches
- Early childhood exposure to...well, they've seen it all
- Racially and ethnically diverse
- Segmented thanks to the rapid expansion in Cable TV channels, satellite radio, the Internet, etc.
- Less brand loyal, quick to change its fashion according to what's “trending” more involved in family purchases of everything from groceries to new cars unprecedented purchasing power via adult-signed credit cards and/or smartphones

According to a comprehensive study by Futurecast and Barkely, Inc., Generation Z tends to hold a traditional ethos in areas such as honesty, loyalty, and achievement.³ They also mimic the Boomer's values of responsibility, determination, work ethic, dependability, money, intelligence, and independence. However, “This generation is writing new rules that favor liberal—almost radical—viewpoints on things like race, gender, identity, and sexuality. Socially and technologically empowered, they are arriving on the scene at a crucial moment in history.”⁴ To me, Millennials are another great generation because they had to grow up in a kairos moment in history where so much innovation and technology was being discovered in an age of globalization. What some people attribute as apathy, I tend to view as contemplative. As “big brothers and sisters” to **Gen Z, they helped figure out an awful lot in the midst of a dynamic and dramatic era. Generation Z is now applying that contemplative thought and making it actionable.**



WHAT GEN Z SAYS ABOUT THEMSELVES

Questions they are being asked, and some ways they are answering

How would you describe yourself?

Though answers differ regionally, today's teens exhibit an overall positivity about themselves and their future. U.S. teens say they are happy, confident, excited, motivated, and optimistic.⁵ African teens describe themselves as hard-working, ambitious, and resourceful.⁶ Students ages 11-17 surveyed in the UK were most likely to describe themselves as hardworking and as team players; in Australia as creative⁷ and team players; and in Germany as "a little lazy" but also creative. Lazy is a descriptor that has come up in other research studies, with teens across the globe willing to admit it applies to them, even though they also see themselves as motivated, ambitious, and money-conscious.⁸

What makes you happy?

Teens define happiness differently based on where they are in the world, and more research is needed on this subject from a global perspective, but here are some of the responses we have seen:

Top three things that make Teens happy

United Kingdom⁹

93% their friends

92% family

26% music

Vietnam¹⁰

45% making their parents proud

29% getting good grades

28% spending time with their family

United States¹¹

43% financial success

23% educational attainment

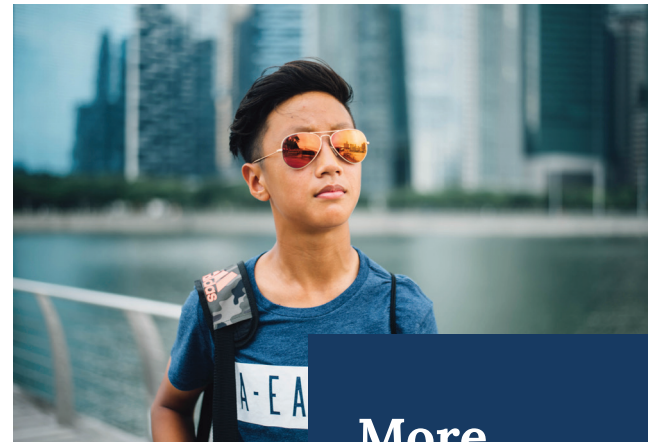
20% family

Most American teens report that their family background or upbringing is not central to their sense of self—a major departure from previous generations.¹¹



What are your goals and priorities?

Gen Z exhibits a strong focus on hard work and educational attainment that is causing some researchers to call them a conservative generation that is reverting back to traditional values embodied by the Baby Boomer generation. They also demonstrate a focus on personal achievement and on enjoying life. This may be an expected part of being young and ambitious, though some believe Gen Z is uniquely driven compared to other generations, something that can possibly be traced back to perceived economic and even physical insecurity. More than half of U.S. teens agree that personal success is the most important thing in life, a jump of nearly 10 percent over Millennials. Compared to other generations, they are more likely to report that winning individual awards is important, and a strong majority (69%) say success is a matter of hard work, not of luck. Two-thirds² of U.S. teens report that they want to finish their education, start a career, and become financially independent by age 30.¹³ These tangible goals rank higher than more intangible pursuits such as “follow my dreams,” “enjoy life before you have the responsibilities of being an adult, and “find out who you really are.” Only 1 in 5¹³ American teens say getting married before the age of 30 is a future goal. Canadian teens rank “enjoying life” as their number one priority over “finding a great job” and “becoming a better person.”¹⁴



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What do you spend your time on?

Generation Z'ers are primarily students right now, so they mostly spend their time in school and working on their homework. But in their spare time, they do what we would expect young people to do: hang out with their friends, spend time online, and watch a lot of media. Interestingly, they are also exhibiting more conservative personal behaviors than previous generations. When asked what they spend their time on daily, U.S. teens ranked their grades in school as number one and getting into college as their second focus, even above other things including time relaxing and hanging out with friends. Teens in the UK report that in their spare time, they most enjoy (in descending order): watching YouTube videos, TV and movies, using social media, hanging out with their friends, and gaming.¹⁵ About half (49%) said they enjoy reading. Teens in Vietnam are more likely to be engaged with their devices, reporting that besides school work, they mostly read news on Facebook, listen to Spotify or other music sources, instant message, watch YouTube videos and post to social media.¹⁶ Instead of being out and about, they are mostly online and “cocooning at home.” In this same vein, researchers are pointing out that risk behaviors among young people are at their lowest in decades. This includes drinking, smoking, drug use and teen pregnancy rates. Even activities such as driving are on the decline among young people.¹⁸



WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Being highly aware of what's going on in the world around us is biblically necessary. In Acts 17, Paul provides a model for how to engage culture. Walking the streets of Athens he “looked carefully” at the temple and the various gods he finds there, noting that the “objects of worship” (Acts 17:23) were “formed by the art and imagination” of man (Acts 17:29). He was also familiar enough with their literature to quote it in his preaching about Christ (Acts 17:28).

Listening and engaging with Gen Z is our first step toward shepherding and cultivating its future. Let's continue to have these honest conversations, and let's always seek out the beauty in our rising generations.

Thank you to the OneHope Research Team for their hardwork on this content.
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A woman with long blonde hair, wearing a tan hat and a red sweater, is shown in profile, looking out over a sunset. The background is a bright, hazy sky with the sun low on the horizon, creating a warm, golden glow. The woman's hair is blowing in the wind.

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