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## Generational Harmony Saves the World: How the Power of Generation Theory, Gen Z Youth, and Activism Can Mitigate the Climate Crisis

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GENERATIONAL HARMONY SAVES THE WORLD:  
HOW THE POWER OF GENERATION THEORY, GEN Z YOUTH,  
AND ACTIVISM CAN MITIGATE THE CLIMATE CRISIS

by

RYAN HILL

# Abstract

This paper: explores generations as a concept for understanding and explaining the relationship between major sociohistorical events and societal members, posits generation succession as a way in which long-term social change occurs, compares and contrasts the perceptions of the major generations (Baby Boomers, Gen X, Millennials) created by popular media and scholarly research, illuminates characterizations of the youngest and still-emerging Gen Z, discusses what major sociohistorical events during the time of their adolescence have folded Gen Z into a distinct group with a common generational consciousness, outlines how anthropogenic climate change is a real phenomenon with harmful consequences already affecting today's populations, details how activism directly carries over into actual social change, distinguishes different forms of activism including those which are conducted by youth or which take place in primarily digital spaces, showcases examples of successful activist efforts led by both youth and adults, showcases examples of climate-oriented activist efforts led by both Gen Z and members of previous generations, argues the need for Gen Z climate activists and those of other generations to work together in order to meet their goals regarding climate crisis mitigation, identifies potential areas for intergenerational conflict in social change organizations in the climate movement, and provides strategies for how intergenerational conflict can be reduced in favor of meaningful intergenerational cooperation.

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# Introduction

Mainstream conversations about generations have been common the past few decades, but such conversations took an antagonistic turn the last few months of 2019 when the term “OK Boomer” rose to prominence. Now, generational antagonism is nothing new. The bottled-up contempt the young and the old hold for each other surely extends back as far as youth and old age, but in Western civilization it finds documentation as far back as the days of Socrates. Ancient Greek youth were scolded as the tyrants of the household, zealous in their defiance of established filial expectations and offensive in their rebuke of basic social norms.<sup>1</sup> That “kids these days” mentality no doubt was joined by its converse: disdain for the out-of-touch geezers by headstrong young guns. In our modern times, each specific generation has traversed the gauntlet of lambasting offered up by others, especially throughout their youth. The Baby Boomer generation (for the purposes of this paper, defined as those born between 1946-1964) were scorned as immature, immoral hippie bums when they were coming up.<sup>2</sup> Since then, many Boomers have dealt the lashes to their own generation, defining themselves as self-centered “hungry locusts” too foolish or too greedy to leave behind a prosperity better than or even proportional to the one they inherited.<sup>3</sup> Gen Xers (1965-1980) after them were vilified as the sedimentary MTV Generation, a group of cynical slackers. Millennials (1981-1996) almost need no introduction, for the image of overprotected, entitled trophy-kids comes to mind with ease. They have additionally been pegged as exceedingly selfish, garnering the alternative nickname of Generation Me.<sup>4</sup>

The story of how the “OK Boomer” phrase inflamed generational tensions is intertwined with the new generation following the Millennials: Gen Z (1997-2012). The springboard for the



phrase's leap into the popular consciousness was the invocation by 25-year-old New Zealand lawmaker, Chloe Swarbrick. She was commenting on a bill which would provide a pathway for zero carbon emissions in her nation by 2050 when an older gentleman of the Parliament heckled her.<sup>5</sup> Swarbrick answered with that succinct, dismissive recognition of the cohort to which the heckler presumably belonged. The words struck a chord with young Millennials—Swarbrick herself belonged to this age-group—and Gen Z teens in America, becoming a social media rallying cry against the old-fashioned sensibilities of older generations. Baby Boomers reacted to the jeer with varying degrees of support, disdain, and anger. One commentator declared it an ageist slur comparable to a racial epithet.<sup>6</sup> If the New York Times is to be believed, the insult's dominance among youth marked the “end of friendly generational relations.”<sup>7</sup> That is an overzealous interpretation of the situation. Still, while the phrase's ubiquity is a testament to the essence of satirical internet humor, its usage goes beyond a fleeting meme. It speaks to a general air of discontent among young people with the world their forebears have left for them; it speaks to a generation gap that is widening in the face of Gen Z's expanded comprehension of the issues they did not cause but must solve. Fittingly, the parliamentary bill Swarbrick was discussing aimed to address the greatest of these issues: climate change.

The average Global Mean Surface Temperature of Planet Earth today is 1°C (1.8°F) warmer than the pre-industrial (1850-1900) levels.<sup>8</sup> That single degree of warming has brought forth a plethora of hazardous effects that are not just visions of a not-so-distant future, but glimpses of our present reality.

The polar ice caps are melting. The average annual thickness of Arctic sea ice is now half of what it was in the 1980s.<sup>9</sup> The extent of minimum sea ice after seasonal summer melt is declining at a rate of 13.1% per decade as of 2021; the Arctic sea ice stretched over 3.92 million

square kilometers in 2020, the second lowest extent of ice at the September minimum since the satellite record began in 1979, when ice covered an area of 7.05 million square kilometers.<sup>10</sup> The Earth hasn't seen such a decline in Arctic sea ice in *at least* 1,500 years.<sup>11</sup> Further, the annual average volume of Arctic sea ice in 2019 was the second lowest measured, some few hundred cubic kilometers greater than 2017's record low.<sup>12</sup> Stunningly, the September minimum of sea ice volume is estimated to have declined more than 75% in the past four decades, going from 16,911 cubic kilometers in 1979 to 4,158 km<sup>3</sup> in 2020.<sup>13</sup> In 1979, the average Arctic volume for the entire year (instead of at the September minimum, when sea ice is at its post-summer low) was 25,426 km<sup>3</sup> while the average Arctic volume for the year 2020 came out to be 13,522 cubic kilometers.<sup>14</sup> Further, less than 1% of today's Arctic ice has survived more than 4 summer melts compared to nearly a third of ice in 1985, meaning that the younger—and thinner, and thus less resilient to melting—ice will reinforce the long-term trend of ice loss.<sup>15</sup> And as the reflective white ice gives way to the absorptive deep blue of Arctic waters, the ocean will drink up more of the sun's warmth, and the trend strengthens. All until the increasingly likely possibility of a summer without the Arctic ice cap becomes a reality.

The Antarctic doesn't fare much better. Impacts of climate change can be seen in the Pine Island Glacier in Western Antarctica's steady retreat this past decade.<sup>16</sup> Or in the Thwaites Glacier, a Florida-sized mass whose volatile ice sheet has doubled its loss in the past 30 years.<sup>17</sup> Fed by warming waters slipping further along its underbelly, this glacial loss is likely to usher in the Thwaites' collapse within this century. Unable to be stopped once it begins, such a collapse will singularly account for a rise in sea levels of more than 2 feet.<sup>18</sup> But there is a third wonder of the cryosphere, one which more readily details the direct damage a melting world holds. It is the Hindu Kush Himalayan Region (HKH), a mountain system amounting to more than 1.6 million

square miles and home to the highest peaks Earth has to offer.<sup>19</sup> As the source of 10 essential Asian rivers—including the Ganges, the Indus, and the Yangtze—the HKH delivers water and therefore food and energy to roughly 2 billion people. The glaciers and snowpack of the region, vital elements of the water supply the HKH provides, have tended to thin and retreat in the past few decades. Unsurprisingly, the pace of glacial mass loss has accelerated during the 21st century.<sup>20</sup> As snow accumulations shrink and glaciers retreat permanently, their capacity to make reliable contributions to streamflow during seasonal melting periods is diminished. Glacial lakes have increased in number and in size, too, which raise the likelihood that an outburst flood can occur. A calved chunk of a glacier crashing into a glacial lake or the sudden drainage of a supraglacial lake—those that form atop the glacier itself—during a landslide event are ways these catastrophic floods can be delivered. The Hindu Kush Himalaya Assessment, a colossal scientific effort by more than 300 leading researchers and experts published in 2019, warns that more than a third of the glacial volume in this region will be gone by century’s end in the best-case scenario of climate response.<sup>21</sup>

Most all other glaciers in the world are enduring this same shrinkage. Some, like Austria’s Pasterze Glacier, thin three feet every year while others, like Greenland’s Helheim Glacier, continue their long-term retreat by shedding two miles of ice in a single year.<sup>22</sup> These represent the more extreme cases of our endangered glaciers, but nonetheless, our world is losing its ice. The rest of Greenland’s ice sheet, in fact, is the epicenter for increasing loss at an increasing rate. Scientists have noted that in the past 50 years, decadal mass variance of the ice sheet shifted from a gain of approximately 47 billion metric tons per year to a loss of 286 billion metric tons per year.<sup>23</sup> Since 2002 alone, more than 4,000 gigatons of Greenland ice mass has

disappeared, making it highly likely that the 21<sup>st</sup> century will see the greatest loss of the ice sheet in at least 12,000 years.<sup>24</sup>

Permafrost is bowing out the world over, too, especially in the northern areas of Alaska, Canada, Greenland, and Russia where most of it is concentrated. These thick layers of perennially frozen soil that underlie the surface are thawing. As a result, topographic depressions called thermokarst can emerge, sometimes filled by its own melted ground ice that further picks away the frozen earth at the lake's edge.<sup>25</sup> They're the Arctic's equivalent of a sinkhole. These thermokarst landforms have multiplied in recent decades, and with them come increased landslides with their very own name: retrogressive thaw slumps. In Banks Island, the westernmost part of Canada's Arctic archipelago, there were 60 times more retrogressive thaw slump events in 2015 (over 4000) than in 1984.<sup>26</sup> The consequences for degrading permafrost go beyond putting homes and other infrastructure in certain polar regions at risk for these types of dramatic events, however. Oil and gas drilling sumps, which store waste and other harmful substances produced by natural resource harvest, are often carved deep into permafrost, but now they are no longer the permanent containment method they once seemed to be. Suspected leakage from these sumps have already made their way to nearly two dozen lakes in the Mackenzie Delta region in Northwest Canada, the historical home to the indigenous Inuvialuit people, with identifiable impacts on the aquatic life.<sup>27</sup> Sumps located near freshwater reservoirs hold obviously negative ramifications. What's more, permafrost land serves as a massive carbon sink. 1,600 billion tons of carbon are stored there, nearly twice as much currently in our atmosphere.<sup>28</sup> As permafrost thaws over the coming centuries, hundreds of billions of tons are expected to be released. This massive liberation of greenhouse gases is by way of once-dormant microorganisms feasting on the long-dead organic material that froze before they could

decompose.<sup>29</sup> Once locked in the icy amber of permafrost, bygone pathogens will find their liberation, too. In 2016, thousands of reindeer fell victim to an outbreak of anthrax which originated from spores given off by a 75-year-old reindeer carcass when the permafrost containing it thawed.<sup>30</sup>

In other areas of the world, it is not melted ice but a lack of water which hints at climate change. A three-year drought in South Africa had dwindled the amount of water in the dams supplying the capital city of Cape Town to a point so low that city officials declared a “Day Zero” set for April, 2018.<sup>31</sup> This was to be the day when the taps were shut off and citizens would be forced to gather their water at communal dispensaries. The city began an aggressive campaign to conserve water, one which depended on the residents stepping up to change their way of life. Water use was restricted to 50 liters per person per day; note that certain showers can use 15 liters of water in a single minute.<sup>32</sup> For further perspective, the average American tends to use more than 300 liters, or 80 gallons, a day.<sup>33</sup> Residents managed by catching shower water in buckets to reuse elsewhere, by limiting the number of flushes they made, and by creating social media challenges to see who could go the longest without washing their shirt. Further restrictions also barred residents from washing their cars or filling their pools, and the city even created an interactive map which showcased how much water each household was using.<sup>34</sup> If households exceeded water-use quotas too greatly, they’d face fines in addition to the scorn of their neighbors. And many agricultural workers had to accept large losses to their crop yield while others were put out of work in wake of irrigation restrictions.<sup>35</sup> But the crisis was averted. When April came, the city had pushed Day Zero back a few months. The year’s rainy season broke the drought. The dams filled and some restrictions eased, allowing for Day Zero to be pushed back indefinitely. But South Africa is a country with half the average rainfall of the world and rising

demand for water sources; outpacing their allocation of 15 billion cubic meters in 2016, estimated demand in 2030 is 17.7 billion cubic meters.<sup>36</sup> Drought periods like the one that caused this water crisis are rare, but they're becoming less so. Rising temperatures from climate change have already tripled the likelihood of such rainfall deficits.<sup>37</sup> The immaculate short documentary by Simon Wood and Francois Verster, "Scenes from a Dry City," peers deep into the new normal Cape Town and other cities like it may face in the decades ahead.<sup>38</sup>

Unfortunate new normals are being carved out in the vital ecosystems that feed our fishery industries and, by extension, feed us. In the U.S., livelihoods are being affected by the decreasing body size of Alaskan salmon both for those who depend on the fish as their food source and those who depend on their fish as their source of income. These salmon spend years in the ocean to mature before returning to Alaskan rivers to spawn, but over recent decades they've withdrawn from the oceans earlier and earlier in their lifespans, bringing younger—and smaller—salmon to Alaskan fisheries. Rising ocean temperatures, making the waters increasingly more risky and inhospitable, are seen as a key factor in this phenomenon.<sup>39</sup> In Iceland, commercial and subsistence fishers were dealt blows when the Marine and Freshwater Research Institute did not issue a quota for capelin in 2019 because, as a result of abnormally warm winter waters, the fish's population in the region was too low.<sup>40</sup> Capelin's significance to the trawler captains of Isafjordur and fishmongers of Fjardarbyggd cannot be overstated: the fish stock is the second most economically vital in an island nation where the industry accounts for 10% of the GDP.<sup>41</sup> To compare: the nearby island nation of the United Kingdom attributes 0.12% of its GDP to the fishing industry.<sup>42</sup> Capelin also feeds Iceland's *most* economically vital fish stock: Atlantic cod.<sup>43</sup> In 2020, there were again too few capelin in Icelandic seas to allow for them to be caught.<sup>44</sup> Increasingly in their place, however, are populations of mackerel and other

southern species that have themselves fled warming waters. The political consequences of fish venturing away from their historical habitats and beyond traditional maritime borders have been clear in the ongoing disagreement between Iceland and the European Union, Norway, and Faroe Islands; Iceland's ever-increasing quotas for the valuable mackerel stock are viewed as unsustainable, forcing other nations to limit their catches in order to preserve the stock.<sup>45</sup> Such conflicts will become more common as more species shift closer to the poles in search of cooler waters, and they'll be heightened in the tropics where no other fish will replace the ones that have fled. The communities that depend on wildlife fishing for their economic well-being, for their nutrition, and for their cultural traditions will be irrevocably impacted.

Rising oceans threaten to claw further up continental shelves and devour shorelines. The waterfront homes and highrises of Miami, Florida acutely reflect the mounting risk of high tide flooding—which brings damage to doorsteps, obstructs roadways, and backs up sewer lines not as a result of violent storms but rather the mean rise in sea levels worldwide. Because Miami has seen sea levels rise 8 inches since 1950, most of this increase coming in the past 25 years, they have also seen more than double the occurrences of the national median for high tide flooding in 2019.<sup>46</sup> And as sea level rise accelerates, the frequency of high tide flooding disproportionately multiplies. Relative to occurrences of high tide flooding in the period 1998-2006, wherein sea levels rose 57% to 3.61 inches, tide-induced flooding increased 400% for 2006-2013 and corresponded to a 80% increase of sea level rise to 6.51 inches.<sup>47</sup> Over the next 20 years, when sea levels in the area are expected to rise at least another 8 inches, the degree of high tide flooding will undoubtedly worsen.<sup>48</sup> Around the rest of Florida's low-lying coastlines, 2.5 million properties already at risk for flooding will be joined by hundreds of thousands more as the heightened consequences of rising seas barrages them with greater regularity.<sup>49</sup>

Most recently, the Australian bushfire crisis in the 2019-2020 season embodies the essence of unsustainable human-induced climate change: unprecedentedly extreme events become increasingly commonplace. Prompted by an intense fire-prone dry season, the likelihood of which has quadrupled for the region since 1900, the devastation left by what's been called "Black Summer" is staggering.<sup>50</sup> At least 17 million hectares, or 42 million acres, of land burned.<sup>51</sup> A fifth of Australia's forested area was scorched, a feat which dwarfs the typical proportion of forests that succumb to flames during fire seasons everywhere else in the world.<sup>52</sup> Over 30 people died and 3,000 houses were destroyed, though hundreds of thousands of Australians faced displacement and millions more saw their skies clouded with haze and smoke.<sup>53</sup> Over a billion animals were killed. An additional 2 billion displaced. These estimates are considered conservative.<sup>54</sup> For one of the most biodiverse regions on earth that also suffers from one of the highest species extinction rates, this loss of habitat is particularly threatening to the ongoing health of its ecological systems.<sup>55</sup>

Once again, all these troubles to our ecosystems and communities can be traced back to that single degree of warming. Warming that is locked in as the status quo now, for temperatures only continue to rise. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) has determined 2010-2019 to be the hottest decade on record, with eight of those years being among the ten hottest individual years on record.<sup>56</sup> Behind 2016, 2020 is the second hottest year on record.<sup>57</sup> Carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>), a greenhouse gas which serves to warm the planet, has been released into the atmosphere at an unnaturally high rate since human industrialization. 33 gigatons of CO<sub>2</sub> were released into the atmosphere in 2019, tied with 2018 for the year with the most human-caused energy-related carbon emissions.<sup>58</sup> The 2021 report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), in addition to unequivocally attributing



climate change to human behavior, noted that “In 2019, atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations were higher than at any time in at least 2 million years (high confidence).”<sup>59</sup> The unabated continuation of these emissions and thus unabated warming will result in a world with average temperatures north of 2°C above pre-industrial levels at the end of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The best-case goal is not even a reduction in warming or stabilizing it to 1°C above pre-industrial levels—it is keeping warming to 1.5°C by 2100. The window for achieving that ideal level of warming is rapidly closing. The IPCC released a seminal special report in 2018, declaring 2030 an essential deadline in the battle against climate change.<sup>60</sup> That marks the year at which our current carbon emissions should be nearly halved so that by midcentury, the sum of anthropogenic CO<sub>2</sub> emissions can be net zero. Failure to keep to these deadlines would drastically reduce the likelihood that warming stays at or below 1.5°C by the end of the century.

In the face of calamitous developments, questions naturally emerge. How dire must the consequences become for action to be taken? Where do we draw the line in the sands heavy with floodwater? When do we see the forest for the trees choked out by ash and smoke? How long do we let the parched earth crack beneath our feet? What is the breaking point?

Many with “climate stories” have reached their breaking points because they personally experienced the reality of the crisis in their own backyards, and their richly detailed testimonies—earnest in their solemnity yet electric in their optimism—can be found at websites like <https://ourclimateourfuture.org/>, <https://www.climategen.org/>, and <https://www.climatestoriesproject.org/>. For me, it came during a mission trip to Puerto Rico on the heels of the devastation Hurricane Maria wrought on the island. Now, I was born at the turn of the century. There was never a time where I wasn’t conscious of nor a believer in climate change, for I was lucky enough to have teachers and parents who offered the sense of science.

And like any other mildly considerate first-world kid, I memorized and practiced the three R's of sustainability: reduce, reuse, and recycle. I didn't dare litter. I turned off lights not in use, I didn't keep the faucet running as I brushed my teeth, I eventually realized that 20-minute showers were wildly unnecessary and adapted to slightly lukewarm water instead of the scalding embrace of hot showers. I listened to David Attenborough's lifeblood-nourishing narration of our world's enchanting seascapes and fascinating marine life in *Blue Planet*, and I never saw a soda can ring again without taking scissors to it. In my teen years, I took on some greater involvement like volunteering with Clean the World or participating in lake restorations or invasive species removal in my local community. I was part of my high school's ragtag environmental club, which I lovingly petitioned to name "The Environerds" and which received unanimous rejection. And I continued to recognize the looming specter of climate change, both in its present effects on the world and in its dramatically exacerbated effects on some future iteration of the 21st century world. But I did the bare minimum. In environmental protection and energy conservation, I met the absolute basic thresholds for returning unto nature decency, gratitude, and stewardship. At the time, climate change just didn't compel me to take on greater action to fight the good fight against it. I knew the world was at stake. I knew the destiny we were—are—hurtling toward. It wasn't quite abstract, but it wasn't yet palpable either. It didn't yet sting me with a potent indignance and stir in me a compulsive passion. In Puerto Rico, it did. My visit was a watershed moment where the visceral reality of the crisis burrowed into me a clarity that can't be blinded and with it a resolve that won't be shaken. The breaking point.

