

Generation Z + Media Blog Post (Title)

The year is 1997 and a new dawn of media is on the horizon. NSYNC's debut album premieres in Germany, a seemingly modest book series debuts with *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* hitting bookstores, and the beloved "People's Princess" Princess Diana is tragically killed in a car crash. There's an unsettling irony in the fact that in the midst of Princess Di's shocking death, a new generational demographic was born: Generation Z (spanning 1997 to 2012). More so is that while Generation Z wasn't even alive at the time to witness the grace and glamour that was Princess Diana, there's unruly correlations between the two that linger beneath the surface regarding their widespread perceptions by others and relationships with the media at large.

Princess Diana's unexpected passing sent shockwaves not only through the UK but the entire world. A globally admired figure, she still proved to be an anomaly to some – her unorthodox tendencies and youthful/modernist attitude present in the very traditional royal family were frowned upon and viewed as a threat. However, as the world's most photographed person, she soon learned to use the media to her advantage – an added complexity to this twisted tale, as the media (paparazzi more specifically) would be the primary offender in her premature death at age thirty-six.

Similar to how Princess Diana served as a bridge between old world ideals and modernity, Generation Z – also called the "Zoomers" – bears a similar responsibility in today's age. Older generations have trouble comprehending many aspects of the "Zoomer" mentality and trends, namely their cultural fluidity and advantageous utilization of media (like how a recent Saturday Night Live sketch cheekily reported that career aspirations for 86% of today's kids are to be "influencers"). However, as the first generation to have technology and media at their fingertips for the majority – if not all – of their lives, one could only expect a relationship to form. And as the generation with parents primarily in the Baby Boomer/Generation X demographics, "Zoomers" are leading the "Boomers" to the new frontier of media, technology, and culture at large.

It's been twenty-five years since Princess Diana's passing and her legacy is still leaving frequent ripple effects throughout the globe. Her personal and authentic presence even influenced the Royal Family's approach to media; Queen Elizabeth II gave an unprecedented speech about Diana's death after much public scrutiny of their "pursed upper lip, no emotion" mentality, which altered the trajectory of the Royal Family's relationship with the public and made them altogether more personable. Similarly, Generation Z covets these authentic media connections and more personalized interactions with the content they consume, and this will likely be part of their indelible mark on society in relation to the media. Through touching point on a personal experience on being Gen Z (from yours truly), the overall expectations and customs of Gen Z, and how media can effectively draw "Zoomers" to content, a holistic understanding can be constructed of the generation and how to employ media for the impending majority.

My experience as a “Zoomer”: Justin Timberlake or Harry Styles?

Fast forward three years to 2000 and people are saying “Bye Bye Bye” to a millennium, ushering in a new one with NSYNC releasing their “No Strings Attached” album, a film version of Harry Potter announced by Warner Brothers Pictures with internal debates of whether to make the film live-action or animated (you’ll never guess which format they chose), and 4.059 million Y2K babies born (including yours truly). With four older siblings born between 1979 and 1991 I’m in the beneficial position of being exposed to both Generation Z and the Millennial customs which gives me some uniquely dual perspectives.

Growing up with Baby Boomer parents and Millennial siblings, technology and media were present but not pervasive in the household. BlackBerry, Nokia, and Motorola phones, AOL messaging on the Gateway desktop computer, and VHS viewings of “Mary Poppins” and “Matilda” (after rewinding the tape for 10 minutes, of course) were all staples. If Millennials are “VHS tapes, desktop computers, and flip phones” then Generation Z is “Blu-ray DVDs and streaming, laptops, and smartphones” – all technological innovations that allow for more immersive, mobile, and ubiquitous media experiences (and items my household didn’t adopt until my teenage years). However, the true crux of media technology is the continuous innovation of cellphones, as smartphones have enabled near-constant consumption of all types of media from news to mindless entertainment.

Contrary to most of my fellow Gen Z-ers, I didn’t get my first mobile device until I was twelve - a modest Samsung slide phone. With hefty persuasion, my parents caved and allowed me to get a coveted iPhone two years later, well behind the curve of my peers’ smartphone-possessing trajectories. And this late-adopting pattern has continued in the ten years since I got my first cell phone; I didn’t create social media profiles (namely Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and Snapchat) until high school, and was reluctant to hop on the TikTok bandwagon until the past year. Furthermore, while Gen Z (and Millennials to a degree) are notorious for posting on social media so frequently that they might as well be the posterchildren for the saying “take a picture, it’ll last longer”, my sharing activity on social media rivals that of a boyband reunion – rarely, but with purpose. And while I’d argue I’m not unhealthily glued to my phone like so many people my age nowadays (and not just restricted to GenZ), I still consume ample media content through my daily scrolling escapades. Thus, I have an insider’s perception on how to best strategize reaching Generation Z audiences as a fellow purveyor of media content – and it’s strongly correlated with Princess Diana’s approach, NSYNC’s “No Strings Attached” freedom, and Harry Potter’s engaging immersion.

Gen Z Expectations: A Princess, a Boy Band, and a Wizard Walk into a Bar...

While there is a plethora of overlapping characteristics between Generation Z and the preceding Millennials, a few notable differences should be considered to best serve the Zoomer’s media needs. The main points of differentiation regarding media intake relate to overall behaviors towards the industry, vehicles for drawing the audiences, and lifestyle variations.

