

LABELING GENERATIONS

A. K. Lozovik

Belarusian State University, Minsk;

alozovik01@gmail.com;

*Scientific supervisor – A. Gr. Polupanava, candidate of pedagogic sciences,
associate professor*

While generational names have existed for years, their regular use is a fairly recent cultural phenomenon. There has been an obsessive attention to these birth-year categories recently. Labeling generations is a controversial topic in the sense of its influence on different aspects of social life. The aim of this research is to analyze the role of naming generations. The tasks are: to find out where the roots of naming generations lie and who is in charge of it; to spot the reasons and effects of labeling generations; to conduct a survey via social media on how people relate to this issue. The question of the research is as follows: Does labeling generations make any sense?

Key words: labeling generations; generational theory; Baby Boomers; Generation X; Millennials.

To delve into this issue we first have to understand what generation is. A generation is a period of about 25 to 30 years, in which most human babies become adults and have their own children [1]. Unlike popular misconception generations are not defined by age, but by the same experiences or attitudes, shaped by the historical, social, political and cultural events of the time.

Before diving into the brief history of naming generations we can't but mention that the following description concerns «Western World» labeling system including USA, South America, Western Europe and Australia. Western generational naming began in the 20th century with the term Lost Generation (1883 – 1900) used by American writer Gertrude Stein. The term The Greatest Generation (1901 – 1927) was first mentioned by Tom Brokaw. The rest of the generations were mentioned by generational theorists Neil Howe and William Strauss, including Silent Generation (1925 – 1945), Baby Boomers (1946 – 1964) and Millennials (1985 – 1995) [2]. Generation X (1965 – 1985) was called so by Canadian author Douglas Coupland. As for those born from 1995 to 2010, some prefer the term Generation Z, while others prefer titles like Centennials or the iGeneration. The youngest generation (2010 – 2024) was called Generation Alpha by Australian researcher Mark McCrindle.

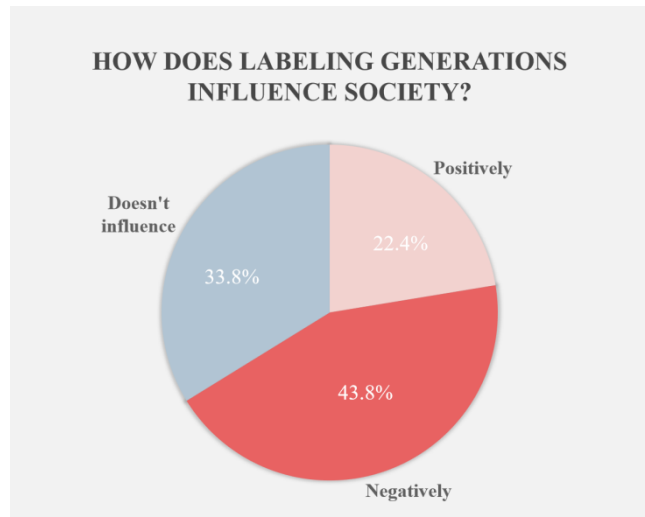
Baby Boomers started this naming trend and all of the generations before the baby boomers were named retroactively. Following WW2 there was a boom in the birth rate in America and suddenly economists and advertisers felt the need to label this group to better understand them.

According to William Strauss and Neil Howe's generational theory generations follow a cycle of four distinct eras: 1) The Height, in which institutions are strong and individualism is weak. 2) Awakening, where people realize that actually institutions are kind of terrible and they want to take back their independence. 3) The Unraveling, when institutions are heavily weakened and individualism is thriving. 4) The Crisis, which is a time of war and revolution. [3]

So, if the Baby Boomers were at The High in the Golden Age of capitalism, Generation X rebelled during their Awakening, millennials fully embraced their individualism during The Unraveling, then we are now in The Crisis era. The public sentiment is divided, confidence in institutions is at low, and we are facing the consequences of climate change. This cycle will repeat itself with the following generations. And it is much easier to follow this cycle, to study trends in a group if you are able to label them. So on the one hand, naming generations is needed for economic, historical, social and cultural analysis.

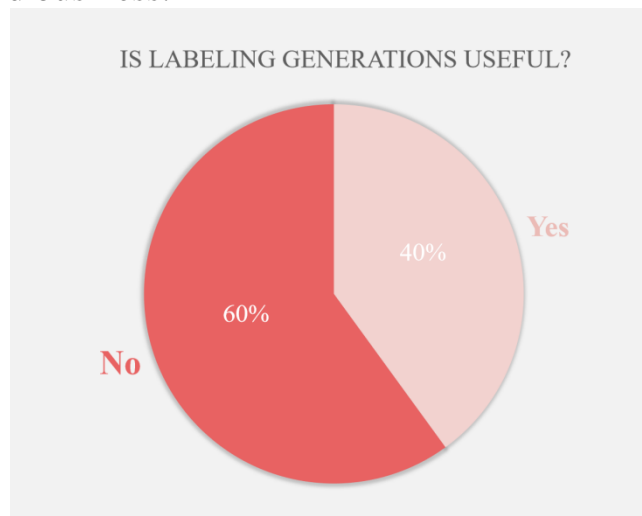
On the other hand, labeling generations has its flaws. Firstly, there are many more factors, apart from the time period you grow up in, like race, sex, wealth being etc. that should be taken in consideration while doing serious social, historical or economic analysis. Secondly, 20 years spans are too wide. The oldest of the millennials might have more in common with the X generation than with the youngest millennials. So generational spans are more likely to shrink to 10-15 years due to the continuous technological development. Thirdly, generalization of such huge groups of people creates an environment for stereotyping and creating "Us vs. Them" mentality. Generalization assumes that the entire population of people shares the same values, the same upbringing, the same psychological tendencies, which is not true.

To understand this issue more we conducted a research on instagram where people voted in two polls. The first one raised the question of «How does generational labeling influence society?». Out of 89 voters: 33,8% voted for «doesn't influence at all». That shows that almost one half doesn't see any effects of labeling generations, which is fair since we are not that involved in the «Western World» using this labeling system. 43,8%, representing the majority, voted for "negatively" and 22,4% voted for «positively».



Picture 1

That leads us to the final poll «Is labeling generations useful?» Out of 95 voters 40% voted for «yes» and 60% voted for «no». When asked why those who voted for «no» mostly mentioned the stereotyping environment that causes social conflicts and irrelevance of this system in the modern world, where society changes with a continuous technological development. Those who voted for «yes» mostly mentioned that labeling is a tool in specific fields like marketing and business.



Picture 2

Coming to the conclusion:

- 1) Naming generations started with Baby Boomers and all the previous generations were named retroactively. The credit for naming most of the generations is given to generational theorists Neil Howe and William Strauss.
- 2) Labeling generations after all as a form of classification makes sense for social, economic, political and cultural analysis.

3) The survey conducted on Instagram showed that the majority of voters consider labeling generations as either something negative or ineffective. Those who do think it makes sense see it as an important tool in specific fields like marketing or business.

So is labeling generations useful? Considering all mentioned above it is, depending on what aspect we are looking at. As for its recent use in mass culture with media constantly arguing about whose generation is worse and whose better it is worthless. In this sense to reject the category of “generation” isn’t to deny that some age groups have experienced events in ways younger or older ones haven’t, but to end the limited view, that those events are defining characteristics of one group – and often one group alone. We are all in this social, historical and political moment together, regardless of our age. Labeling system should undergo a number of changes to meet modern realities and should be applied as a tool in specific professional fields where it is necessary.

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