Hurricane Maria made landfall in Puerto Rico in September, 2017 with sustained wind speeds of 155 MPH, just below the threshold of Category 5 status.<sup>61</sup> Howling winds and rushing storm surge ravaged the island where more than 44% of the nearly 3.4 million residents live

below the poverty line.<sup>62</sup> In Maria's wake, the entirety of the island was left without electricity.<sup>63</sup> Restoration was notoriously slow. 100 days on, 43% of households still didn't have power, effectively making it the longest blackout in American history by far.<sup>64</sup> After 11 months and deep into the 2018 Atlantic hurricane season, 100% of power was finally restored.<sup>65</sup> Access to water was wiped away for an average of 68 days, but concerns about access to *safe* drinking water lasted for months.<sup>66</sup> 97% of the population receives water from systems that have garnered at least one violation under the Safe Drinking Water Act's requirements for lead and copper testing.<sup>67</sup> A third of sewage treatment plants were unable to function, inducing backups that resulted in bacterial infection, and even after water restoration many homes faced frequent interruptions that forced them to boil all tap water before use or turn to FEMA-funded water distribution centers.<sup>68</sup> Response efforts to provide potable water were not entirely effective, however, as tens of millions of water bottles failed to be distributed to in-need residents, instead sitting unused at a tarmac or on farmland.<sup>69</sup> Houses were battered, their roofs flayed and lawns scraped away. Concrete estimates are difficult to come by, but at least 700,000 homes—well over half of all houses on the island—sustained some form of damage.<sup>70</sup> Thousands were destroyed, and these displaced families were forced to adjust to life in hotel rooms funded by FEMA's Transitional Shelter Assistance program, often without much of their belongings or beloved pets.<sup>71</sup>

Factoring in other structures and essential infrastructure, Hurricane Maria dealt more than \$90 billion in damages—the third costliest storm to strike the U.S. behind 2017's Hurricane Michael and the notorious Hurricane Katrina.<sup>72</sup> The storm sheared about 80 percent of the island's agricultural yield, further tattering the crippled economy and jeopardizing livelihoods.<sup>73</sup> Over a million Puerto Ricans applied for some form of FEMA assistance, 40 percent of whom

were considered ineligible and did not receive aid.<sup>74</sup> As for the death toll<sup>75</sup>, the Government of Puerto Rico originally reported the official death toll as 64. A dramatic underestimate, researchers later calculated the true impact of Hurricane Maria by taking into account excess deaths; they examined the island's actual mortality rate in the months following the disaster and compared it to the expected mortality rate for the same period in a non-hurricane scenario by mapping out fatality trends of the years prior. One such study found the excess deaths—and thus, true death toll of Maria's all-encompassing impact on the island—to be 4,645.<sup>76</sup> The official death count was revised in accordance with the findings of a study from George Washington University's Milken Institute, which estimated the number of hurricane-related deaths to be 2,975.<sup>77</sup> The long-term financial and psychological toll to be endured by the survivors, however, cannot be so easily measured. And upwards of 123,000 Puerto Ricans have left the island for the U.S. mainland between mid-year 2017 and mid-year 2018, amounting to an exodus of nearly 4% of the population.<sup>78</sup> More than half (57.8%) of all children on the island saw friends or family members relocate.<sup>79</sup> It's a historic leap in the long-term trend of emigration that has seen the island lose hundreds of thousands of its population in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Most of those who left after the storm won't return.

This is the context I was wildly unaware of when I boarded the small aircraft that would shuttle me, a dozen other youth volunteers, and plenty of native islanders eager to visit their families to the Island of Enchantment. As I peered out the window to the expanse of ocean, I wondered about the person I would be on the return flight one week from then, about the changes that visiting the island would stir in me. I wondered when I would feel the beginning of that change. If there would be an exact moment in time that I could mark where 'before' ended and

‘after’ began. That change did come, and it was at an exact moment in time: my first glimpse of the scarred island.

The waves became land and a new sea of blue emerged: the blue tarps that crowned homes all over San Juan. They told of how much healing had left to be done. As we touched down and applause filled the cabin, I picked out the skeleton of a hangar that lined the runway which was filled not by aircraft but by its own debris. It would be the theme for my stay. Amid the striking beauty of the island’s natural offerings and the gracious warmth of the locals, there were hauntings of graffiti-marred restaurants left shuttered and hillside graveyards of snapped trees left undisturbed. The vibrant colors of colonial architecture were joined by trails of rust crying out from cast iron fence workings. Iguanas sunbathed atop a centuries-old fortress while stray dogs roamed the streets of neighborhoods. The shadow of Maria loomed throughout the island, particularly so in my encounters with her survivors.

A veteran likened the windswept sheets of rain smacking against his house to the fury of gunfire he learned in his years of service in Vietnam. A father of two young boys guided me and my fellow volunteers through his living room, where inches of flood water gathered despite his elevated foundation. On the wall, three degrees he earned from the University of Puerto Rico hung. When his youngest son slipped back into his room to find another board game he’d ask us to play, the father divulged his fear that the best future for that boy did not include attending his alma mater. The likelihood of a new storm forcing them to reset every other year made him believe that the mainland—really, anywhere but the island—would be better for his sons. While passing out cans of habichuelas rosadas as well as invitations to a community picnic in a Ponce barrio, we met an old lady who happened to share her name with the hurricane. This Maria was far sweeter, inviting us into her garden and offering us lunch even as she was doubtful that she

had enough food for the dozen of us. In between making guesses at which of us “young lovebirds” were courting whom, she discussed her fears. Chief among them was that another storm would come, one that could outstrip the carnage wrought by the worst hurricane she’d ever known. Everyone she knew, she said, tried comparing storms of decades and centuries past to it in vain. There was no comparison.

Their stories awakened in me an understanding that proved to be the genesis of this thesis: climate change is a crisis, and I need to act. It is an understanding that many youths around the world possess with vivid clarity, for mounting consequences of climate change is an integral part of our parameter of experience—our perception of the world. It seems evident then that climate change, as a source for heightened generational tensions and the motivation of a renewed wave of youth activism, is essential to the Gen Z experience. In this way, the climate crisis serves as a shared circumstance which bonds members of today’s youth into a shared identity. Into a unique generation. Gen Z.

The generation which never knew of a world before the twin towers came down, instead knowing the boundless global war on terror. The generation native to the internet and dominant on social media. The generation with intimate knowledge of society’s violent capacities, especially shootings in schoolyards. The generation of diversity in race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, gender, and other backgrounds. The generation of fragmented mental health. The generation that watched their families grapple with the Great Recession. The generation which faced a global pandemic before they could rent a car. Generation Z, born 1997 to 2012, is united by each of these distinguishing realities of their formative years. Such collective characteristics define Gen Z’s wholly peculiar generational consciousness—an assortment of overlapping habits, values, behaviors, norms, beliefs, perceptions, traits, understandings, and experiences.

And as they come-of-age, they're beginning to take a greater role in affecting the moods and currents of the society they inhabit, reconfiguring it in accordance with that distinct consciousness they bear. Thus is the promise of generations: history imparts unto a generation a common vision of the world, and from that vision the generation imprints onto history collective change.

It is clear, then, why young folk embraced a term that simultaneously poked fun at and criticized their elders. It is clear why this youngest generation, comprised of individuals who are growing up in the midst of the real consequences of climate change and also in the midst of thorough scientific understanding of humanity's impact on climate change, is frustrated with previous generations who are passing along this crisis to them. It is clear why Gen Z, armed with the knowledge of these pivotal deadlines for grave eventualities, has been compelled to act.

In March of 2019, more than a million young students around the world skipped school in the name of a global climate strike.<sup>80</sup> They were inspired by then-16-year-old Greta Thunberg, the Swede who has become the leading voice for climate activists the world over but especially among her fellow youth. She rose to prominence when she began to skip school each Friday to protest outside her nation's parliament building. She stirred up enough discussion to earn her place at international summits, and the youth-led movement of which she became the face rallied for another historic protest in September 2019. Coined the Global Week for Future, a riff on the Fridays for Future organization which sprouted from Greta's initial protest, more than 6 million activists participated by walking out of their schools or workplaces.<sup>81</sup> Second only to the 2003 anti-Iraq-war protests, it was the largest organized demonstration in history.<sup>82</sup>

In the United States specifically, youth-based activism flourished. Gen Zers themselves have formed or now taken leadership of groups like U.S. Youth Climate Strike, Zero Hour, Earth

Guardians, Youth v Gov, 350.org, and more grassroots initiatives. Perhaps the most prominent climate activist group is Sunrise Movement, which first garnered recognition for their involvement in sit-ins of prominent lawmakers like Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-CA) and Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi (D-MD). Sunrise Movement has since then been a vocal advocate for the Green New Deal, a nonbinding resolution that would serve as an expression of commitment by the federal government to initiate industrial mobilization reminiscent of that seen in World War II so that the nation can reach net zero carbon emissions and meet 100% of energy demands through renewable sources by 2030. They have also been instrumental in pressuring President Biden to commit to bolder climate policies, which his administration agreed to do shortly after his inauguration.<sup>83</sup>

Undoubtedly, the emergent Generation Z will shepherd monumental societal progress of many kinds as they author the courses of their lives. All generations do. But the climate crisis is the gravest predicament humanity's ever wrought for itself, one which deepens in severity with each day. Gen Z will have to shoulder the burden of climate change's devastation throughout their lifetime, and they have already started dealing with that burden. Indeed, their destiny is intertwined with and legacy inextricably linked to the evolution of the crisis, and the magnitude of their mark on history largely rests on how they meet the challenge of that crisis. Time is running out to ensure that their mark is one of mitigating the threat rather than feeding it. That they are righting the wrongs of those who came before rather than adding to them.

This express sentiment regarding their mission—righting the inherited wrongs of their day—is indicative of a baked-in tension which permeates their efforts for climate action. Gen Z and their peers around the world believe that prior generations have handed down a dying world. That an Earth plundered and polluted with reckless abandon is a preventable tragedy their



parents, grandparents, and beyond failed to prevent. There's an ever-growing resentment among Gen Zers for older generations in positions of power—like world leaders who deny climate change's existence or Exxon's oil tycoons who buried premonitory evidence of global warming in the very research studies they commissioned as far back as the '70s.<sup>84</sup>—that have exacerbated the crisis and, still, have yet to implement effective policies to meaningfully reverse course on the hurt given to the globe. The cruel irony Gen Z balks at is that those who have dealt the most damage and deserve the most blame will suffer the least of the consequences and refuse much of the responsibility to work toward solutions. That when staring down a mounting crisis which may someday threaten the foundation of our society's capacity to sustain free and fulfilling lives, those who beckoned it blinked. This is the source of the anger that coats each of the more venomous utterances of the “OK Boomer” phrase. Generational relations, as a result, are particularly antagonistic. These simmering tensions seem to have deeply and insurmountably fractured generational solidarity, mirroring the larger pattern of all-time high divisiveness in America.<sup>85</sup> The danger of such potent intergenerational antagonism is that despite all the contributions Zers are making to the cause, their actions alone are not significant or immediate enough to mitigate climate change in satisfactory ways.

Although Gen Z should and will be the spearheads of the climate movement going forward, the ambitious goals and transformative vision of the future that is foundational to the climate movement simply cannot be achieved solely by the actions of Gen Zers, at least not if warming is to be kept under 1.5°C or even 2°C. For many years yet, Zers will not have access to the formal systems of nationwide decision-making that are essential to designing, instituting, and executing mitigation efforts. None can hold elected office in either chamber of Congress (the 2022 midterm election cycle marks the first time that the very oldest Gen Zers can vie for public

office), and most Zers cannot yet vote. So in the very near-term, those in institutional power—who are those of older generations—must cooperate with these young climate activists. But they will not unless they are met with an immense groundswell of people power, for social change is not wrought by silent lips and still feet.

Of the emergent Generation Z, undoubtedly, there has been an immense showing of such necessary climate activism—and it is still burgeoning. Older environmental activists of all stripes have been critical players in securing the successes of the movement thus far. They'll continue to be instrumental in what successes are to come should they cooperate with Generation Z to up the pressure on world leaders and amplify the stories, demands, and visions of the young standard bearers. And, importantly, should Gen Z salve their resentment and reciprocate such cooperation.

Therein lies the pathway to fulfilling the movement's mission with the speed and scale the climate crisis merits. To maximize the efforts of climate activism—to raise a rumble so forceful that policymakers not only pledge to meet the obligation of protecting the Earth but they take action to follow through—the movement must be a multigenerational coalition. One which does not succumb to generational tension, but instead one which emphasizes the common cause. One which does not falter from generational misunderstandings, but instead one which seeks to demystify the true distinctions between generations without subjecting these inherent differences to judgement. One which does not simmer in generational conflict, but instead one which leverages disparate attitudes and faculties to clarify objectives and strengthen efforts. Gen Z and their predecessors must engage in a well-oiled, harmonious partnership that overcomes the difficulties presented by both perceived and actual intergenerational differences, for their movement will grow and their activism will bolster and their effectiveness will heighten and, so the hope goes, their world will be saved.

Intergenerational harmony within the climate movement is one dear piece in the puzzle of the climate crisis. As we inch closer to placing the final piece—the distant image of an Earth unburdened by anthropogenic warming—it’s important to examine the rest of the visible picture we’ve filled out. This paper is an effort in shedding insight on some of the pieces already placed and those that center around the cavity of that dear piece yet to be laid. Among these include a depiction of generational theory, which frames the concept of generations as an analytical tool for uncovering the particulars of how sociohistorical phenomena influence and are influenced by swathes of society (Part I). And a discussion of the idea of generation succession, which explores how generations act as social forces that steer history via the unending succession of their unique consciousnesses (Part I). And a research-backed account of what differences truly exist between the Boomers, Xers, and Millennials of America, revealing that indeed generations are not so monolithic and indeed their differences may not be so irreconcilable (Part II). And an early examination of the emergent characteristics which define Gen Z’s identity, including the key historical phenomena which have influenced and shaped its collective worldview, which will invite a more empathetic understanding of the context of today’s youth (Part III). And a distillation of the realities of climate change from the science behind it to the ramifications it leaves (Part III). And an analysis of activism which proves that transformative social change can blossom from the hands, voices, and minds of a relentless few (Part IV). And a spotlight on the unique capacity of youth activists to guide the course of history, with inspiring accounts of Gen Zers—as well as youth from before their time and outside their generation—who have already stoked the fires of social change successfully (Part IV). And a plea to view generations not as a rigid label partitioning us into antagonistic camps but rather as a conceptual lens through which we make collective sense of the world and, by extension, as an opportunity to harness the fine

variations in our identities and the throughlines alike to seed harmonious connections across the societal mosaic (Part V). And finally, a deepdive into the ways harmony between generations can thrive in social change organizations, which reveal the paths climate organizations can and should begin to take to maximize their movement's efforts (Part V).

Across these five Parts, this wide-ranging paper will ideally detail how we can hold more understanding of and appreciation for the mechanisms by which we advance toward that highest aspiration of the social process: bettering the world.

## Author's Note:

It is imperative to note some crucial distinctions about terminology regarding generations before delving deeply into the many complicated theories that surround the subject. A principal distinction needs to be made between genealogical—or kinship related—generations and those that pertain to social groups. In kinship terminology, genealogical generation refers to the relational structure of familial members to each other; the parents make up one generation, their batch of children make up a separate generation, and then *their* offspring make up another generation within the familial line. While family can play a fundamental role in this paper's proposed idea of generational experience, kinship-based generations are *not* the focus here.

Another fuzzy distinction to make clear is that of “generation” and “cohort.” These terms are similar, but “cohort” refers to a singular aspect of the concept of generation that I will work from throughout this paper. Broadly, a cohort is simply a group of individuals who share some defining characteristic. In demography, birth year is this defining characteristic, and it is that characteristic I refer to when I use “cohort.” When people are born within the same general time frame, they occupy the same cohort. An individual born in 1928 and an individual born in 1930 are of the same cohort, as is someone born in 1938 depending on where the demarcation lines are drawn. They are not automatically, however, a part of the same social generation. Now, these terms have become entangled because generational boundaries tend to inform where cohort boundaries are drawn (for instance, the “Silent Generation” runs from 1928 to 1945, and so the individual born in 1927 is seen as a different cohort despite the proximity to the person born in 1928). In reality, cohorts, and generations for that matter, are distinguished by gradients, not

stark dividing lines. But they are easier to conceptualize—and study—if we apply those dividing lines.

So, cohorts are groups of individuals born with a *select* time frame. And they are a necessary component of social generation, but only compose one piece to that complex puzzle. The rest of this work is a venture in sorting out just what that puzzle entails.

# Part I: Theory of Generations

Before a conversation can begin about whether Gen Z is a cohesive, identifiable unit (a generation) that will influence society (through affecting climate policy, for instance), the fundamentals of what generations are and how they function in terms of the larger social process need to be addressed. This Part aims to explore these fundamentals. The primary research questions guiding this Part are: (1) what is a generation? (2) how are distinct generational identities formed? and (3) how does generation succession allow generations to serve as a social force arising from and interacting with historical circumstances? The methodology I use to explore these questions is an integrative literature review, which is defined as “a form of research that reviews, critiques, and synthesizes representative literature on a topic in an integrated way such that new frameworks and perspectives on the topic are generated.”<sup>86</sup> Various generation theories, behavioral theories, and social cohesion theories will be touched on in the following chapters.

Ultimately, generations are a lens through which we can extend our understanding of the social process—the unending evolution of human civilizations. A tool by which we can measure the hows and whys of history. A social force which, through the constant stream of old generations dying off and new generations emerging, actually drives change in the social process. These are the key contentions of generational theory. Part I will focus on detailing the complexity of generations and clarifying what practical use the concept holds for the modern world.

In Chapter 1, I chart the origins of our modern sociological understanding of the concept of generations, building toward the man whose influential theory fathered a new school of

thought: Karl Mannheim. His specific perception of the constituent elements of a social generation is foregrounded as the guiding framework for conceptualizing what a generation truly is. Further, I introduce two major theories on how generations develop and function in society: the pulse-rate theory and the imprint theory.

In Chapter 2, I examine how a generation forms a distinct identity—or generational consciousness—in the Mannheimian tradition. By coalescing the wisdom and findings of a vast array of generational researchers, the various sections of this chapter depict how historical, cultural, and social influences can and do unite individuals into a common identity. Abstract assertions on generations are given empirical weight by real-world examples and studies.

In Chapter 3, I delve into how generations endowed with their own distinct consciousnesses drive social change through the process of generation succession. The relationship between individual decision-making and societal shifts is made clear. I offer a key explanation of how the social process imparts onto a generation a specific set of “native” characteristics which influences their generational consciousness and how in turn that generation “vanguards” unique change in the social process. Also, I offer a brief account of additional generation theories that have helped to develop the concept, including Strauss and Howe’s well-known cyclical theory.