Much like how Princess Diana was an exemplary face of authenticity and genuine human connection in dismay to the traditionally hardheaded Windsor family, this is what Generation Z craves in their media consumption. Moreover, her cruel – and ultimately deadly – treatment by the media resulted in unprecedented and enduring skepticism of the industry. Add the likes Zuckerberg/Meta scandals, monolith iron-fisted conglomerates like the Murdoch empire, political polarization never seen before, and what seems to be a new global crisis breaking every day, and Generation Z is notoriously weary of what to believe, where to obtain their information from, and which organizations to actively support. Simply put, GenZ is overwhelmed with the volume of content out there and hates the “clickbait clutter” of it all. The key to standing out in their eyes and meeting their expectations is a Princess Diana philosophy: authentic, transparent, and trustworthy news rooted with admirable intentions of spreading important knowledge in a compassionate manner and on their terms when they seek it out. Think the searing truthful content of her infamous BBC Panorama interview, but not the unethical methods in which it was obtained by Martin Bashir.

With Generation Z rarely consuming media through physical newspapers and inconsistently online/on websites, social media is the prime way in which the demographic expects to obtain their information. And for better or worse, media companies must embrace this “no strings attached” mentality – Generation Z doesn’t want to be tied down to expensive subscriptions for only a handful of news sources. They want the ability to seek out news and topics that resonate with them at their own discretion, regardless of where it originated. It’s a mobile generation that spends hours daily scrolling on social media taking in hundreds to thousands of pieces of content. What they expect in return is content that catches their eye and fulfills the pillars of authenticity, transparency, and truthfulness.

Another unexpected correlation between pop culture and Zoomer media expectations: Harry Potter. Throughout the eight films that depict the Hogwarts trio’s daring escapades, there’s never a lack in splendor as each installment finds a way to effectively captivate audiences. They’re spectacles that stay close to the original literature and keeps engagement high through all 120 minutes of film time. Although a grandiose example, this is exactly what Generation Z wants from news media: immersive content (whether that be visually appealing and engaging posts or videos) that succinctly and accurately narrate important current events. While Millennials might prefer online/website news consumption as opposed to Baby Boomer and older generations’ physical newspapers, Generation Z presents a new and complex digital beast. They want to be entertained with their news consumption and have dwindling attention spans. Ironically these dwindling attention spans are partly caused by the vehicle that will help media companies stay relevant in the eyes of the generation – social media.

Media targeting Gen Z: “TikTok” isn’t just a song anymore

Generation Z has grown up with social media and vice versa; Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok have all been created within the past twenty years and accumulated staggering user-bases in such short periods of time. Social media is rather foreign to

older generations like Baby Boomers, but Millennials have quickly adopted the technology. To Zoomers, these apps are second nature much like the smartphones they're fostered in due to developing on the same timeframe. A self-proclaimed news-junkie, I'm in the minority of my generation that uses social media as complementary addition to television news stations and news site tabs open on my browser throughout the day. However, most of Generation Z solely uses their phones to obtain their daily news feed – and for news companies to effectively draw Zoomers to their content, they need to adopt a robust social media strategy.

Determining that social media is the new frontier of media consumption is only half the battle – with an extensive array of platforms, how does an organization decide where to promote their content? Facebook is a nonstarter; while the star performer of Meta is preferred by older demographics, Generation Z finds the application outdated and undynamic. They view it as a medium to appease older family members – it's not cool, trendy, or worthwhile in spending a lot of time on. Add in Mark Zuckerberg's presence and recent headline-making scandals like Cambridge Analytica, and the Zoomers respectfully choose to take their scrolling business elsewhere.

Instagram and Twitter are happy mediums for Zoomers. "The Gram" is still owned by Meta which warrants some skepticism but has a widely active user base ranging from Gen Z to Boomers and beyond. Instagram thrives on connecting users to their ideal content, whether that be friend/family posts, celebrities, or news media. Add in its visually engaging feed, and it effectively captures the attention of audiences – a bullseye in media targeting for Gen Z. Twitter doesn't quite have the same visual appeal as Instagram but thrives in getting out messages quickly and effortlessly through 140 max-character blurbs. With Gen Z entering adulthood and seeking out quick, succinct information on the workday commute, this could be another feasible area for news media to expand. However, with Elon Musk's recent takeover of the company, sentiments may change regarding the app in relation to Generation Z...only time will tell.

And finally, the "notoriously B.I.G." app that is "hypnotizing" Zoomers with its quick-fire videos: TikTok. It has a primarily Gen Z user-base but is rapidly becoming the preferred social media platform for many and a catalyst of culture. Many media organizations have already embraced the growing prominence of the app, such as The Washington Post (Arc XP's parent company) with their humorous, clever videos that summarize the day's top stories. What media organizations like The Washington Post is doing with their TikTok exemplifies what Generation Z desires from news media: an entertaining approach to stories that engages, informs, and can be easily accessed – one might be as bold as to say "storytelling". Furthermore, TikTok's algorithm is incredibly advanced and enables personalized feeds for each user – another important touchstone of what Next Gen covets from their media consumption. If social platforms are the impending frontier of how news media can effectively reach Generation Z, then TikTok is leading the charge one smartphone at a time.

Conclusion

Within the next ten years Generation Z is poised to become the ideal target demographic for media companies. They may not remember Princess Diana, NSYNC fever, or the early developments of Harry Potter, but it's vital that news media channels all three in their quest to win over Next Gen audiences. Instead of viewing their skepticism as a threat, view it as an emboldened reason to promote authentic, transparent, personalized, and engaging news stories on social media. To effectively market to Zoomers, news shouldn't just be viewed as the spreading of information but entertaining storytelling that's accessible to the masses but doesn't feel like it's targeted at the masses.