## Chapter 1: Foundations of Social Generation

To begin with the thinkers who influenced Karl Mannheim in his eventual seminal theory seems apt. Earliest among them were David Hume and Auguste Comte. As students of the positivist school of thought, they sought to approach a social phenomenon like generations with empirical science, relying only on concrete information ascertained by experience and explained through reasoning. So, they tried to understand the “ultimate data” of human historical existence via the biological tangibility—in the sense that life-spans, births and deaths, are quantifiable and thus represent actually comprehensible knowledge—of generations.<sup>87</sup>

Hume, the Enlightenment philosopher, pondered over the connection that human demographic metabolism, wherein older generations depart society and younger generations enter it in an endless succession, has with the continuity of forms of government.<sup>88</sup> Comte took it further: he suggested that the continuous death and replacement of members of society influences the tempo of historical progress. It is here that a cornerstone notion of Mannheim’s vision of *social generation* emerged: that generations and social change are related. Viewing generations as biologically determined, Comte wagered that lengthened or shortened life-spans would have the intuitive impacts on the rapidity of societal change.<sup>89</sup>

This biological understanding of generations continued in the 19th century, and efforts arose to uncover some fixed metric by which the rhythmic renewal of death—and by extension, the rhythmic occurrence of historical events—could be measured. French philosopher Justin Dromel posited a period of 15 years whereas his Italian contemporary Giuseppe Ferrari favored 30 years.<sup>90</sup> Splicing age-groups into biologically-informed, regular intervals was deemed by Hans Jaeger as the *pulse-rate theory*.<sup>91</sup> Spanish philosopher Jose Ortega y Gasset latched onto the 15 year paradigm, wagering that it is the span of time in which the “tone of history” changes;

he identified 1626, the year Descartes turned 30, as the ‘pulse’ around which all generational boundaries theretofore and thereafter would be drawn each 15 years.<sup>92</sup> Most advocates of the pulse-rate theory, however, championed a 30-year period of generations because conventional wisdom of the day dictated that “during the first 30 years of life people are still learning, that individual creativeness on an average begins only at that age, and that at 60 a man quits public life.”<sup>93</sup> An additional attempt to scientifically pinpoint the proper increments of generations that one could use to understand historical processes came about from Gustav Rumelin, a 19th century statistician. He took the sum of the average age of marriage among men and half of the average period of marital fertility in order to find the length of generations in Germany and France, which he found to be 36½ years and 34½ years, respectively; his findings ultimately reject the notion that historical events rigidly correspond to regularly occurring intervals of generation-periods because the factors which truly inform these generation-periods, average age of marriage and number of children born to a mother as well as the timing of their births, are variable.<sup>94</sup> That is to say, there is no fixed interval by which generational spans repeat.

Rumelin was not alone in contesting the validity and applicability of the pulse-rate hypothesis. Norman Ryder, a premier contributor to generational theory, also criticized many of the assumptions contained within that hypothesis. He dismisses the notion that father-son periodicity within the family can be transposed to society as a whole, for in any given year there is some fairly consistent number of parents of a wide range of ages participating in the gradual reproduction of the population.<sup>95</sup> Peter Hart-Brinson, an incisive rising theorist in generational studies, echoes this contempt, likening the pulse-rate theory to the alluring nonsense of astrology.<sup>96</sup> Historian Hans Jaeger characterizes the paradigm, particularly the idea that Descartes is the focal point around which the fixed “pulse” of society is arranged, as grotesquely

inept, without merit, and deserving of no further consideration.<sup>97</sup> Still, despite their attempt to discern some absolute rhythm to the march of history, the pulse-rate theorists initiated the crucial conceptualization of generations as a measure of the social process.

As the explanatory potential for non-genealogical generations gained traction, an adversarial school of thought emerged. In contrast to positioning generations as a quantitative temporal unit specified by fixed intervals, an *interior* notion of time became the bedrock upon which future researchers built their generational theories. Essentially, it is the same notion that lends the following statement its truth: you are not a different person today than 5 years ago because an absolute length of time elapsed, but because the varied experiences which speckled that length of time influenced you into becoming your present version. The true measure of change is not the external parameters of days, months, years or so on, but the circumstances which color those parameters and culminate in our lived reality. Applied in a communal sense, Jaeger traces this qualitative time—which is not projected onto the historical stream but is “actually experienced by those who are embedded in its flow”<sup>98</sup>—back to Dilthey, who speculated that some common experiential force bound together a collection of German romantics who happened to be born within a couple of years of each other.<sup>99</sup> This force: historical circumstance. As Cavalli wrote, “Obviously, it makes a difference to be an adolescent or a young man in time of war or peace, to enter the labour market in a phase of high unemployment or full employment, or even to retire in a time of crisis in welfare provisions. Individual biographies are...influenced and conditioned by the historical context.”<sup>100</sup> Jaeger noted that Dilthey’s distinction of quantitative and qualitative time not only allowed for a more encompassing analysis of social change, with the qualitative measure being able to stand-in for otherwise arbitrary external parameters, but it also spawned an alternative hypothesis to the

pulse-rate theory of generations. One which aims to capture the messy relationship between the calendars of history and one's own lifetime and posits social generation as the avenue in which these calendars undergo "mutual phasing," and impress themselves onto each other in lasting ways.<sup>101</sup> It is the *imprint theory*.

The imprint theory asserts "the absorption of formative impressions during adolescence tends to transmit for life to a great number of individuals of the same age a fund of relatively homogeneous philosophical, social, and cultural guidelines."<sup>102</sup> That is, individuals of similar age who share in common certain critical life experiences—ranging from predominant economic conditions to seismic shifts in global politics to momentous historical events—in their youth tend to develop relatively similar perceptions of the world that contrast with individuals of a different cohort who experienced a different set of conditions in their own youth. In this model, generations are not created by arbitrarily dividing the populace into rigid, non-overlapping segments but are inductively identified as responses to some pivotal stimuli in society.<sup>103</sup> The theory builds off two fundamental premises, the *impressionable-years* and *age-stability* hypotheses, which state that fundamental worldviews formulate as an individual comes of age and that these worldviews tend to persist over the life course once major life disruptions have been accounted for, respectively. Duane F. Alwin and Jon A. Krosnick supported these hypotheses in their research, finding that sociopolitical attitudes that strengthened in stability over time tended to emerge in late adolescence.<sup>104</sup> An array of other researchers, principally spearheaded by eminent political psychologist David O. Sears, have extended and reinforced understandings of these two hypotheses and their validity.<sup>105</sup>

Additionally, the imprint theory has ethological roots in Konrad Lorenz's study of baby birds. Lorenz found that geese hatchlings responded to any moving, sound-producing object even

if it is not the mother, and that this attachment continued long after the chicks exited developmental stages.<sup>106</sup> He coined this irreversible learning experienced during formative years “imprinting.” Early patrons of the generational imprint theory, including Dilthey and even Mannheim, predated Lorenz’s discovery, so while they didn’t invoke that terminology, the parallel is apparent. The imprint theory of generations categorically rejects the “lawlike rhythm” of generations that the pulse-rate theory purports, and it puts emphasis on the crucial imprinting experiences of adolescence as the binding agent which organizes adolescents into a shared sociohistorical disposition—a shared consciousness.<sup>107</sup>

The theoretical discourse around generations which budded in the 19th century blossomed in the 20th, beginning with philosopher Francois Mentre in 1920 and earning contributions from art historians like Wilhelm Pinder, literary historians like Julius Peterson, and scholars from yet more disciplines.<sup>108</sup> But the most influential of these deepened considerations of generation arrived in Hungarian-German sociologist Karl Mannheim’s seminal thesis described in his essay “The Problem of Generations.”<sup>109</sup> The work articulated the sociological utility of the concept of generations; he argued that yes, they are an analytical framework which can deepen understandings of the continuity and change of history *because* they are also a social force cultivated by and affecting societal change via the distinct nature of what Jane Pilcher, a sociologist who delivered an eminent reinvigoration of Mannheim’s legacy on generations in her 1994 article, calls “generational consciousness.”<sup>110</sup> Subscribing to the assumptions of the imprint theory, Mannheim asserts that generational consciousnesses are formed during an individual’s key developmental period, specifically the formative years of youth, which incline them to certain behaviors and attitudes shared in common with other individuals who underwent similar experiences in the same period. In this way, these individuals are grouped together in a common

consciousness; like circumstances produce like mindsets. The basis of Mannheim's perspective on generations is that they form from and feed into broad-scale social change, but he's careful to not oversimplify this complex process with vague assertions about what defines a generation and how they operate in the social structure. The mere existence of a generation does not automatically yield changes in society, and being born within the same stretch of the temporal landscape does not automatically make for a generation. Further, for Mannheim, a generational consciousness can only arise from a bona fide *social generation*, which can only form when a set of requisite conditions are sufficiently fulfilled. Below, I share his generational theory by tracing his three-pronged delineation of the dimensions which compose a social generation.

### **Anatomy of Mannheim's Social Generation**

The first of Mannheim's three principal concepts related to social generation is *generation location*, synonymous with current understandings of cohort. A cohort is any group of individuals who share some characteristic in common, and for our purposes that characteristic is similar birth years. Here, the biological component of earlier generational thinkers fits in. A group of individuals who were born within a certain number of years of each other are similarly situated within the historical stream, and thus they are limited to a particular parameter of experience. Mannheim has been criticized for the comparison,<sup>111</sup> but he likens class positions to generation location in order to showcase how one's placement within the historical structure (or social structure, for class) renders a relatively uniform field of circumstances that, in turn, breeds characteristic "modes of behavior, feeling and thought."<sup>112</sup> While class mobility is a possibility, of course, cohort mobility is not. He does not mean to say, however, that being born within the

same year means two people will act and think the same, but that the range of experiences which they might encounter (and which will influence their perspectives) are the same. More recent theorists have incorporated Pierre Bourdieu's sociology of *habitus* into generational theory lexicon: "A Habitus circumscribes a set of dispositions to act and an evaluation frame of perception which are at once historical, social and individual."<sup>113</sup> In essence, it is the ingrained method individuals have to understand and engage with their varied contexts; those of the same generation location are primed to have similar habitus, or at least the potential for it. We know this intuitively. An American born in the antebellum period will have a vastly different range of options available to them for recreation, occupation, entertainment, and a variety of other facets of life than their great-great-grandchild born during World War II. The time in which someone is born matters to the worldview they adopt, and they are likely to share much more in common with their peer group than with those born a hundred years on either side of them.

Cultural and geographic regions play critical roles in the formation of a common generation location, too. Mannheim offers the analogy that those born in Prussia in the year 1800 had very little historical and social circumstance in common with those in China in the same year.<sup>114</sup> They may belong to the same cohort if we are scrutinizing the global population at large, but the particulars of the immediate society they belong to are incongruent. So while generation location *is* dependent on biological factors like birth, two individuals must be embedded within the same stretch of the historical stream and subject to the same cultural factors in order to belong to the same generation location.<sup>115</sup> To be clear, the "location" part of generation location does not merely refer to being born within the borders of some specific nation. There must be a genuine, ongoing connection with that national culture; if a Prussian family moved to the New World shortly after the birth of their first son, he may be reared in the ethnic tradition of his

homeland, but he would no longer belong to the specific generation location his peers back home inhabit. Generation location, or cohort, is a necessary but insufficient condition of Mannheim's social generation.<sup>116</sup>

This strikes at the heart of another criterion for Mannheim's social generation. Members of the same generation location, by virtue of having the same parameter of experience and thus an inborn range of appraising the world around them, have the *potential* to engage with some historical, social, or cultural stimulus characterizing their milieu.<sup>117</sup> But in order to progress toward a social generation—in order for generation location to become a *generation as an actuality*—the members of a generation location must move beyond the potential to be in interaction with prevailing stimuli and actually be engaged in such an interaction. Employing an analogy of young Prussian peasants and townspeople, Mannheim details that “individuals of the same age, they were and are, however, only united as an actual generation in so far as they participate in the characteristic social and intellectual currents of their society and period, and in so far as they have an active or passive experience of the interactions of forces which made up the new situation.”<sup>118</sup> The war Napoleon brought acted as the social current which bonded these individuals of different walks of life yet of the same generation location together into a singular generation as an actuality. Their experience was significantly impacted by the historical event.

Here, imprint theory provides a useful insight into Mannheim's social generation. To give a relevant example applicable to today's youth generation: say that member A and member B were both born in the same year in America. One is born to a middle-class family, the other to a wealthy one. Though stratified along class lines, they are knocked on the same thread in history's tapestry, and thus share a common parameter of experience. Slavery is not, for instance, within that parameter. But the indelible ghost of slavery and its legacy in systemic racism *is* a part of



both members' parameter of experience. Telegrams and steam engines are not prominent markers of their parameter of experience, but the connectivity and mobility granted by phones and the internal combustion engine are. Within the confines of these parameters, a potentiality to engage with the prevailing circumstances exists. Thus, it can be said that the two members belong to the same generation location. Some highly significant event, such as a massive economic downturn, acts as the crucial formative experience tethering these members to the social process. Though the particulars of the downturn's effects will differ due to any number of factors, not least among them the wealth disparity, it is difficult to imagine that the scope of the financial downturn did not in some way disrupt both the children's lives. Whether through direct recognition that dinner portions have grown scantier and job positions have changed and that new clothes have to be hand-me-downs, or through the indirect sense that some worrisome issue is afflicting the country because everyone and the media are talking about it, these members are dragged into the outstanding social current. And, occurring within the developmental years of these members, this event serves as a crystallizing agent—or *imprint event*—which will fundamentally influence these members' attitudes and perceptions regarding money, frugality, capitalism, pragmatism, financial responsibility and stability, fairness, economic justice, and more for the remainder of their lives. It can be said, then, that in this scenario the two members belong to a generation as an actuality which is forming. And via other complex stimuli, some acting as imprints, the generation will deepen and morph and evolve and shift as a distinct consciousness begins to emerge, one which is by necessity disparate from those possessed by social generations of the past and future and from those any other cohort could possibly produce. It is a grossly simplified version of how generations are born, but summarizes well how Mannheim viewed social generations as beyond biological determination.

It is critical to recognize, however, that generations are not all-encompassing. Imagine that there is also a member C for the recession analogy. Born in the same year, raised up in the same national identity and more or less the same cultural context. From this information, it is clear that member C is of the same generation location as their counterparts. But despite its scope, say this recession never reached member C's community with any real significance, or not any that member C would take note of. The toll was not suffered firsthand. It was not a household topic of discussion, and the family rarely turned on the news. Even in a passive sense, the economic downturn did not stamp onto member C any meaningful implications for their experience of the world around them. They are relatively untouched by the imprint event, and so they do not belong to the actual generation which members A and B have been grouped into. The potential for those like member C to be of the same actual generation as their coevals is always present by virtue of their exposure to the same historical circumstances, but without legitimate engagement with and experience of those historical circumstances, they do not become carriers and shapers of their peers' emergent generational consciousness. They obviously would not share in the generational consciousness of some other social generation, for they would not fulfill the requisite condition of being of their generation location nor actual generation. Simply, they would not belong to any social generation unless some other imprint event affects the whole generation location and this time truly weaves them into that generation as an actuality.

Importantly, too, is recognition that generations are not monolithic either. As Mannheim notes, the effects of a significant historical stimulus will not be the same for every member of a generation location. This fact complicates, but does not negate, Mannheim's generation as an actuality. His conceptualization compensates for disparate responses to social and intellectual currents via *generation units*, the third component to his conceptualization of social generation.

Generation units, situated within generations as an actuality, allow us to account for the fine and sometimes polar contrasts between near-age individuals who have interacted with some significant historical event. To carry on the analogy Mannheim offers: the stimulus of war fomented two separate worldviews in the youth, one that can be described as romantic-conservative and one as liberal-rationalist.<sup>119</sup> Because generation units represent a more specific way of participating within the social process, the outlook of members within a common generation unit are more alike than those of a different generation unit. However, the larger context of the generation as an actuality reconciles these different generation units into a collective historical experience that is distinct and unique from those of individuals belonging to different generation locations (and by extension, different generations as actuality and *generation units* which may have arisen from these separate generation locations as a result of the peculiar circumstances which marked their youth). The *intragenerational* variation in their responses to the factors pervading their parameter of experience may be stark at times, but it must be less stark than *intergenerational* variations in generational consciousness which distinguish two separate social generations.

Harkening back to the recession analogy: should Member A and Member B develop intensely different political views on economics, adopt different behaviors of spending, place different emphasis on the values of frugality and charity, and exercise different degrees of pragmatism in their money handling, they would still be a part of the same social generation. A collective experience emerged from the historical stimulus, after all. Just not a duplicate one. The influence an imprint phenomenon has on a generation is uniformly significant, but the precise perspectives each individual of that generation develops as a result do not necessarily have to be the same. Member A and Member B would belong to two separate generation units operating

within one broader generational consciousness; a case of intragenerational variation. The inclusion of generation units into Mannheim's framework is a testament to the messy complexity inherent in studying social change. While generalizations are necessary to permit any substantive analysis of broad social change, there needs to be recognition of the idiosyncratic experiences which characterize personal biographies as well as the factors which comprise these unique biographies. I will name these factors a little further down, but a key point is that not every individual—or grouping of individuals—will neatly and entirely fit into their generation's consciousness. Generation units depict the specialized, varied versions of a historical consciousness without negating the existence of a larger shared generational identity across units.

It is unfortunate but inevitable that a singular, dominant generation unit goes on to become the embodiment, or voice per se, of the whole generation. Their particular manifestation of the generational consciousness becomes the “generational entelechy,” or the fingerprint by which a social generation is known.<sup>120</sup> In this way, we can see that certain units of a social generation, when they are tightly related to each other and deeply engaged with their contemporary circumstances, are the agents of change which classify generations as a genuine social force. Think of the WWII Generation; the entire cohort of individuals born in the inaugural decades of the 20th century were defined by the valiant efforts of Americans fueling the war effort at home and fighting it abroad. There were other responses to the dominant circumstance of their time, of course, ranging from general apathy to conscientious objection to suffering endured within unconstitutional internment camps.<sup>121</sup> Or think of Baby Boomers, a large and so obviously varied actual generation whose consciousness has largely come to be remembered as the manifestation represented by student anti-war protesters of the late 1960s and

early 1970s. Generation units sometimes stand in for the whole of the social generation when their iteration of the overall generational consciousness guides them in seeding actual change in society.

## **Chapter 2: A Deeper Look at Generational Consciousness**

Social change can be understood through the lens of generation succession, wherein different generations form distinct consciousnesses as a result of the prevailing historical and sociocultural factors that dominate their developmental years that then in turn motivate a common field of resultant behaviors, attitudes, perspectives, values, and overall mindset that each generation uses in their unique interaction with the social process. In this way, Mannheim himself follows in the tradition of Comte and Hume in reducing the “secret of history” to some identifiable process of generational change.<sup>122</sup> If there were no cultural difference between cohorts, the replacement between them would merely be social reproduction.<sup>123</sup> The replacement of generations, and the arising tension between contemporaneous generations equipped with their own identities and characteristics, is for these thinkers the invisible hand which incrementally transforms society. The younger generations—comprised of “new organisms” capable of “new impulses”—push back against the traditions of old which are incompatible with the emergent consciousness they have formed.<sup>124</sup> This succession of distinct generational consciousnesses constitutes Mannheim’s theoretical grounds for considering generations a useful sociological tool for measuring the progression of civilization. It becomes necessary, then, for us to comprehend how these change-guiding, distinct generational consciousnesses arise before we make claims regarding the routes and types of changes they produce within society.

In the Mannheimian tradition, modern conceptualizations of generation are nearly invariably linked with the imprint theory. Since his proposition of social generations, scholars have aimed to determine the empirical validity and applicability of the ideas central to imprint theory and, by extension, the notion of generational consciousness. Much of their research has indeed deepened understanding of how a generational consciousness develops in practice while exploring and acknowledging the flaws baked into studying such a complicated subject. The following sections depict their contributions, and we start with the researchers who expounded upon the most immediately evident formative feature linking generational members into a collective experience: dramatic historical events.

### **The Imprinting Power of History**

One of the greatest studies in support of Mannheim's generational imprint theory of comes in Howard Schuman and Jacqueline Scott's 1989 piece titled "Generations and Collective Memory."<sup>125</sup> These sociologists sought to test Mannheim's assertion that worldview-defining events occur during adolescent years by conducting a national survey of the most important events within a 50-year (1935 to 1985) period of history. They discovered that for "events and changes... [that] Americans recall as especially important, the memories refer back disproportionately to a time when respondents were in early teens or 20s."<sup>126</sup> For instance, respondents who were young during WWII were more likely to cite that event as exceptionally important within the given time period whereas those who were young during the Vietnam War cited that conflict as most important. The authors are careful to note that, for the younger respondents, this might be due to general apathy toward events which transpired before their

lifetime. But even still, Schuman and Scott wager that adolescence *is* the era in one's life course wherein generational imprinting will take place, as evidenced by these age-structured collective memories. Even for respondents who chose events that did not occur within their youth, they framed such events in contrast with whatever the prevailing circumstances affecting them in their youth were. For instance, those who came of age during the Vietnam War yet selected WWII directly cited the "goodness" of the latter conflict—in contrast with the more obvious horrors and pointlessness of involvement in Vietnam—as their reasoning. Their perception was still filtered through the lens of the actual imprint events of their youth, then. In this way, the research substantiated the chief postulates of imprint theory: the impressionable-years hypothesis and the age-stability hypothesis.

A subsequent study by Larry J. Griffin extended Schuman and Scott's research by honing in on how region and race affects recollection of historical events.<sup>127</sup> Affirming Schuman and Scott's findings in his unfalsified hypothesis that Southern whites will place more historical significance on the civil rights movement if they lived through it as an adolescent than other Southern whites belonging to age groups who did not, Griffin also found that Southern whites who lived through the civil rights movement gave it more weight than their non-Southern co-evals. That is to say, a white Georgian who was 17 during the peak of the movement would think back on it with more significance than a white Alaskan of the same age, so the collective civil rights memory of Southerners is generally greater than that of non-Southerners. Additionally, and unsurprisingly, black respondents to Schuman and Scott's 1985 survey as well as to the 1993 General Social Survey recalled civil rights as the most important event much more readily than they recalled other significant happenings of the 20th century.<sup>128</sup> Griffin's research confirms Mannheim's caveat about generation units within a social generation: additional factors like

region and race play a role in how someone recollects or perceives their historical location. Collective memory, a method of understanding how imprint events sear themselves onto individuals in a common but not homogenous way, is structured by adolescence as well as locus, or race, or gender, or religion, or other identity markers. Ultimately, this insight lends credibility to the concept of generation unit rather than impugning the durability of the concept of social generation, for the regional variations of civil rights memory are neither excessive nor stark enough to interfere with the common, broader national culture that is a necessary element of the formation of any generational consciousness.

These two sources affirm generational effects, those which result from the difference between distinct generational identities, as explanations for the differences observed in the collective memories of these individuals, but their studies point to another possible explanation which often serves as a more definitive explanation: period effect. Complicating studies of generational identity, period effects are any predominant influences existing at the time of data collection which affects an individual's worldview.<sup>129</sup> Scott and Schuman contextualize the period effects in their assertion that if their 1985 survey were taken in 1950, almost every individual in every cohort would point to WWII as the most important event because it would be fresh in their memory. Griffin's 1993 survey validates this view, for two years after the fall of the USSR, the "end of communism" ranked as the most important event.<sup>130</sup> If the same survey were taken today, based on the findings of collective memory in the studies, one can reasonably suggest that the end of communism would not be the highest ranked across all cohorts, but would likely rank comparatively highest among the cohort which experienced that event during their adolescence. To give another example: a survey in 2002 would likely show across all cohorts that 9/11 was the most important historical event of the past 50 years, whereas nearly 20 years



later the ranking of that event might begin to structure by age, with responses peaking around those who lived through it and the fallout during developmental years.

Further complicating the relationship between fine variations in historical circumstance and the generational consciousness, Duane F. Alwin examined change and continuity in parent socialization across cohorts in Detroit.<sup>131</sup> While leaning more toward genealogical generation, the study is still applicable if we assume that families are an important part of a youth's socialization to the larger societal structure and historical context in which they have been born, which they are.<sup>132</sup> Reflecting Griffin's piece, Alwin found that there was identifiable change in secular methods of parents' socialization of their children among different Catholic cohorts while there was little change found among non-Catholic households.<sup>133</sup> Though it supports imprint theory's assertion that values or attitudes formed during youth tend to endure over a lifetime, this study verifies the nuance of social generations which is easily visible in generation units partitioned by factors like "political and religious ideology."<sup>134</sup> It bears repeating that generations are not monolithic and generational effects are not the sole influence on the way in which an individual interprets and moves through the world. Their personal habitus is an intersection of many factors which include religion, race, politics, region, sex, gender, class, *and* generation. This lattermost identity, though, is inextricably linked with the development of the social process; so while there are undoubtedly instances where the 'consciousness' granted by these other identities supersede the influence of generational consciousness (e.g., someone's race will better inform how they view and experience a racist incident more than their generation), it is through understanding how distinct generational identities form and function that we can more clearly see how history sails along in the stream of time in the particular way it does.

Still more researchers hold to the validity of the imprint theory's notion of formative events as the crystallizing impetus for an overarching generational consciousness which satisfies Mannheim's notion of social generation, generation units included. Applying these theories to the Estonian cohort that was in their formative years when the USSR collapsed, ringing in truly "exceptional" social change, Raili Nugin provided an example of an imprint ushering a generation location into a generation as an actuality equipped with their own burgeoning collective consciousness.<sup>135</sup> Crosby, Gill, and Lee determined that life-status variables such as marriage and retirement did not account for all the differences in values for the consumers they studied, pointing to "cohort-historical" reasons as the explanation for the remaining differences between those of different age-groups.<sup>136</sup> Strauss and Howe, premier researchers in the generational field, incorporate a rough version of the imprint theory into their generation concepts. In their suggestion that certain types of regularly recurring events create a correlating consciousness in the emerging cohort, they affirm the power imprint events can have in thrusting a group of similarly-aged individuals into a social generation defined by a particular, resulting generational consciousness.<sup>137</sup> A more detailed account of their influential generational theory comes in Chapter 3, but the takeaway for now is that they too see imprint events as an integral component of a generation's collective habitus.

Pointing to WWI and WWII, researchers have pinpointed the pronounced effects these major imprint-level events had on the formation of the generational identity of the coming-of-age cohort.<sup>138</sup> World War II was a significant enough event that the generational names gifted to the individuals who reached adulthood in the face of the conflict, from G.I. Generation to the Greatest Generation to the World War II Generation, derive directly from the momentous event.<sup>139</sup> This formative event helped to organize members of a specific cohort into members of

an actual generation defined by a shared experience and consequently a shared worldview relative to other cohorts. In 2016, Lauren M. Troska agreed that generations endure certain major events that define distinct cultures, forming a gap in understanding between generations.<sup>140</sup> Again, imprints coalesce individuals into a broader generational consciousness distinct from those of generations prior and subsequent, but imprint theory does not dictate that *all* behaviors and attitudes and values must be the same because of it.

But, for good reason, there are concerns about the strength of imprint theory's determination of historical events as the sufficient factor in crystallizing a shared habitus within a cohort. A step up from the biological perceptions of generation, to be sure, yet not a complete appraisal of how generations can be understood as distinct identities produced by the social process. Chris Gilleard gave voice to these concerns in 2004:

If the advocates of generation are to advance their case, defining the nature of generational identities and the means by which they are structured requires a new approach beyond that offered by the 'critical event' approach. Cultural identities may well incorporate historical events in defining a shared history – as Anderson (1983) has noted in his account of the imagined community of the nation – but such signifiers are typically established retrospectively and their relationship to present social realities is iconic rather than experientially formative as students of political generations would claim.<sup>141</sup>

The recognition that events reach imprint status, or at least are considered major enough to be generation-defining, through a retrospective lens is echoed by Cavalli in the same year, 2004. The qualities which characterize an event as critical and capable of imprinting can only be identified after the event via socio-historical research.<sup>142</sup> Cavalli, however, offers a framework

for how we might judge a historical event's 'imprinting' potential via the psychological process of cognition development.

Joining the consensus that highly-receptive formative years occur between late childhood and early adulthood, Cavalli wagers that a critical event triggers a similar learning process within various members of a generation location. This shared learning comes to be if the critical event satisfies each of the following: "(1) if it overcomes the threshold of the subject's selective perception and attention; (2) if it is somehow dissonant with the mental organization of information and therefore produces a sort of 'surprise effect'; (3) if it causes a restructuring of the subject's cognitive maps, of his/her orientation systems and images of the world."<sup>143</sup> Imprint events, he suggests, are fundamental breaks in the normal continuity of societal stasis. Crises, such as war or presidential assassinations or massive terrorist attacks, satisfy this framework. Advancements, such as space exploration and the internet, also seem to do so but to a more subdued degree. Some truly severe, significant events are immediately recognizable as imprints, for there is no doubt in the moment the news spreads that they are striking enough to demand attention, dissonant enough to shock, and disruptive enough to necessitate a reordering of one's worldview. Some are not. Regardless, the relevance of historical imprint events to the formation of generational consciousness is well-supported, even and especially because of retrospective analysis.

Additional researchers have carried this notion further, examining beyond just the event itself to reveal how the discourse around the event socializes individuals in their formative years, thereby contributing to a shared habitus. In looking at how adolescents' predisposed attitudes were changed or crystallized during communication around particular presidential elections, Valentino and Sears make the case that political socialization gains *did* occur.<sup>144</sup> That is, whether

or not adolescents actively enmeshed themselves in political discussions or received secondhand barrages of political rhetoric centered on the prevailing issues of the day, they entered into the social currents of the moment and inched closer to developing a unique consciousness informed by those currents.<sup>145</sup>

## **Culture and Consciousness**

Peter Urwin and Emma Parry capture the turn in recent decades to consider a generation's unique habitus development in terms of cultural phenomenon as well as historical events, primarily because these phenomena can generate cultural markers that clarify and fortify the collective persona a generation builds in the formative years of youth.<sup>146</sup> Leading the charge, and offering the most direct application of imprint theory to the cultural landscape, are Morris B. Holbrook and Robert M. Schindler.<sup>147</sup> In 1989, their survey discovered that popular music tastes across various cohorts clustered in their respective late adolescence, early adulthood years.<sup>148</sup> They replicated their research with film stars as the cultural variable and found again that there was an "age-related preference peak" for Hollywood figures that were prominent during developmental years.<sup>149</sup> Drawing on Lorenz as a possible explanation for certain stimuli impressing onto individuals longstanding inclinations during biologically determined "sensitive-times" of youth, they suggest that solidification tends to come at the upper threshold of youth for music and the lower threshold of youth for film.<sup>150</sup> The authors also consider the social dimension of this cultural imprinting; through incessant repeat exposure which breeds significant familiarity and thus favorability with a certain stylistic texture of an era of music and a correlation of rites-of-passage like prom or fond memory-making activities like backyard get-

together with that music, social settings compound and crystallize the cultural preferences of an individual to be more like that of those within their same parameter of experience.<sup>151</sup> In this way, we can see how a common generational identity develops from the consistent imprinting of cultural phenomenon. Sociologists Ron Eyerman and Bryan S. Turner suggest that these “shared rituals” of culture are key in sustaining a generation’s collective memory of their distinct origins and identity.<sup>152</sup> Huan Chen affirms external imprint events as one of the core components of generational identity while also touching upon the cultural function of marketing to construct, reflect, and cement generation identity; symbolization and other identity cues which target beyond just life stage (e.g., youth, retirement, parenthood) activate an individual’s recognition and self-categorization process, allowing them to determine whether or not the advertisement is pinning for their generation and by extension them, which ultimately helps to reinforce that generational identity.<sup>153</sup> It is not a stretch to suggest that generations become mini-cultures of their own, or subcultures of the larger national culture, characterized by practices and attitudes that inform the personal experience of those belonging to it. Historical imprints coalesce a cohort into a social generation, and cultural markers scaffold and reinforce the common identity that emerges around their unique generational consciousness.

These aforementioned scholars are not alone in affirming the importance of cultural practices in maintaining a cohesive generational consciousness. Michael Corsten posits that it is not enough for historical events to happen to a specific age-group to reasonably consider them bound together in a genuine identity.<sup>154</sup> Members of that age-group must possess and communicate an established, collective criteria for interpreting and articulating their historical context; Corsten considers “cultural circles” as the environments where people observe and realize that others, even strangers, share their same habitus.<sup>155</sup> Beyond the superficial signifier of

the age—and thus cohort and generation—someone appears to be, cultural elements like the era of music someone prefers to listen to or the pop culture references they make can clue others in to whether someone is of their “in-group” generation or of an “out-group.” Even quirks in someone’s patterned ways of speaking can display their cultural repertoire and allow others who share in that repertoire to more thoroughly identify with them. Slang terminology is a straightforward example of this. There is an immediate understanding of where someone falls on the generational map when they say “I’m gonna split” versus “gotta blast,” or “word from the bird” versus “no cap,” or “classy chassis” versus “dumb thicc,” or “main squeeze” versus “bae,” or “bust a gut” versus “I’m dead,” or “groovy” versus “lit,” or “never trust anyone over thirty,” versus “OK, Boomer.”<sup>156</sup> It is interactions, then, between individuals that showcase their parameter of experience and parameter of interpretation criteria, allowing individuals to mark the boundaries between those who share comparable standpoints and those who do less so.<sup>157</sup> The cultural identity and overall consciousness of a generation becomes more solidified as a result.

Chris Gilleard is not fully convinced by Corsten’s cultural circles, taking issue with the unclear means by which these informal discourse practices are formed and therefore the unclear means by which they solidify generational distinctions.<sup>158</sup> Gilleard does not declare the impossibility of demarcating distinct generational habitus, though. He reframes generation as a “cultural field” in which all social participants no matter the age engage with at varying degrees, but only a certain amount do so in a way which can be considered stylistic of their experience.<sup>159</sup> He offers youth culture of the 50s as emblematic of his idea: “the worlds of commercial art and design, the retail fashion industry, the media, and the entertainment industry” which expanded in that era and were woven into the experiences of all cohorts created a particular field of cultural markers by which adolescents in particular could define themselves. Fixated in their collective

memory, such cultural makers serve to bind a pool of adolescents together in an enduring fashion even as they age. A common generational identity is fortified, then. McMullin, Comeau, and Jovic note technology as another essential cultural marker, and even characterizes key advances in computers as symbolic historical imprints.<sup>160</sup> The progression of primary entertainment mediums during one's youth also serves as a key wedge in cultural gap between generations. The radio subsided to black-and-white television with only three main channels before becoming colorized and expanding with cable networks, which is now subsiding to the internet-enabled video on demand system which characterizes the streaming wars between Netflix, Hulu, HBO Max, Disney+, Amazon Prime Video, Apple TV+, Peacock, and Paramount+. The childhood-defining cartoons featured on these devices have changed too, from black and white *Looney Tunes* and *Merrie Melodies* to *The Jetsons* and *The Flintstones* to *The Smurfs* and *DuckTales* to *Animaniacs* and *Rocko's Modern Life* to *Spongebob Squarepants* and *Phineas and Ferb* to *Adventure Time* and *Regular Show*. These cultural elements do not make as obvious or direct an imprint on a generation's consciousness as a critical historical event might, but they nonetheless aid a social generation in developing a unique character.

It should also be noted that generational identities are maintained, strengthened, and otherwise impacted by generational discourse in popular media and academic research alike. The entire second Part of this work and all the studies discussed therein are prime examples of how the cultural dimension of a generational consciousness can be influenced by our perceptions of it. When the narrative is that Millennials are entitled, for example, Baby Boomers are able to recontextualize their consciousness—from which this characteristic of entitlement is already absent—to foreground and reinforce their attitudes on hard work and determination. They see a negative attribute associated with some other generation and lean into their categorization as a



member of a different generational identity with its own distinct traits and values, thereby furthering the actual connection of that identity. Meanwhile, Millennials implicitly buy into this characterization of their generation when they situate themselves, individually, as the exception to it; believing they are not like other Millennials in a particular respect reinforces that there does exist some larger Millennial identity. This interplay between discourse on generations and the clarity of a common generational identity details well how a generational consciousness is distinguished constantly through cultural dynamics.

Sociologist and author Nancy Whittier presents an understanding of how generational identities are developed and reinforced: social action. With her notion of political generations, Whittier extrapolates parts of imprint theory to showcase how a group of individuals who “come of political age” together by joining a social movement—in her study, the feminist movement—during the same wave form a common identity with each other.<sup>161</sup> In her view, the configuration of cultural circumstances of society at large as well as the social movement at the time a twenty-something and seventy-something join will impress upon them both a shared political outlook which will tend to endure as the social movement transforms in subsequent waves. She discovered that manifestations of what it meant to be a feminist—including less emphasis on structure and criticism of the racial and class homogeneity of earlier waves—changed, but the core collective identity forged at the time of entrance into the social movement remained stable over time.<sup>162</sup> When members of the same social generation enter into some activist movement at around the same time, thereby becoming members of a particular political generation as well, their shared identity becomes more layered while their shared consciousness becomes more solidified.

Echoing this view, Eyerman and Turner see social movements as prime opportunities for "The marks of generational distinction [to be] realized."<sup>163</sup> They provide Baby Boomers as a case study for how all the intersecting factors previously discussed clash and entangle to crystallize a shared, collective, solidaristic generational consciousness. First, they note the unique historical circumstances coloring Boomers' parameter of experience: post-WWII industrialism, "rapid population growth, economic expansion and a growing optimism in spite of the nuclear threat," and the Vietnam war as the foremost imprint event.<sup>164</sup> Next, they describe how participation in cultural rituals of electric rock, diverse folk music, clothing, American New Hollywood, sexual liberation, and mass media connected Boomers into a distinct, if emerging, habitus. Finally, they posit that key social movements in the 1960s and '70s including second-wave feminism and gay liberation but chiefly peace protests and student movements acted as spaces to manifest the Boomer consciousness, helping to at once define it and magnify it.<sup>165</sup> Thus the cohort of Baby Boomers, moored together by temporal happenstance, morphed into a unique generational identity as a result of interacting with and influencing the social process.

Their story of generational consciousness captures how historical imprints crystallize it, cultural phenomena sustain it, and social action manifests it.

## **Chapter 3: Generation as a social force, generation succession as social change**

With this greater understanding of how generations, and their unique identities are formed via sociocultural and historical means, we can take a deeper look into their relationship with the social process and how they act as reflections and drivers of social change. We know that demographic metabolism, or the biological process for a population's renewal (through fertility) and culling (through mortality), yields the *possibility* for social change.<sup>166</sup> And, as Hart-Brinson contends, the lack of idiosyncratic historical or cultural experiences would ultimately render this process of personnel replacement as mere social reproduction.<sup>167</sup> Thus, cohort replacement theory only serves as a groundwork for our evaluation of the social process. Generation succession, which can be described as the gradual development and death of inimitable generational consciousnesses, undoubtedly injects variation into society. But how do these variations amount to significant transformation within the social order? How do like circumstances beget like pathways for change-making that affect these very circumstances? These questions are not easily answered. Important to unveiling how generations tend to act as social forces within society—as Mannheim and his followers believe—is first addressing how scholars understand the ways in which individuals tend to do so. For that, we turn to the relationship between values and behaviors.

### **Values, Decisions, and Consequences**

Drawing on Milton Rokeach, a seminal contributor to axiology and architect of a well-known values scale, a value can be defined as “an enduring belief that a specific mode of

conduct or end-state of existence is personally or socially preferable to alternate modes of conduct or end-states of existence.”<sup>168</sup> It is immediately apparent in this definition how core values—self-respect, social recognition, and mature love to name a few terminal values for a preferred end-state of existence, and broadmindedness, responsibility, and sincerity as instrumental values for a preferred mode of conduct—reasonably guide a person’s actions once those values are internalized.<sup>169</sup> Despite frequent contradictions within human nature, someone who values mature love likely will not engage in superficial one-night stands every other day of the week; someone who values responsibility will likely, whether consciously or unconsciously, be careful about making it to obligations on time and prepared. The examples could go on. Values that we place particular emphasis on or are otherwise central to our lives tend to produce actions in alignment with those values. Dewey details in biting clarity how relevant actions are to value systems: “As far as valuation and the theory of values are concerned, any theory which isolates valuation of ends from appraisal of means equates the spoiled child and the irresponsible adult to the mature and sane person.”<sup>170</sup>

Hitlin and Piliavin complicate Rokeach’s notion of values in their thorough deep dive into the history of the sociological application of the concept, delivering a useful distillation of values from related but dissimilar terms.<sup>171</sup> Traits are “fixed aspects of personality” which contribute to behavior but do not determine it, and often do not serve as the justification or judgement framework for behaviors.<sup>172</sup> For instance, someone with an aggressive disposition who acts in alignment with the value of politeness and/or self-control has demonstrated greater cognitive agency and should be commended accordingly whereas someone with a friendly disposition who does not act in alignment with such a peaceable value represents the converse.<sup>173</sup> Attitudes, or evaluations on whether an object or action is favorable or unfavorable, are often

conflated with values; the differentiation comes in values relating to central issues of personhood and cherished ideals. Sociologist Norval D. Glenn highlights the distinction: the statement “personal freedom is good” points to a value whereas the statement “this law, which expands personal freedom, is good” points to an attitude which derives from that abstract value as well a perception of the law’s intended effects.<sup>174</sup> To give another example, we can harken back to the value of mature love. Premarital sex is not a value someone will have, but they might harbor an attitude on it which is informed by their valuation of mature love, which in turn influences their acceptable set of behaviors and ultimate mode of conduct. If one’s value of mature love manifests in a favorable attitude toward physical intimacy in romantic relationships and thus a favorable attitude toward premarital sex, then that behavior falls within the accepted parameters of action and thus becomes likelier than the alternative; we can see how values serve as an indirect but ultimate source for behavior. There is nuance in the interpretation of values, however, which becomes visible through an individual’s attitudes on certain behaviors. Mature love may be considered by some to mean withholding sexual intimacy until marriage, and so the attitude they hold toward sex in premarital relationships as well as their actions in such relationships will reflect this particular valuation. Attitudes are the signposts which reveal the larger values behind the curtain.

Needs, Hitlin and Piliavin assert, are biological inclinations that are often reconstituted as values; we can trace the value of mature love back to the biological need for reproduction, but values remain the chief social factor affecting the final behavior in that extended example.<sup>175</sup> A fairly robust catalog of researchers have, in fact, correlated specific values with certain behaviors.<sup>176</sup> However, normative pressures of particular social situations are responsible for shifts in behavior that may be contradictory to values.<sup>177</sup> Despite being trans-situational, values

may be overwhelmed by the norms embedded within some social contexts so that behavior is driven primarily by an understanding for how one is *expected* to act rather than their ideal course of action. Thus, values compete and compound with norms, traits, attitudes, and even other values to motivate action. Values central to the self, when well-articulated and energized, privilege a narrow set of actions in which behavior is congruent with those values and thus override any competing impulses.<sup>178</sup> Life, of course, is rarely so simple. But the complex web of values and their offspring chart the paths we take in the course of life.

This newfound understanding of values yields useful insight into how individuals act, but how can we apply these notions on a societal scale? The pioneering work of Geert Hofstede, initially in examining the differences between IBM employees of more than 50 countries and since then in his expansion of data collection and revitalization of his analysis paradigms, gives us a clue.<sup>179</sup> He identified six dimensions of culture—originally the Power Distance Index, Individualism versus Collectivism, Masculinity versus Femininity, and Uncertainty Avoidance Index, and later Long-term versus Short-term Orientation and Indulgence versus Restraint were added—which serve to differentiate the value systems, or “software of the mind,” of workers of different nations.<sup>180</sup> For our purposes, Hofstede’s work is critical in revealing how the presence, prominence, and prioritization of certain values within a society are reflections of the actions of societal members who operate from these national values.

Christian Welzel and Ronald Inglehart offer another way values exercised on an individual scale can have implications on a societal one.<sup>181</sup> Their perspective is founded upon evolutionary principles wherein human societies operate under the same imperative to adapt to their environmental conditions; because humans have agency, societal evolution occurs far more

quickly than biological evolution and extends beyond the aim of surviving to that of thriving. They outline how this societal evolution ripples up from individual actions:

But the imperatives of adaptation operate also on the micro level of individual human beings. Their capacities to exert agency enable them to make choices about what to maximize in their lives. Because these choices are not fully predetermined, they differ. Differences manifest variation in human maximization strategies. Variation in a pool of strategies establishes a field of experimentation that filters out what is more useful under what conditions. Among perceptive agents this makes learning possible, allowing individuals to chose [*sic.*] the strategies they perceive as most useful. When many such micro-level choices are similar, they create a macro-level trend that changes entire societies...<sup>182</sup>

Building off the insights anthropologist Robert Boyd and biologist Peter J. Richerson offer in their groundbreaking *The Origin and Evolution of Cultures*, Welzel and Inglehart go on to explain that as viable life models which maximize an individual's successful engagement and mastery over their needs and opportunities are willfully adopted by others—and those that fail to do so are deselected by their agents and ignored by others—the values which underpin those life models are adopted as well.<sup>183</sup> As individual agents continue to uptake successful maximization strategies—or behaviors—and their corresponding values, the tide gains momentum and a large-scale societal shift begins to emerge. This evolution, or social change, driven by the determination and enactment of 'maximizing' values is not easily won, however. Individual agents are inhibited from freely choosing 'successful' values and their congruent behaviors by a variety of factors including social stratification, socialization, and normative pressures.<sup>184</sup> Nevertheless, as certain value-inspired maximization strategies gain traction as better modes of

meeting needs and seizing opportunities, micro-level exertions of individual agency defy inhibitive factors and snowball into societal evolution.

It may already be obvious, then, how these notions of value and behavior fit into our discussion of generations and social change. Values are “developed and internalized in patterned ways” that include particular historical circumstance and significant imprint events—key generational effects—but also social stratum, gender, race, etc.<sup>185</sup> While values are not the sole driving force for actions and generations are not the sole driving force for social change, they are useful explanative conceptualizations for their respective end-results. Generations, constellations of individuals who are themselves “constellations of values,” are endowed with specific overarching value systems that reflect and construct their distinct consciousnesses; generational members, then, tend to act harmoniously with their respective value system and participate in the characteristic intellectual currents of society in more similar ways than not.<sup>186</sup> In short: if values influence behavior, behaviors scaffold and compound into broad societal trends, and generations are distinguished by particular configurations of values, then generations influence social change in particular ways.

A key, yet hitherto unmentioned, component of this intersectional framework deals with the experimentation of values and their corresponding life models. Welzel and Inglehart wager that this experimentation is likelier in younger people—younger generations—because the sanctions for experimentation are less severe: “Having less of a lifetime invested into old values and role models, they can more easily detach their identity from traditional patterns.”<sup>187</sup> These lifestyles, if proven a successful maximization within the given environmental conditions, could then be diffused to and adopted by perceptive peers and amount to an eventual reconfiguration of societal norms in the image of the young generation’s newly forged values or further esteemed



values already present in the social landscape. Once again, values and their related behaviors detail how generations contribute to the social order and how generation succession contributes to the evolution and change of that social order.

The perspective that youth are the principal spearheads of social change is echoed by Mannheim—he supposes that new impulses can only originate in new, young, organisms—as well as by Ryder.<sup>188</sup> Ryder offers empirical evidence to support his claim that change is concentrated in younger cohorts, pointing to the active roles of youth in the Protestant Reformation, the civil rights movement, and in key historical revolutions in the West.<sup>189</sup> He incorporates the works of Levy, who credits transformative movements in China to younger citizens, and Eisenstadt, who does the same for movements in Germany, to further illuminate the impact youth have in societal evolution.<sup>190</sup> Ryder rationalizes these historical observations with a similar logic to that invoked by Welzel and Inglehart, affirming that as one ages, the penalties for experimentation are heightened while the possibilities are reduced. This tendency means that those firmly entrenched in the affairs and commitments of adulthood will uphold and continue traditional patterns of thinking, fortifying continuity and resisting “comprehensive redefinition” of societal norms.<sup>191</sup> Ryder believes, then, that youth are the optimal agents of change because they are not old enough to have been routinized into a stable value-behavior paradigm by traditional institutions whereas they *are* old enough to critically challenge the “rigid precepts implanted in childhood” and thus impel at least scenarios for change.<sup>192</sup> Guided by their unique generational habitus, we can see how youth have the ability to assimilate and continue certain norms they deem somewhat favorable or acceptable enough to not find objectionably problematic, or to—as Sean Lyons and Lisa Kuron frame it—“rail against” the status quo in the interest of some better maximization alternative and thus gradually push broad social change

along.<sup>193</sup> Here is an apt time to stipulate that the social change, or social progress, referred to throughout these chapters is not necessarily a declaration that this change is ‘good’ or ‘desirable’ or an ‘improvement’ but merely that the conditions which constitute the social landscape have undergone alterations. These aforementioned scholars substantiate a convincing argument that generations act at the least as a force motivating social change.

Additional perspectives extend our understanding of the relationship of generation succession and social change. Lauren M. Troska puts forth a useful model in her notion of generational progression, which aims to discern how generational gaps represent social change. She contends that emergent generations are brought into a progressed version of society that older generations contributed to but did not grow up in, thereby preventing the older generation from identifying with much of the challenges and experiences of the emergent generation.<sup>194</sup> In this view, we can see how Troska touches upon familiar tenets of generational theory, particularly in agreeing that social change can reinforce and reflect distinct generational identities because of the *gaps* social change produces in their parameters of experience. As such, each generation gauges and engages in the progressive strides of the times with their baseline, or the configuration of the society in the historical moment in which they grew up. Older generations thus find the changes that youth generations inject into society—which moves society further and further from their own baseline viewpoint—sometimes incomprehensible and oftentimes undesirable; young generations view the changes and continuations older generations make and have made in much of the same light.

This understanding of “experiential chasms” is supplemented by the esteemed economist Walt W. Rostow’s account of the stages of societal growth.<sup>195</sup> Hailing from Thomas Mann’s novel *Buddenbrooks*—a sprawling chronicle of a wealthy family’s life across multiple

generations—Rostow poses the Buddenbrooks dynamic to hint at the incremental valuation change, and consequent action change, yielded by being born and brought up in certain circumstances.<sup>196</sup> The first generation of Buddenbrooks was born without money and thus placed value on it, seeking and acquiring it; the second generation was born into financial security and thus sought heightened social standing; the third generation, born into comfortable wealth and prestigious standing, instead placed value onto cultural expression and the arts. Viewing the familial tale as a microcosm of broad social development, the Buddenbrooks dynamic illuminates how each subsequent generation's value and behavior systems can be affected by the changes initiated and wrought by the generations prior. Flung into a new set of circumstances arranged but not inherited by preceding generations, the succeeding crew of societal members develop a shared habitus that begins to inform the valuations they make and actions they take. Simply, they build off the existing changes and initiate those of their own.

### **How Generations Drive the Social Process**

To organize and connect the multi-faceted conceptualizations of social generation and its relation to broadscale social change via generation succession, I make a refined synthesis below foregrounding two essential elements of the ceaseless social process: generations are *native* to it and *vanguards* within it.

Per our understanding of generation location, generations inherit a certain collection of historical circumstances, cultural contexts, and social phenomena when they are born into a particular cohort. These cohorts are situated in a parameter of experience which, as we know, is fundamental in the creation of their distinct generational consciousness; each is native to these

inherited parameters of experience, or baselines. They experience these native items as inherent realities, for they did not witness the gradual evolution of the circumstances or phenomena, but instead understand them as an essential part of everyday existence so much so that life predating this native perception of society is borderline inconceivable. Traditional societal norms and values get passed down to emergent generations as, again, native conditions of reality. Because every cohort is plunged into different native configurations of society, the normative values—those ingrained into children during socialization—and experimental values—those viable and capable of being adopted with a greater or newfound vigor—that cohorts face are dissimilar. As a young age-group coalesces into a unique generational identity through major historical and cultural imprint events, they maximize their adaptation to their present conditions; this process sees them uptaking favorable normative values, rejecting unfavorable normative values, and breeding new values or new hierarchies of established values which become woven into their generational identity. Generational members tend to operate from their shared native experiences and generational consciousness in addition to the characteristics of their personal biographies—which may be influenced by a variety of other social identities along racial, gendered, class lines—so as to prioritize a set of congruent behaviors that compound into a societal-level force. In this way, the emergent generation begins to vanguard.

Actualizing the components of a shared historical consciousness and sociocultural habitus, generations produce social action that either reinforces baseline circumstances or rewrites them. Particular generation units, with their own specific manifestation of the distinct generational identity to which they belong, tend to be the active social force responding to stimuli within the social landscape in a particular manner. These changes or continuations, incremental or fundamental, that an emergent generation vanguards, in cooperation or in conflict

with other generations, through their subset generation units achieving entelechy alter the historical make-up of society so that it is no longer configured in the native fashion that generation once knew but could not yet influence; since values and worldviews and imprints and generational consciousnesses crystallize around youth experiences and remain mostly stable over time, members are not detached from their native baselines once that sociohistorical reality no longer exists. However, the changes they inject into the societal make-up, thus progressing the social process, *do* get socialized into the next cohort as native circumstance. If the cohort satisfies all the requirements of becoming a social generation, then from their native experience they bear a fundamentally new, unseen perspective of the world that itself is truly a culmination of alterations to the conditions of the social order that all previous generations pioneered. The nascent generation is thus free and uniquely positioned to challenge, extend, undo, and adopt the various socio-historical-cultural components that color its starting reality. In other words, through uptaking these norms or through renouncing them, this generation participates within the present configuration of the social process that yielded their peculiar identity. It transcends just being created by social circumstance and now contributes to it by resisting and supporting and dismantling and scaffolding. It becomes a generation as an actuality. It *vanguard*s.

It does not do so alone, however, for contemporary generations may continue to vanguard in keeping with their own native parameter of experience and their own peculiar generational consciousness, stalling or accelerating the changes or continuities that the newly-actualized generation begets. And the changes which it implements or fails to implement in accordance with the distinct generational consciousness that unites and drives its generational members register as the baseline conception of the world for the next generation, rendering the social process progressed. And that next generation, cultivated by the unique web of circumstances

precipitated by antecedent vanguard generations and a key developmental determinant, forms its own unprecedented generational identity which leads to particular actions and reactions within the social process, producing—vanguarding—changes which will create the native reality for another later generation. This process repeats indefinitely, or so long as human fertility and mortality persists. And that is the secret of history: generation succession is an eminent contributor to the evolutionary process of society.

It may be helpful to ground this abstraction in real-world examples. Internet technology is a relevant example for today's youth generation, Gen Z. Born at a point in history where internet, computers, cellphones, and even smartphones are commonplace, Generation Z has been recognized as digital natives. Technology plays a veritable role in the reality of Gen Z's experience, marking their developmental years and thus weaving technological prowess and familiarity into their generational identity and consciousness. But what of the prior generations who vanguarded the baseline circumstances Gen Z faces? These generations that have affected the social phenomenon of technology, whether by introducing change or securing continuity, based on their generational consciousness? Informed by their characteristic identity, they indeed have become a visible social force in societal evolution; no longer merely shaped by it, but acting upon it. Baby Boomers offer a prime example. Cultivated in an industrial, analog, prosperously innovative America—and so native to those aspects of history—Boomers helmed and lived through crucial technological advances such as the most archaic forms of phones, emails, and digital cameras. The cultural and social tremors of these technological developments were felt every step of the way for Boomers, and their distinct attitudes, values, and ingrained experiences informed the way they responded to these changes. It is empirically obvious in the 21st century's third decade that high-tech development has far out-paced the comfort level of

Boomers but is second-hand for young Gen Zers. And as today's young generations trek on through the life course and pioneer even greater technological innovations, they'll impart as native circumstance to their successor generations a keen comfort with significant advancements in applied science—full adoption of electric, self-driving cars, hypersmart artificial intelligence, integration of neurotechnology brain implants, and other leaps not yet imaginable—that challenge their own highly adaptive sensibilities.<sup>197</sup> The endless march of technological progression, then, captures the way in which generations accept the baton at a unique vantage point and carry it forward to the next hand-off, instilling into the new runners a wholly distinct array of native technologies they'll come to outshine with their own innovations. More broadly, the example shows that older generations do play direct roles in the changing of the time, vanguarding the social process. Younger generations may inherit the changes in the social process as their starting reality, as their native experience, or they may experience them as the formative stimulus which births the beginnings of their common consciousness.

Additionally, the changes or contributions that vanguards can make in society are often tethered to the native circumstances that bred their identity; based on the context of their development, pilgrims could not have been expected to vanguard advancements in LGBTQ+ rights such as gay marriage. Yet incremental changes, subtle but valuable vanguarding, fronted by dozens of generations led to the recent victory of gay marriage, which will now be woven into future generations as a native circumstance. Building upon this *native* circumstance, those generations will helm additional vanguarded gains for queer rights and acceptance. In a similar fashion, one can hope but not reasonably expect that a generation whose native baseline is a slave society to vanguard the essential protections of freedom and equality achieved in the Civil Rights Movement. One can hope, but not reasonably expect, that a generation born within the

colonial arm of a mercantilist monarchy would champion sweeping voter rights for non-property owners, non-white citizens, and women once they established their constitutional republic. One cannot reasonably expect a generation immediately predating the industrial revolution, thus being without access to the science and empirical knowledge of the climate crisis, to vanguard a full transition to sustainable, renewable energy sources. We can, of course, expect that from any present-day generation, even if the intensity and frequency of climate disasters are not imprinted onto their parameter of experience like they are for today's batch of youth. This is the unfortunate truth of social progression. It is a slow and painstaking journey toward better civilization. Through generations, we are given a useful lens with which to study it.

### **Additional Generation Theories**

More researchers add to this discussion of generation succession as a social force. Abramson and Inglehart uphold generation replacement as a key explanatory factor in the gradual shift from materialism to postmaterialism in a handful of European countries in the late 20th century.<sup>198</sup> Charlotte Chorn Dunham further encapsulates the relationship between generations and social action, finding that generational consciousness, especially among those who explicitly identified with their own generation, was a strong predictor of activist tendencies within the anti-war movement in the United States.<sup>199</sup> Though focusing on kinship generations, Gisela Trommsdorff discusses how change and continuity over time is influenced by cultural transmission, which we can envision as the native norms and values embedded into generational members' childhoods.<sup>200</sup> She posits a recursive, bidirectional model of transmission wherein parents and offspring mediate each other's cultural values much in the same way that



contemporary social generations influence and test each other's habitus outlooks, a model which Glen H. Elder solidified in his magnum opus *Children of the Great Depression*.<sup>201</sup> Interestingly, Trommsdorff recognizes that the model she describes is prone to deviation during the internalization process, much like that of mutations in organic biology. Reminiscent of the popular push to analogize societal processes with biological stand-ins, it is apparent how the mutations which take place in the cell (the individual) may ripple out into the whole of the organism (the society). Ryder favors a different analogy which better signifies the relationship between individuals and society in the social process without winnowing much of the complexities: societies are like species, constituted by replaceable individuals capable of independent mobility while still functioning within an evolutionary—baseline—imperative.<sup>202</sup> Serving as a useful comparison for large-scale change via unit-level variety, society is indeed more flexible in its type of change and faster in its rate of change than species because of the cognitive agency humans have to uphold and disavow certain societal paradigms.

Not every scholar is convinced, however, that generations influence social change, or that they are even a useful tool to examine social change. Harkening back to Alwin's survey of parental socialization in the Detroit area, his findings that cohort replacement influences did not yield change in socialization values among non-Catholics contribute to a skepticism that cohort replacement theory can be applied more broadly, even if the theory is refined with Mannheimian social generations in place of cohorts.<sup>203</sup> France and Roberts offer a similar perspective, one that is not antagonistic toward generational theory but unconvinced by it.<sup>204</sup> They would prefer to look at the factors which theorists claim cultivate generational identity—economic market forces, political policies, historical developments—to study the macro processes underpinning social change rather than diluting it through a separate, generational lens. Wilson and Banfield

echo this preference in their notion that collectivist values—and corresponding support for public-regarding policy—stem more from sociodemographic and socioeconomic factors.<sup>205</sup> Thus, a prime analytical pathway for social change for these researchers does not come in generational theory. For our purposes in this paper, however, I am inclined to disagree. An imperfect but worthwhile construct, social generations offer a complex framework through which the indefinite beginnings and ends of efforts at social change can be better understood

Other theories and models aim to explain societal phenomena without Mannheim's generational consciousness as a factor. A conflict theory approach posed by MacManus argues age effects rather than generational effects as a key determinant in behavior and perspective, suggesting that older cohorts need more resources than younger cohorts do and thus they act in ways that help to secure these resources.<sup>206</sup> MacManus' theory draws upon Bourdieu's conceptualizations of generation, wherein he sees it as a construct resulting from a "conflict over economic and cultural resources and of the fact that different generations will see different resources as important, leading to inter-generational conflict."<sup>207</sup> Generational identities, then, are born out of and preserved by the shared need to scrounge up access to "cultural capital and material resources."<sup>208</sup> The conflict manifests in exclusionary practices—what Parkin calls rituals of exclusion and Max Weber and Pierre Bourdieu coined as social closure—whereby different cohorts attempt to restrict the access capacities of others so as to secure those advantages primarily for themselves.<sup>209</sup> Credentialism in the education field is a representation of this sociological perspective of cohort conflict on a smaller scale: tenured officials resist the transfer of resources to younger officials in an effort to retain power and relevancy, often achieved through the emphasis of their superior credentials.<sup>210</sup> These age-related tensions can

boil over into genuine conflict, for many revolutions pit those of youth and old age against each other.<sup>211</sup>

None of these theories gained quite as much traction as Strauss and Howe's cyclical model of generations, an intersection between the imprint and pulse-rate perspectives. Strauss and Howe wager that their cyclical theory can "predict the style, attitudes, and behavior of each generation as it grows older" because every generation fits into one of four generational personalities: idealist, reactive, civic, and adaptive.<sup>212</sup> They argue first in their landmark book *Generations: The History of America's Future* in 1991 and later in *The Fourth Turning* in 1996 that generational consciousnesses are not unique to every generation.<sup>213</sup> Instead, the four generational archetypes they prescribe recur every *saeculum* cycle, which lasts anywhere from 71 to 110 years and consists of four "turnings."<sup>214</sup> Each turning rings in a new generation's emergence, acting as the fundamental imprint which characterizes the identity that generation will carry throughout its life course. The First Turning—High—sees strong institutions and collectivism, much like the economic prosperity seen after World War II; the Second Turning—Awakening—sees reclamation of personal autonomy and gradual rejection of institutions, much like the Great Awakening in colonial times; the Third Turning—Unraveling—sees weakened institutions and heightened individualism, much like the Prohibition of the '20s; the Fourth Turning—Crisis—sees the destruction and reconstruction of institutional life and collectivist sentiment reemerge, much like the twin crises of the Great Depression and World War II.<sup>215</sup> It is a more sophisticated version of the adage that has gained steam in recent years: "Hard times create strong men. Strong men create good times. Good times create weak men. Weak men create hard times."

The archetypes, or generational personalities, are meant to denote the behavioral patterns of each generation in respect to the turning in which they emerge. A new generation after a Fourth Turning is a direct response to the previous, but in character and worldview they have much more in common with the generation which came a full Saeculum before them. Their notion that certain types of generational personalities are cultivated by certain historical happenings is not unshared. Drawing upon Ronald Inglehart's *The Silent Revolution*<sup>216</sup> delineation of social structures as insecure (wherein societies face social upheaval, war, or economic instability) and secure (wherein societies are unburdened by such factors and privileged by relative stability), Huan Chen argues that the mindset of a cohort will lean toward a survivalist or hedonistic framework depending on the type of society they were oriented to during their adolescence.<sup>217</sup> In other words, a generational identity is congealed around and programmed by the broad strokes of society's circumstances without must respect to the specific characteristics of those circumstances; whether the 'insecurity' in the social structure is mass protest or crippling recession, the result is a generational mindset centered on enduring hardship rather than enjoying leisure.

The parallel is clear: insecure social structures represent a Crisis Turning whereas secure social structures represent an Awakening Turning. Strauss and Howe introduce intervening turnings to mark the transitions between these structures, and for these turnings they subscribe to a variable periodicity of about 20 years wherein members of a generation are fixed to that corresponding mindset. These mindsets—generation archetypes—trickle down into the attitudes the generation carries and the behaviors the generation carries out.<sup>218</sup> In this way, we can see that the Strauss and Howe model holds as Mannheim's conceptualization of social generation does that generations are a social force propelling the continuous turn of the wheel of history.

Of course, the theory is flawed. They incorporate imprint principles into a pulse-rate framework, applying to large swathes of history semi-concrete boundaries that divide the cohorts and immediately graduate them to social generations because they inherently must satisfy one of the archetypes. Though the notion of assigning a specific archetype to each cohort has not taken root, Strauss and Howe's perspective that each cohort does in fact translate to a social generation is an idea that has been adopted. It is important to note that the possibility for any cohort to evolve into an actual generation is undoubtedly there, but the mere fact that a cohort must follow Millennials does not guarantee that a true generation will spring forth from that next cohort. The cohort of Gen Z might indeed make for an emerging social generation, but contrary to Strauss and Howe's rigid succession of specific generational archetypes, its crystallization is not inevitable. Further, their retrospective identification of turnings within a flexible *saeculum* cycle amounts to a model which can be fitted to account for every possible aberration, allowing there to be some generations which perfectly align with the popular 30-year paradigm while others fall 12 years short. And when historical circumstances run so counter to the pattern established by the *saeculum* cycle, as the Civil War crisis did, the model is able to account for the exception by skipping over an entire "civic" generation.<sup>219</sup>

Now, Strauss and Howe are certainly not the first to identify cyclical undercurrents to broad historical trends, for they explicitly draw upon some thinkers such as Anthony Wallace,<sup>220</sup> Nikolai Kondratiev,<sup>221</sup> Walter Dean Burnham,<sup>222</sup> and Arthur Schlesinger Jr.<sup>223</sup> who have posited cyclicity with cultural revitalization movements, capitalist economies, political party ideologies, and national moods of political ideology, respectively. Most paramount among them, the unparalleled political scientist Samuel P. Huntington espoused in his 1983 book *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony* the existence of a fairly regular calendar of "creedal

passions” that spawn realignment of dominant political institutions with core American ideals; Huntington points to the Revolutionary era of the 1770s, the Jacksonian era of the 1830s, the Progressive era of the 1900s, and the Civil Rights era of the 1960s as evidence of these recurrent idealistic eruptions of the people.<sup>224</sup> What sets Strauss and Howe apart from these other gentlemen is that the pattern they observe across nearly 6 centuries of Anglo-American history is an all-encompassing explication of our society’s history, framing its progression in circular strides much like a coil spring. It is an admirably ambitious venture, but their vision of a repeating cycle of fixed archetypes in a semi-flexible timeframe has its critics. Author and American political historian Michael Lind lambasts the cyclical-generational model as pseudoscience, writing: “The key to history, it appears, is the Fudge Factor.”<sup>225</sup> Hart-Brinson laments that the legacy of the Strauss-Howe model has cemented the mainstream notion that the Gen X and Millennial cohorts are generations, which he believes to be “almost purely social fiction.”<sup>226</sup> And as for that sentiment about hard times and strong men, ancient historian Bret Devereaux intricately describes how the realities of civilization are not so wonderfully succinct.<sup>227</sup>

There’s always an unfortunate degree of losing the finer intricacies of the historical process when undergoing the necessary effort to reduce that process into manageable components that permit sociological analysis, but the account Strauss and Howe offer might expend a little too much nuance for any conclusions drawn upon it to be tenable. Therefore, while this model provides a useful combination of key facets of other generational theories and tenets, Mannheim’s conceptualization of social generation and the revised considerations of generation succession as a mode of explaining the social process better respond to the research

questions presented in this paper. Nevertheless, I will give these foremost theorists the last word: “Just as history produces generations, so too do generations produce history.”<sup>228</sup> Indeed.

## **Part I Conclusion**

A fitting overview of the concept of generation is as follows: “a generation is not only a united group, born in a certain period, but also a common attitude, a response emerging from spontaneous impulses...a common collective mental, emotional and physical development.”<sup>229</sup> Further, social generation is at once a crossroads of historical circumstance, cultural mood, and individual experience within a society.

A generation location is the most basic requisite for a social generation’s formation; it combines cohort with nation, making it so that two individuals must be born at a certain point in the historical timeline and on the same side of a set of borders which contains a national culture if they are to be considered a part of the same generation location. Endowed with this generation location, individuals of like age and like national culture have a common parameter of experience. The configuration of society into which these individuals are born—their baseline reality—is distinct from the configuration into which individuals of other generation locations enter. Further, major historical events and significant cultural phenomena constitute imprints on adolescent individuals’ parameter of experience. While members of other generation locations may have also experienced those events or interacted with those phenomena, it is not an imprint for them because it did not occur during their formative years. Imprints can bestow upon members of a generation location, by virtue of bringing them vividly into a collective parameter

of experience of societal conditions, the potential for a shared set of attitudes and perspectives—a habitus—which would mostly endure throughout their lifetime.

The evolution from generation location to generation as an actuality comes through the consistent and meaningful interaction of coming-of-age individuals with the cultural and social effects of their parameter of experience—including and especially the circumstances arising from the crystallizing agents that are imprints. As members come of age *and* interact with their social landscape in such a way, the mixture of values, behaviors, and beliefs passed down to them by society and the habitus informed by unique imprint events of their youth cement into a generational consciousness, the defining feature of a true social generation. Not everyone who belongs to the generation location will necessarily make this leap to become a part of the actual generation. If an adolescent were isolated from much or all of the impacts of WWII because they, for example, worked on a remote subsistence farm in rural America, then that individual might not develop a generational consciousness with his peers who *were* impacted by WWII in some intellectual, physical, or cultural aspects. Further, not everyone in an actual generation will necessarily have the same relationship to the formative imprints of their parameter of experience nor will they respond to them in the exact same way as the rest of their peers. For instance, a draft dodger and a soldier of the same actual generation have distinct sorts of experiences with the Vietnam War, but that event constitutes for both of them a significant aspect of their parameters of experience and both of them directly interacted with that formative circumstance. They might have disparate attitudes on the event—one seemingly in favor and one against—but it still operates as a distinctive, binding historical condition for them both; while still in the same social generation, they belong to different generation units.



Generations are social forces which drive societal change. United in a common generational consciousness, or generational identity, distinct from those of past or future social generations, a generation's interaction with their circumstances is specific to them. Individuals will typically act and operate in accordance with their habitus, so they may reject societal norms or adopt new behavior patterns in a manner that is in part informed by their generational consciousness. These rejections and adoptions may be small-scale or massive, but they constitute incremental social changes. Emergent generations, because they are less likely to be fully socialized into predominant values and customs and thus more willing to experiment, are especially likely to drive social change. When generational members, typically springing from a specific generation unit, overtly make an effort to make societal changes, they become vanguards; the changes they seek to make are often informed by their generational consciousness, and so generations leave an impression on the stream of history that is distinct. Whatever changes a generation successfully vanguards help to define the parameter of experience for the next cohort, or generation location. If substantial imprints help to create a collective identity which individuals reinforce through interaction with their conditions, then a new social generation emerges. And in alignment with its own distinctive consciousness, that generation will affect change in the historical process. These fully-fledged generations would coexist in contemporaneity, but due to their distinctive features, they interpret and respond to contemporaneous sociohistorical stimuli in different ways.<sup>230</sup> Their responses—which may overlap and align in certain instances, but usually it is the younger generation which spearheads the most radical front—further impress changes onto the social landscape, influencing the native conditions of the forthcoming cohort and perhaps facilitating the imprints which may elevate that

cohort to a social generation distinguished by its own developing generational consciousness. The process repeats indefinitely so long as societies exist and social beings exist within them.

A major limitation of this piece is the abstract nature in which generations were treated. There was no thorough comparison between the application of Mannheimian social generations and other generational theories (such as the cyclical model posed by Strauss and Howe) in order to determine which conceptualization is most useful in describing the relationship between generations and the social process. An in-depth analysis of each generation's prevailing identity (characteristics the generation had) and legacy (influence the generation had with the major events or trends of their time) would help bear out whether these concepts of social generation are indeed truly useful. Further, additional avenues for research could include applying the different generational theories to a particular cohort in order to examine what overlaps and distinctions there are and if there happen to be advantages one framework offers that the others fail to do so. These theories could also retroactively be applied to past generations in order to determine if and to what extent an individual born in 1880 was a part of a social generation much in the same way someone born in 1980 is considered to be.

Social generations rise up out of monumental changes in society, and they in turn produce new changes in society. Generation succession fuels history. Knowing generations can help us to know history better. The prize of that is the chance to create better history.

## Part II: Meet the Generations

In the interest of evaluating Gen Z and its eventual place within the social process, it is necessary to examine the current assortment of established generations in the context of generational theory. Many cohorts, each with a range spanning somewhere between 15-25 years, have been classified as generations in American society. Baby Boomer, Gen X, and Millennial are terms well cemented in the cultural consciousness; probably more obscure, the Lost Generation and Silent Generation are still recognizable. The mere mention of these generational names may arouse certain perceptions in the mind of the reader about the wildly different attitudes, behaviors, and tendencies each one possesses. It is not a surprise why. Generations have captured the imaginations and attention of thinkers for decades. The inevitable differences between social generations have particularly dominated generational talk. Back in 1969, the esteemed cultural anthropologist Margaret Mead minted the term *generation gap*. Adamant that an irreconcilable divide partitioned generation groups, she writes, “Any adult that thinks he [can] invoke his own youth to understand the youth before him, he is lost.”<sup>231</sup> That same year, renowned public opinion analyst Daniel Yankelovich brought the notion of the generation gap mainstream with a CBS special called “Generations Apart,” which investigated how it could be that prominent youth activists held such radically distinct viewpoints from their own parents.<sup>232</sup> For both social scientists, a gap in generations was undeniable. And, for Mead, explicitly recognizing the inevitability of this fundamental misunderstanding between generational groups is the first step toward restoring meaningful connections. The next step in the path toward intergenerational reconciliation and cooperation, then, would be to discern where the misunderstandings lie.

To that end, what are the specific qualities constituting the identity attached to each respective generation, and to what extent do these qualities carry across generational bounds? In what ways do generations truly differ? How much of these differences yield from generational effects, those which stem from the distinctive consciousness a cohort develops as a result of a unique, interrelated range of historical, cultural, and social influences both inherited and experienced? These are questions which have gripped the scholarly community surrounding generational research, and the two chapters of this Part will explore the complicated answers thus far gathered by these researchers.

The first chapter, *Generational Profiles*, aims to portray the constellation of current generations through the traits and characteristics observers have attributed to them. From the oldest generation with surviving members, the World War II Generation, to the most recent generation preceding Gen Z, the Millennial Generation, the generations will be covered in chronological order. Some of these observations play into generational stereotypes while others dispel them. It is important to note that this chapter details the collective perception society has of each of these generations; it is not meant to serve as the end-all be-all pronouncement of today's generations. Further, these generalizations are not intended to bind the personal narratives of every individual belonging to an age-group to a certain set mode of thought or action. These generalizations—and they are generalizations—are meant to capture the prevailing moods and attitudes that a group of people of the same era might share. Obviously exceptions exist. Obviously variations persist. But for analytical purposes, we must winnow some of the complexity of these concepts into something manageable.

In the second chapter, *Generational Differences*, I will expound upon the traits discussed within the Profiles by mapping out the vast number of studies which attempt to identify how

such traits manifest in empirical settings like the workplace. Indeed, most researchers have endeavored to measure intergenerational differences by studying work-related characteristics. As the turn of the century approached and the newest generation, Millennials, began to enter the workforce, studies on workplace differences became particularly fertile ground for generational research. With the multigenerational workforce an irrevocable reality, concerns arose that the differences between generational members would spark discontent and inhibit productivity. Much of this generational research, then, had the goal of illuminating these specific differences so that managers and employers could be instructed on how to best alleviate them. This goal drew a great number of researchers these past few decades, producing an abundant catalog of similar workplace studies. However, these studies are often dissimilar in their theoretical bases, their operationalizations of the term generation, and even their demarcation years for the generations. Likewise, their findings and conclusions on intergenerational variance are not uniform. This chapter examines the complex array of research which supports and denies the claim that generational differences exist within the workplace, within consumerist behaviors, and within other spheres of everyday life.

As a final note: because demographers have already ascribed the generational label to these cohorts and popular belief has already ascribed distinct personalities to these cohorts, this thesis will not spend time verifying each one as a Mannheimian social generation. These sections will be dedicated instead to how their generational characteristics have been identified and compared with one another by numerous commentators and researchers. However, I will discuss the applicability of certain theoretical cornerstones such as imprint events wherever possible, for rarely do empirical depictions of generational identities relate back to generation theories to elucidate their findings.

## Chapter 1: Generational Profiles

### World War II Generation (1901-1927)

Members of this shrinking generation are likely centenarians as they were born at the dawn of the 20th century. Purveyors of the Strauss and Howe cyclical model know them as the Civic type.<sup>233</sup> They're referred to here as the World War II Generation, but they've been gifted a variety of names including the G.I. Generation and the Greatest Generation. Tom Brokaw<sup>234</sup> first touted this generation as the latter because of the virtuous qualities indelibly tethered to its collective consciousness: duty, courage, sacrifice, love of family and country, responsibility, and service among them. These characteristics were developed and were tested with the Great Depression and World War II—this generation's namesake because so many men and women dedicated themselves in wartime service, be it in combat or in factories—as the two great historical imprint events binding these individuals into a common identity. Emerson Hynes, a member of the WWII Generation who dedicated much of his life to being an influential and widely adored professor of ethics and sociology at Saint John's University in Minnesota,<sup>235</sup> observed that these historical circumstances forced the WWII Generation to grow up rapidly, weighting the lofty heroism and bravery at the heart of this generation with a sense of lost time.<sup>236</sup>

The legacy of this generation, however, is one of perseverance. Emerging from the greatest conflict in humanity's history, this generation was folded into times of uncertainty with a war-sculpted cultural psyche.<sup>237</sup> They met such challenges by leaning on the core principles which carried them through the hardship of their adolescence, forging families and capitalizing on President Roosevelt's G.I. Bill to attend college and expand America's educational

infrastructure.<sup>238</sup> This sparked a trend, as we will see throughout the profiles, of each successive generation becoming more formally educated than their parents. Civic-minded, achievement-oriented, and team-focused, the WWII Generation helped to spur the rise of suburbia and chart the path to the Moon.<sup>239</sup>

### **Silent Generation (1928-1945)**

Deemed the “Lucky Few” Generation by their immediate predecessors because they didn’t have to confront large-scale military conflict nor severe economic collapse in their early adulthood, the Silent Generation came of age in a comparatively more hospitable set of historical circumstances.<sup>240</sup> In the cyclical model, they’re the Adaptive type. They grew up in the dawn of television and the credit card, and they had quickly become pegged as lazy, tech-obsessed slackers by certain commentators like.<sup>241</sup> This pattern of technological advancements being adopted easily by younger generations and scorned vehemently by older generations is one that has intensified with each successive generation turn.

This generation is not without its fair share of mindset-shaping events, for the Cold War, Korean War, and peacetime economic prosperity they experienced contributed to the don’t-rock-the-boat attitude which yielded their generation’s moniker.<sup>242</sup> Interestingly enough, this generation had a revitalized conception of the American Dream because of the good post-war fortune, raising their expectation of a satisfactory baseline standard of living to include healthy security in vocation and finances.<sup>243</sup> Ultimately, they’ve been regarded as a heads down, career-committed, conformist generation with a fine legacy that can, in contrast to the generation’s name, speak for itself.<sup>244</sup> Additionally, they’ve been characterized as financially conservative, family-oriented, and faithful hard workers.<sup>245</sup> This generation’s population is dwindling as more

and more members continue to reach the upper reaches old age; it lies at around 25 million today.<sup>246</sup>

At the outset of my research in late 2019, no member of the Silent Generation had served as president of the United States. Since then, the graying generation has successfully offered up one of their own—President Joe Biden—to inject the White House with their abiding vitality.

### **Baby Boomer Generation (1946 to 1964)**

As the war ended, the returning WWII Generation and the oldest of the Silent Generation helped spur the post-war Baby Boom, inaugurating the beginning of a new cohort immediately remarkable for their demographic dominance. With a population currently estimated at 72 million<sup>247</sup> and as the enduring occupants of leadership positions in businesses and institutions, (including a majority in the House of Representatives and a super majority in the Senate as of the 117th Congress)<sup>248</sup>, Baby Boomers serve as an essential piece in the American jigsaw. In their youth, their flood into classrooms strained the public school system—raising questions in some parental circles about the quality and effectiveness of the education they were receiving—and necessitated the expansion of colleges and universities as they pursued higher education in record numbers.<sup>249</sup> Concurrent with the eve of this new generation, Benjamin Spock’s monumental child-rearing manual *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care* informed a new parenting style which encouraged greater freedom and natural development, which ultimately comprised the foundation for the environment Boomer youth were brought up in.<sup>250</sup> Interestingly enough, Spock’s own personal biography was intertwined with that of Margaret Mead, for he was her child’s pediatrician.<sup>251</sup> Though Mead never pointed to the pediatrician’s book as one of the wedges distancing emergent generations from elder generations, some have



credited—or blamed—Spock for fostering more clear divides between generations with his parenting manual.<sup>252</sup>

Whereas the Silent Generation was lucky in their early adulthood but gripped with crises in their childhood, Boomers were primed with fortunate beginnings. Born into a roaring economy, Boomers were cultivated as consumers from their earliest days; the toy industry increased fourteen-fold in the first decade of their childhood, rocketing past the 10-figure threshold of sales.<sup>253</sup> This consumerist uptick was similarly realized in cultural outlets such as television programs like *Davy Crockett* and *I Love Lucy* and comic books like *Detective Comics*, further solidifying the common range of experience for this cohort. These mediums indirectly exposed young Boomers to the social realities around them, for comic books were often reflective of the major events and moods going on in society at the given moment.<sup>254</sup> Observers such as Fredric Wertham<sup>255</sup> criticized these outlets as sources of poor literature and ideas that Boomer children were absorbing, particularly when these comics were of the horror or crime genres. Members of the Congressional Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency tended to recognize that most comics not of these controversial genres served a developmental educational function, and those that were of this genre would not produce delinquency in juveniles that were not already predisposed to such behavior.<sup>256</sup> It should be noted that such discourse represented a continuation of the trend of the older parental generation fearing that the cultural obsessions of the emergent generation would produce stunted, violent, and callous individuals. Millennials and Gen Z have been the recipients of such fear, evident in ongoing discussions about the impact of video games on young developing minds despite most research thus far affirming the lack of a direct link between violent video games and real-world violence.<sup>257</sup>

Per their model, Strauss and Howe consider Boomers the Idealist type because they were the “heirs of a national triumph” in the Second World War.<sup>258</sup> Paired with the exceptional economic prosperity of their time, these historical circumstances endowed Boomers’ habitus with a veritable sense of confidence, self-esteem, and optimism.<sup>259</sup> They notably lived in a traditional, old-fashioned family model, with the father working as the breadwinner and the mother holding down the home and raising the children.<sup>260</sup> These determinants might be contributors to this generation’s conservative skew, wherein 37% identify themselves as very conservative compared to 17% for very liberal.<sup>261</sup> Key imprints on this generation are inextricably linked with monumental social progress pined for and achieved in the 1960s and early 70s, when the majority of this generation came of age. The Civil Rights Movement, the Vietnam War, and student anti-war protests crystallized a generational consciousness that distinguished many Boomers as civic-minded, out-spoken, revolutionary, idealistic, and rebellious.<sup>262</sup> Indeed, a definitive proclamation from a key figure in the Free Speech Movement, Jack Weinberg, was to never trust anybody over 30.<sup>263</sup> These intense political events that transpired in their crucial adolescent period may have forged a characteristic emphasis on political participation, for today they comprise the greatest share of actual voters, even if much of their turnout can be attributed to an age effect.<sup>264</sup> Other important cultural and historical influences include the Moon Landing, Woodstock, and the Kennedy Assassination<sup>265</sup>

Ultimately, the Boomer generation are the open-minded, pot-smoking “flower-child hippies” who fought the draft before becoming diligent members of the workforce with a venerated work ethic to boot.<sup>266</sup>

President Bill Clinton's election in 1992 established a nearly three-decade reign of Baby Boomer presidents, and it's unlikely that we won't see another Baby Boomer reach the highest political office in the land.<sup>267</sup>

### **Generation X (1965 to 1980)**

The name *Generation X* was popularized by Douglas Coupland, who used it in the title of his 1991 novel all about the spirit of post-Boomer youth.<sup>268</sup> Though he has since credited Paul Fussler's sociological book *Class: A Guide Through the American Status System*.<sup>269</sup> as the ultimate inspiration for the name, Coupland initially drew upon the name of Billy Idol's defunct 1970s punk rock band to give his story an emblematic moniker; Idol himself drew upon the name of a book published by British journalists Jane Deverson and Charles Hamblett in 1964, a copy of which Idol's mother owned.<sup>270</sup> For each of these figures, the "X" was not only sleek but representative of the rebellious desire for the generation to remain, like the algebraic variable "x," undefined. For the most part, however, we've been able to define the core sensibilities of Xers.

With 65 million members, the Reactive type Gen Xers have been sandwiched between two generations with larger presences in terms of population as well as their place in the culture at large.<sup>271</sup> Their status as an indifferent middle-child generation generation, never at the forefront of political or cultural considerations, was epitomized in Xers' apathetic social media response to a CBS new story that excluded Generation X in their infographic generational lineup.<sup>272</sup> Their childhood experience was markedly different from previous generations because both parents tended to hold permanent positions in the workforce, making many Gen Xers 'latchkey' children. Coming home from school to an empty, unsupervised childhood likely

propelled them to be self-reliant and autonomous, one of the primary characteristics observers identify as part of the Gen X consciousness.<sup>273</sup> Indeed, some Gen Xers—author Julie Lythcott-Haims among them—have pointed to the latchkey kid experience as the source of the resourcefulness, resilience, and independence they cultivated in their adolescence; so convinced of the association between their unsupervised adolescence and the positive qualities personified in Gen X’s generational consciousness, Lythcott-Haims even advocates this as a wise and fruitful parental strategy in her *How to Raise an Adult*.<sup>274</sup> In a similar vein, Lenore Skenazy—who whipped up a media firestorm in 2009 when she allowed her 9-year-old boy to traverse New York’s public transit unattended—founded the self-proclaimed Free-Range Kids movement and authored a book of the same name to argue that leaving a little room for unsupervised freedom can help build self-efficacy, responsibility, and independence.<sup>275</sup> Detractors of the Free-Range Movement have identified a correlation in the increased freedom of Gen X to increased levels of crime, premarital sex, and substance abuse.<sup>276</sup> Nonetheless, latchkey Gen Xers have been credited with each of the more positive characteristics as they pursued higher education. Because the absolute numbers of enrollment decreased following the Baby Boom in addition to society’s move toward a more fair and equal admissions process, universities were motivated to accept historically marginalized communities that were previously discriminated against, making Gen Xers the most diverse and educated generation at that point in time.<sup>277</sup>

As with previous generations, the new mass media technologies available to this generation were comfortably adopted at the supposed expense of physical activity—yet another allegation which has afflicted generations since.<sup>278</sup> Xers have also been characterized as having a particularly extrinsic-oriented value system, materialism chief among these.<sup>279</sup> As a result of

these priorities—most notably a strong work-life balance and decent pay—Xers are regarded as less loyal to employers.<sup>280</sup>

Faced with an unprecedented rate of divorce among their parents, the AIDS epidemic, drug abuse paired with the ill-fated War on Drugs, and Black Monday, another key element to Generation X's consciousness is their distinctive brand of cynicism.<sup>281</sup> The cynical mood of Gen Xers was never captured more precisely than in the title the film *Reality Bites*.<sup>282</sup> Sometimes described as unmoored<sup>283</sup> and disinterested, most observers attribute the label of pragmatic skeptics<sup>284</sup> or blunt realists to Xers.<sup>285</sup> All in all, this generation is still fairly young and has a great deal of influence left to exert, though they may choose to simply wield their clarity of the social landscape from the sidelines.

Although Gen X has yet to see one of their own be a major presidential candidate, they have many decades left to rectify that absence from the White House. Their time may even come as soon as 2024.

### **Millennials (1981-1996)**

As the length of this profile will indicate, the Millennial Generation—or Gen Y—is by far the generation which has most captured the attention of the mainstream media and research community alike. By some estimates, elevated by the influx of young immigrants, Millennials have become the most populous cohort with 73 million.<sup>286</sup> According to the cyclical generation theory, they are Civics like the World War II Generation one Saeculum ago. Politically, they skew liberal with 27% leaning very liberal compared to 17% leaning very conservative.<sup>287</sup> When they entered the historical stream, they became the most diverse generation with non-whites comprising 43% of their population according.<sup>288</sup> The Beloit Mindset List, an annual compilation

designed to capture the cultural idiosyncrasies brought to secondary education by an incoming freshman class, contends that Millennials have never known Survivor as a rock band nor considered Beta a competitor in the VCR format war; additionally, they point out that this generation always knew in-color print newspapers, always knew the location of the Titanic wreckage, never feared nuclear war, and never heard the most trusted man in news—Walter Cronkite—tell it the way it is.<sup>289</sup>

An event extending beyond cultural phenomena which Millennials *did* know all too well was 9/11, and it serves as a key demarcation point between this generation and the next.<sup>290</sup> Very likely acting as an imprint event tethering Millennials into a common worldview as the Vietnam War protests did for Boomers, the September 11th attacks created a shift in understandings of violence and safety; as Darrin DeChane writes: “The Millennial Generation feared innocent and not-so-innocent backpacks on the sidewalk. They feared their friends and family would not return from Iraq. The events of 9/11 instilled a fear into this generation uncommon since Pearl Harbor.”<sup>291</sup> Extending this argument, Amanda M. Fairbanks<sup>292</sup> affirms the revelation of a violent world made clear by the Columbine Shooting, 9/11, and the subsequent Iraq and Afghanistan Wars *forced* Millennials to develop an awareness of their society at large and the institutions which keep—and fail to keep—they safe.

Another essential phenomenon marking the Millennial experience is technology, which is unsurprising given the period of rapid technological advancement they were born into. Pioneers of the digital age, these youth had an instinctual relationship with technology; computers were as “omnipresent as the toaster,”<sup>293</sup> and the internet became a new pastime, one where youngsters weren’t limited to their neighborhoods or local schoolyard to find people with whom they can connect.<sup>294</sup> Technology, with the rise of ‘edutainment’ toys marketed to Millennial children,

became indelibly associated with communication, entertainment, and education for this generation.<sup>295</sup> Indeed, DiLullo et al. maintain that Millennials preferred to learn with the inclusion of technology in the classrooms.<sup>296</sup> Beyond its role in how Millennials learn, technology has become an essential part of how Millennials forge relationships and keep in touch with their loved ones. The internet, particularly social media, is a tool for connection and community-building, and it's become indistinguishable from the Millennial experience.<sup>297</sup> Bolton et al. note the tolerance and open-mindedness of Millennials, which may stem from the visibility of alternate lifestyles across digital social platforms, thus making them seem less distant and peculiar.<sup>298</sup> Perhaps prompted by the ease of connection which technology forges and inclusion of technology into curriculums, observers have long cast Millennials as teamwork-oriented and communal. Persis C. Rickes<sup>299</sup> identifies this in the transition to more teamwork-based classroom activities, and Lancaster and Stillman<sup>300</sup> note that Millennials gravitated toward colleges which emphasized community-building, revealing a predilection for teams and an orientation toward communal relations.<sup>301</sup> Since Millennials are the most formally educated generation to date—and, as Anna Greenberg<sup>302</sup> notes, some of their more cherished political convictions are those that deal with education—such observations of these qualities transferring to the workforce are not insignificant.<sup>303</sup>

A glowing characterization is compiled by DiLullo et al.: Millennials are “narcissistic with a feeling of entitlement, unmotivated, impatient, incurious, unprepared for independence, academically disengaged, and deficient in time management, media literacy, and critical thinking skills.”<sup>304</sup> They missed a couple of spots, but another commentator who himself is a Millennial fills in the rest: lazy, unethical, “perma-children.”<sup>305</sup> But the greatest narrative thrown about in discussions of the Millennial Generation is their sense of specialness. Their great expectations

for special treatment are derived from the buzzword diagnosis of entitlement many scholars utilize.<sup>306</sup> Their insistence that mere attendance in college merits them a B grade—which spawned from high school grade inflation that saw an A average go from a 1 in 6 achievement in 1968 to a nearly 1 in 2 achievement in 2002<sup>307</sup>—and their resentment toward being pushed out of their comfort zone in the interest of learning are apparent examples of the entitlement embedded within their consciousness.<sup>308</sup> As spoofed on “Saturday Night Live,” they expect a promotion the third day on the job.<sup>309</sup> According to Tamara J. Erickson,<sup>310</sup> this parody has a good deal of truth in it since Millennials have reportedly been quick to question why they haven’t received a raise or promotion soon after their employment. They tend to believe work rewards should be varied, creative, and personalized because the one-size-fits-all certificates of the past don’t reveal any of the individual specialness each Millennial brings.<sup>311</sup>

It goes further to a point many see as unrealistic. Twenge pinpoints some of the extreme expectations Millennials have when she notes that compared to 1976, the number of high school students who anticipate that they will complete graduate-level education has doubled (to half of all students) when the percentage of students who do complete such an education (9 percent) has remained roughly the same through the turn of the century.<sup>312</sup> One might wager that the quality of secondary education has increased and thus resulted in greater confidence among high school students as they prepare to go into higher education, but another might point out that such confidence is misplaced if no significant increase in the percentage of students who can follow through in obtaining the most strenuous degrees has taken place. Beyond education, working Millennials often have unrealistic measures of the raises they should receive, the accelerated timeline in which they should receive it, and the treatment they are due without having amassed the experience which merits such recognition.<sup>313</sup> Ronald Paul Hill attributes it to the ability-



performance nexus, wherein Millennials tend to view particularly challenging tasks as an indication of their ability to do something rather than a measure of the effort they're putting in.<sup>314</sup> Particularly difficult tasks become things they cannot do (because it is not *able* to be done, no matter the effort someone puts into *performing* the task) while easy tasks become the supposed challenges for which they should be handsomely rewarded (despite there not being a meaningful level of *performance* they had to meet in order to accomplish such tasks). Therefore, their skewed nexus may produce inaccurate expectations of the rewards they are due.

This strain of entitlement has been blamed in part on Mr. Rogers, and the cardigan-clad neighbor has even been knocked with the “Mister Rogers effect” as the epitome of the specialness that pervades the Millennial identity.<sup>315</sup> Equally vilified as the source for Millennial entitlement was the coddling of this generation in any competitive event with consolation prizes for the losers that matched the victory prizes of the winners; Ron Aslop<sup>316</sup> dedicated a book to how these “Trophy Kids” were primed to believe that their specialness elevated them above the triumph of hard work and the consequences of poor work. And thus we trace the source of this perception of entitlement another step further: the helicopter parent.

The Millennial childhood experience is envisioned as a cascade of trophies and a distribution of applause en masse. As Troska succinctly put it: these “Millennial babies were given the world but protected from everything in it.”<sup>317</sup> She notes that the economic failings of the 1970s relative to the prosperity of previous decades, the horrors of the Vietnam war, and the 1982 cyanide-Tylenol murders were key motivations in Baby Boomer parents spoiling their Millennial children; Sharon Uche<sup>318</sup> pinpoints the Columbine Shooting as the source for strong parental protection over later Millennials, resulting in their lives becoming “choreographed”<sup>319</sup> and scheduled. The well-intentioned phenomenon of helicopter parenting has been criticized for

stunting Millennials in their youth and leaving them unprepared for the realities of adulthood.<sup>320</sup> Indeed, being sheltered and showered in praise may have also left Millennials risk-averse and uncomfortable with ambiguity.<sup>321</sup>

Despite this, a silver lining for hovering, ultra-involved parents is that the familial bond between them and Millennial children is strong. This generation values family and strives to maintain connection with them; this is evident in college initiatives to engage geographically distant family members in their child's academic progress.<sup>322</sup> Other observers take a different stance on helicopter parenting, arguing that it puts pressure on Millennials to perform and excel, and while it certainly stresses them out, this coaxes them to be high-achieving.<sup>323</sup> Further researchers extend the picture, characterizing Millennials as goal-oriented and ambitious.<sup>324</sup> Optimism and confidence are additional traits that have been identified in Millennials, possibly resulting from the protection and specialness they were awarded in their childhood.<sup>325</sup> Some, such as Kent Barnds<sup>326</sup> would remind that they just might be overconfident or even narcissistic. Conversely, other scholars have branded Millennials as cynical of corporations, advertisers, and the government because they witnessed so many celebrities and politicians escape punishment for misdeeds.<sup>327</sup> Ricketts<sup>328</sup> offers a middle ground: Millennials are a cross between the vibrant optimism of Boomers and the healthy realism of Gen Xers.

Finally, Millennials have been pegged as the impassioned bearers of the civic spirit by national leaders from their earliest days, and they've apparently grown into their forecasted role as civic-minded idealists.<sup>329</sup> Building off the other elements of their generational consciousness—such as communal-orientation and respect for diversity—a slew of researchers have deemed Millennials particularly civic-minded over the years.<sup>330</sup> Troska points to the prevalence of social justice clubs and classes during Millennials' tenure in the education system

as evidence of them being socially conscious. Often overlooked as one of the lofty expectations Millennials hold is their demand for a healthy, happy society.<sup>331</sup>

Millennials are just barely reaching the age wherein they are eligible to run for president, but they've already started to make waves in the political sphere. In the momentous, hotly contested 2021 runoff election in Georgia, history was made when Senator Jon Ossoff became the first Millennial sworn in to the United States Senate. Also part of the 2020 election cycle, South Bend Mayor Pete Buttigieg became the first Millennial to meaningfully seek a major party's nomination. He ended up fifth in the delegate count, but that's quite a feat given the number and renown of the contenders he faced (including the candidate who would go on to win the presidency). Young and ambitious Millennials making presidential bids will likely be a consistent facet of election cycles moving forward.

Clearly, the Millennial generational consciousness has been subject to the greatest scrutiny of all the generations. But as with the other generations discussed here, it represents a unique snapshot of the interplay between America's historical circumstances and America's cultural conditions.

## **Chapter 2: Generational Differences and Similarities in Practice**

In the following sections, I share some of the trends that have emerged in empirical research endeavors on the topic of generations. This chapter is a collection and categorization of the body of scholarship out there. I indicate many of the takeaways researchers have offered as the fruits of their analyses and situate them in context of the broader scholarly conversation about generations. That conversation is complex, illuminating, and ongoing. Much of it is focused on how generational identities manifest in the workplace, and much of it seeks to determine whether

or not meaningful intergenerational differences arise in practice. I first examine the studies which mostly provide evidence in favor of intergenerational differences. After acknowledging sources which tend to reject the idea of intergenerational differences, I delve into the nuance of generational studies to showcase the many researchers who support and dispute different aspects of the outlined Generation Profiles. Then, I discuss generational identities outside of the workforce and close with an examination of some of the problems with the current landscape of generational research.

Some terms related to research methodologies are best defined upfront. Cross-sectional research designs are those wherein individuals belonging to separate groups are surveyed at the same specific point in time. They are by far the most common in generational research. Time-lag studies survey different participants in different time periods, but these participants are of similar age when they give their responses. For instance, a time-lag study can detail the differences between a 20-year-old's work attitude in 1980 with a 20-year-old's work attitude in 2010. Then there are longitudinal studies, which survey the *same* participants periodically over a length of time. It is the most reliable of these research designs, but it is the most difficult and thus most uncommon.

As another preface, a handful of the sources provide recommendations for how managers make changes in response to generational differences in order to assuage the impact they may have on work duties. Their mention is not an endorsement of the proposed changes nor a comment on their efficacy. I merely include that side of the scholarship because if a researcher is offering ways to deal with generational differences in the workforce, they are operating off the assumption that those differences are indeed significant.

## **Intergenerational Difference Supported in the Workplace**

A vocal section of scholars has amassed an abundant body of research detailing the presence of generational differences within the workplace. Amy Glass<sup>332</sup> reiterated some of the key profile characteristics of the predominant generations—Baby Boomers, Gen X, and Millennials—in order to steer managers in the right direction with their employee retention and motivation efforts. Boomers are contrasted with Millennials in familiar ways: the former generation prefers face-to-face communication whereas the latter prefers instantaneous forms of communication, likely online. Amy Glass noted that these preferences breed opportunity for misunderstanding, so she recommends managers be adept in the forms of communication that their generationally-diverse employees are most comfortable with<sup>333</sup>. Further, the distinction between the two generations in their perceptions of suitable feedback reveals another area of strife for the incognizant employer. Millennials not only respect but demand feedback as part of their work experience, for they may otherwise interpret silence to mean disapproval.<sup>334</sup> On the other hand, Boomers are more comfortable without consistent feedback and may interpret increased levels of managerial engagement as micro-managing. The prescription, then, is to adapt to the needs of the employees as informed by their generational context. Avoid delivering blanket feedback to Boomers, and avoid withholding formative feedback for Millennials.<sup>335</sup> As for Generation Xers, their communication habits tend toward whatever works quickest in a given situation, and they are satisfied in assuming a self-directed role in their workplace.<sup>336</sup>

Andrea Bencsik and Renata Machova adds to the discussion with an interesting assortment of findings from their survey of various generations in the labor market for their perceptions on Millennial attributes.<sup>337</sup> The most common judgments Millennials were given by their peers: overly self-confident, creative, and career-focused.<sup>338</sup> While the overly self-confident

characteristic aligns with the Millennial profile, the career-focused attribute doesn't appear to do so as neatly. Of course, the work-life balance that Millennials emphasize isn't necessarily negated by an extraordinary focus on career and speaks to the unfortunate loss of nuance that comes with broad stroking a generation on subjective perceptions. As for the 'creative' adjective, this seems to result from an age effect that associates creativity with youthful vitality; this is signaled in a survey by Mintel which showcases that each generation, including Millennials, view teenagers and youth as most creative.<sup>339</sup> Observing variations in the willingness to knowledge-share, the valuations of work relationships, and the types of aspirations, Bencsik and Machova depict a vivid vision of a certainly differentiated and possibly incompatible multigenerational workforce.<sup>340</sup>

Kristen Scheuerlein prescribes key adaptations managers must make to facilitate greater job satisfaction—and retention—among each of the prevalent generations.<sup>341</sup> With Boomers characterized as hard-working and committed abiders of authority who enjoy being seen as an equal, employers are recommended to demonstrate appreciation of Boomers as they approach retirement age and grant them positions of mentorship so that they can give a guiding hand to emergent workers.<sup>342</sup> Xers, on the other hand, stress work-life balance and freedom to work unsupervised as well as sufficient opportunity to ascend through corporate ranks.<sup>343</sup> Further, they emphasize the outcome over the process and value self-directed improvement of the skills they deem essential to performing their tasks well. Xers, too, can harbor hostile attitudes toward micro-management, overbearing supervision, and questionable authority.<sup>344</sup> Managers are advised to keep these unique characteristics of Gen X in mind and to adopt greater flexibility in scheduling, incentivizing pay increases as rewards for challenging work, and allowing Gen X workers the room to do their jobs their way.<sup>345</sup> For Millennials, the teamwork-driven educational

environment they have mostly now emerged from seems to have geared them toward collaborative work environments.<sup>346</sup> To attend to these Millennial-specific needs, managers should breed a healthy and collegial environment where innovative ideas are free to flow.<sup>347</sup> Additionally, the familiar considerations of supportive feedback from their seniors and substantive work that goes beyond the mundane or the routine help to inform managers in soothing intergenerational dissatisfaction. Kevin R. Clark recommends that employers establish a coach-like bond with Millennial employees, for the recalibration of Millennial expectations through sincere and specific praise as well as private and constructive criticism proves wildly advantageous.<sup>348</sup> Ng et al.<sup>349</sup> draw on psychologist David C. McClelland<sup>350</sup> to suggest that monetary compensation doesn't serve so much as an extrinsic reward but instead as validation and feedback that they've been doing fine work, emphasizing the apparent importance feedback holds for this generation.

Observations of intergenerational differences, and the strife that may follow, can stem from the stereotypical perceptions generations have of others as much as it does—if it all—from the actual differences themselves. These generalized perceptions wash away the complexity of generational identities but add to the complexity of the workplace. For Yarbrough, Martin, Alfred, and McNeill, they weaken the stability of interpersonal relationships and threaten meaningful collaboration.<sup>351</sup> 40% of Millennials see Boomer coworkers as too guarded with their communication whereas about the same percentage of Boomers see their younger counterparts as too brash and opinionated with theirs.<sup>352</sup> We can see, then, how perceptions of communicative barriers might inhibit teamwork more so than actual differences in preference of communication styles.

A World War II Generation manager deftly epitomized the overriding perceptions generations face in the workforce when asked about core intergenerational differences: “This is an easy question...Let me give you the short and sweet answer to this. The baby boomers don’t know how to go home, the [Xers] don’t want to work with others, and the [Millennials] want to everything [*sic*] given to them. Got it?”<sup>353</sup> While the manager’s answer is well-meaning, researchers observe exaggerated misrepresentations of generations such as this one to be the primary factor nourishing generational strife in the workplace. Indeed, researchers have even developed generational “survival guide” cheat sheets that aim to give workers quick and accurate appraisals of their older and younger peers so that ignorant or prejudiced viewpoints can be remedied.<sup>354</sup>

John P. Meriac, David J. Woehr and Christina Banister<sup>355</sup> applied an analytical framework—the Multidimensional Work Ethic Profile (MWEP)<sup>356</sup>—to generational research in order to more concretely pinpoint actual differences between generations, though notably their methodology was cross-sectional. First, the authors evaluated the MWEP’s set of questions across seven dimensions—self-reliance, morality/ethics, leisure, hard work, centrality of work, wasted time, and delay of gratification—for equivalence; that is, they determined which questions yielded disparate interpretations by respondents as a fault of the question’s wording and not as an indication of some underlying characteristic within the respondent.<sup>357</sup> They found that aside from leisure, which saw insignificant differences among the generations, Baby Boomers tended to report higher levels of work ethic in the various dimensions while Gen X tended to report the lowest.<sup>358</sup> There were 3 dimensions wherein Xers and Millennials had significant differences: morality, hard work, and delay of gratification.



The recognition of generational difference extends further with more cross-sectional studies. Hansen and Leuty<sup>359</sup> provide an interesting portrait of the differences regarding the oldest generation still residing in the workforce, Silent Generation, by utilizing a different framework to measure valuation of 20 work-related needs: the Minnesota Importance Questionnaire.<sup>360</sup> Their results affirmed intergenerational differences, some more intuitive than others. While the Silent Generation placed greater levels of importance on the values of “status” and “autonomy” than did Boomers and Xers, Generation X emphasized “comfort” in the workplace more than these other generations; however, “security” and “moral” values were highest among Generation X men, findings absent in the mainstream rhetoric surrounding the cynic generation.<sup>361</sup> This data is consistent with observations that differences in value systems distinguish the generations.<sup>362</sup> Additionally, Gen Xers, the most recent generation included in this study, were found to have greater expectations for working conditions than their predecessors, which is consistent with yet more research detailing the importance of a balanced work-life intersection and a more challenging yet enjoyable work environment for this younger generation.<sup>363</sup>

Similarly, Lyons et al.<sup>364</sup> utilized Shalom H. Schwartz’s Theory of Basic Human Values<sup>365</sup> survey to discover significant generational differences in the workplace, including the counterintuitive revelation that Gen Xers ranked higher among the openness-to-change basic value than Millennials. In their cross-sectional research, Cennamo and Gardner found stark differences in valuations of vocational freedom, with Millennials cherishing freedom the most.<sup>366</sup> Wong et al. employed a Motivation Questionnaire and appeared to verify the perceptions of Millennials as communal and teamwork-oriented, for they ranked affiliation as a workplace motivation significantly more than other generations.<sup>367</sup> Offering a more in-depth qualitative

study of an albeit small sample, Gursoy et al. found several differences that align with previous understandings of generational characteristics.<sup>368</sup> Boomers respected authority and lived to work; Xers desired a fun and independent work environment with flexible hours and quick rewards; Millennials showed proclivity for teamwork and optimism, and trusted central authority. Within the hospitality industry, Chen and Choi found Boomer respondents reflected altruistic values.<sup>369</sup> In that same study, Millennials were found to emphasize the work environment—lending credence to the impression of Millennials as communal—in addition to economic return over personal growth facets like achievement—running counter to characterizations pegging them as fulfillment-motivated and achievement-oriented.

Beyond cross-sectional designs, concrete differences were still identified. Sverko concluded that Gen Xers maintained greater expectations for a more satisfactory work environment and compensation structure by using a time-lag survey.<sup>370</sup> Smola and Sutton examined whether work values changed in generational members as they grew older by employing a time-lag study comparing data in 1999 to data in 1974, finding that even as they aged Generation X still held their distinct perception that work should be a minimal part of one's life and that their promotions should come quickly.<sup>371</sup> In general, Millennials' work ethic has been described as one comparable to the t-shirt catchphrase “working to live, not living to work” and emphasizes a good balance between the office and the home.<sup>372</sup>

### **The Nuance of Generational Research in the Workplace**

Clearly, the research aiming to measure the presence of generational difference in the workplace is just as complicated and nuanced as the concept of generation itself. Perceptions of differences in some areas of work-related attributes have been well-supported by data across

various studies while many researchers have amassed findings that refute such perceptions in other areas. A great deal of researchers, compelled by their data, emphasize such nuance in their own individual studies. Jean Twenge, who aggregated and reviewed dozens of studies in this topic of inquiry, is among them. In extrinsic values, such as money, possession, and prestige, she observed a significant uptick from Boomers to Xers before decreasing with Millennials.<sup>373</sup> In organizational commitment, she found marginal differences surprisingly in favor of Xers and Millennials rather than Boomers. Affiliative values had too conflicting an array of studies to make an accurate judgement in one direction or another.

Further, she found linear changes between generations in regards to work-life balance and individualism, with both highest among Millennials, whom she refers to as GenMe.<sup>374</sup> Her placement of Millennials as most individualistic, even narcissistic, runs counter to the popular characterization of Millennials as more communal, yet it does provide support for the “self-confident” attribute with which Millennials have also been labelled. High individualism might partially be responsible for the diversity tolerance of younger generations; she writes, “the upside is that GenX, and especially GenMe, are more likely to recognize the right and ability of individuals to succeed and contribute regardless of their background—in other words, to treat people as individuals rather than members of racial or gender groups.”<sup>375</sup> Explanation for the linear rise of individualism and devaluation of work centrality can be found, perhaps, in the native-vanguard paradigm of generation succession, wherein our society at large trends towards these particular values to a greater degree. As Twenge points out, these generational differences might be insights into the gradual social change the nation has experienced up to the most recent generation.<sup>376</sup> The differences serve as reflections of the shifting cultural climate within our society. Since generational identities are cultivated by circumstances inherited as well as

experienced in adolescence, such findings of linear differences help us to understand the empirical ramifications of social change acting as a throughline by which generations' parameters of experience scaffold off of their predecessors. This relates the generations, but they still remain wholly distinct by virtue of a parameter of experience being a sum of all past change—including such affected slightly or drastically by the immediate antecedent generation.

Joined by notable generational scholars, Twenge conducted a time-lag design using the Monitoring the Future Survey, an annual study covering a wide range of self-reported attitudes and behaviors of high school seniors.<sup>377</sup> Forms 3 and 4 of the survey pertain to work-related characteristics. Data from three graduating classes, representative of the three primary generations of study, were pulled from the survey years 1976, 1991, and 2006. It's worth noting that the findings are simply perceptions of work-related attributes by students who had yet to enter college, let alone the workforce. Even still, the moderate but meaningful differences these researchers discovered are made more striking by how much it contrasts with the popular generational mythos outlined in the Profile Section. In harmony with Twenge's systematic review, altruistic values were consistent across generations.<sup>378</sup> The notion that Millennials, particularly community- and civic-minded, demand to work for organizations which themselves value social responsibility while also facilitating their individual workers to perform their social responsibility is unsubstantiated here. Further, Millennials' valuations of social rewards such as coworker interaction were lower than Xers and Boomers by a statistically significant margin.<sup>379</sup> Such results compete with the claims that Millennials are especially communal, and perhaps even impugns the strength of their supposed orientation toward teamwork. Fitting in with the Profiles, however, were the upticks in extrinsic values—peaking with Gen X—as well as leisure mindsets, for Millennials were less likely to say they'd want to work overtime and more likely to

stop working if they had “enough” money. Finally, they actually found that intrinsic values remained fairly stable across generations, but that Millennials valued this area less than their predecessors.<sup>380</sup> Weeks and Schaffert’s research supplement this finding. In one dimension of the 4-quadrant model designed by Lips-Wiersma and Morris<sup>381</sup> to measure meaningful work, they found Boomers were more intrinsically motivated by other-doing, wherein they see work as a contribution to society. However, the 4-quadrant analysis also places Millennials as more other-being, which entails togetherness, belonging, and value-sharing.<sup>382</sup> Despite appearing to contradict claims of Millennials’ civic-mindedness, these more recent findings validate the perceptions of Boomers as particularly civic-minded and Millennials as particularly communal and team-oriented.

The complicated landscape of generational research has yet more complications to add. In stark contrast to one of the more widely agreed upon characterizations of Millennials, the desire for frequent employer feedback has been said to have increased from Boomers to Xers but that Millennials have not rated the importance of feedback as highly, according to some researchers’ analysis.<sup>383</sup> Further, the Xer Profile seemed to be upheld by findings that Gen X uniquely reserves conferment of respect for authority figures until they prove such respect earned, but the characteristics which Xers deem respect-worthy in their leaders are valued by other generations at consistent margins.<sup>384</sup>

Other researchers tend to agree with the posture that core workplace concerns, like good pay and a secure future, are not much affected by the generation an individual belongs to.<sup>385</sup> Extending this, Jurkiewicz<sup>386</sup> employed a cross-sectional metric to find that 12 out of 15 work factors related to desires and expectations were rated alike by the generations; fitting with the Profile component of independence, Gen Xers demonstrated a difference in emphasizing

freedom from supervision whereas Boomers especially desired the opportunity to learn new things, which counters the popular age-based conception that they are adverse to change.<sup>387</sup> Certainly contradicting the Profile characteristics of each generation are the findings that Boomers actually care more about their paycheck than Gen Xers do.<sup>388</sup> Another counterintuitive find made by Hansen and Leuty is that the Silent Generation appears to value creativity and responsibility more than subsequent generations, though they stress that the magnitude of this difference is minimal.<sup>389</sup> Further spotlighting the complexity of generational research, studies acknowledging that Gen X values autonomy and out-of-the-box problem-solving also acknowledge that the differences are slight and inconsequential.<sup>390</sup> Each successively younger generation seems to place more emphasis on the importance of a supportive social environment and strong relationships with coworkers.<sup>391</sup> This apparent trend of generational difference is contested by Twenge, Campbell, and Freeman<sup>392</sup>, who find that Xers do not differ in their valuation of social connections than previous generations, as well as Van der Velde et al.,<sup>393</sup> who suggest that Xers actually value them less, possibly in keeping with their self-reliant stereotypes.

In an in-depth qualitative study of Illinoisan K-5 Elementary School teachers, Scott A. Schwartz found key similarities across generations as well as some notable differences. Schwartz compared the motivations of multigenerational faculty by creating a Teacher Motivation Study to examine the three principal ingredients of Daniel Pink's motivational theory: autonomy, mastery, and purpose.<sup>394</sup> Autonomy is the desire to be self-directed, but this isn't necessarily the same as individualism; the autonomous worker can still enjoy and prefer collaboration.<sup>395</sup> Mastery deals with the urge to improve one's own capabilities for one's own satisfaction. As Pink states, purpose entails "our yearning to be a part of something larger than ourselves."<sup>396</sup> Schwartz found that participant teachers overwhelmingly aimed to improve their pedagogy for the sake of their

students—their motivation was centered on a sense of purpose for their kids.<sup>397</sup> In addition to this intergenerational similarity, however, attitudes toward the recently adopted Common Core State Standards were notably differentiated along generational lines. Millennials, who progressed through an early education more similar to the pedagogical foundations at the heart of Common Core, were more likely to be comfortable with the implementation of the new standards than older generations.<sup>398</sup> This proves to be another example of generational complexity, wherein motivations are aligned but perspectives are not. Further, it is indicative of the way the environments we face in our upbringing—in this case, educational settings—can impress upon us an interpretive framework that influences our outlook on stimuli that arise in adulthood—in this case, a new educational standards initiative.

Though not directly applicable to generational identities within the United States because of the separate generation location, research in foreign countries has also been conducted to discover the extent of generational differences. As some domestic researchers look to these international studies for methodological guidance and, regrettably, data comparison, it's useful to examine a few examples and discuss their findings as part of the complicated tapestry of existing generational research. Benson and Brown surveyed workers in an Australian public sector organization for job satisfaction, commitment, and willingness to quit.<sup>399</sup> They utilized Price and Mueller's<sup>400</sup> job satisfaction scale and the widely respected organizational commitment index from Porter et al.<sup>401</sup> to measure these work attitudes. Their results were mixed. Less likely to be willing to quit and more likely to have high job satisfaction, their equivalent to the Boomer cohort showed no difference with their equivalent to the Gen X cohort in organizational commitment; curiously defiant of Xers' characterization in the States as highly independent, Xers in this study were found to rely on coworker support for their willingness to quit.<sup>402</sup> A

cross-sectional study conducted in Brazil presented findings that portrayed more convergence than divergence in generational attitudes.<sup>403</sup> Although the national culture that provides the bedrock for societal values is quite distinct, a Taiwanese study conducted at the turn of the century discovered differences in work attitudes and leadership style preferences between their Boomers (then over 35) and Xers (then under 35) within the manufacturing industry.<sup>404</sup> Such findings seem to validate some American generational research, for if differences persist in international strains of Boomer and Xer identities as a result of generation effects, the intergenerational differences pertaining to our specific generational personalities are more credible. However, within the education sector, Taiwanese Boomers and Xers were not differentiated.<sup>405</sup> The difference in the manufacturing sector, then, might be explicable by the nature of the industry rather than the nature of the generations' consciousnesses. Such a revelation casts some doubt on the cross-sectional data pointing to generational differences in America. Indeed, a Canadian survey of Millennial college students documented a great deal of heterogeneity in plenty of the work-related attributes typically examined for intergenerational difference in generational research; demographic factors like gender, visible minority status, and marriage status accounted for differences between the surveyed Millennials of their workplace expectations and priorities.<sup>406</sup> If this *intragenerational* variance can be chalked up to a myriad of other factors, it is possible that observed *intergenerational* variance might too derive from these non-generational effects if they are not sufficiently controlled for.

Many researchers, in fact, have acknowledged this possibility. Deal et al. capture the problem of generational research with keen precision: work-related attributes and characteristics may be "more likely to be affected as a result of maturation, life stage, the economy, or other environmental factors than [by] some fundamental shift in generational attitudes or



behaviors.”<sup>407</sup> They illustrate this by pointing to the Great Recession as a period effect, wherein attitudes and behaviors are principally derived from experiencing some momentous circumstance that is ongoing or fixed in recent memory. In 2006, workers across generations likely had far greater expectations of their employers than they did in 2010 when they were still reeling from the economic repercussions of the downturn.<sup>408</sup> A study conducted in 2010 will hold a different narrative than what the same study in 2006 might have told because the difference comes not from crystallized generational personas but from the overarching mood of the times. For differences in work-life balance, they contend that the chief factor is life stage, particularly in regards to parenthood, instead of generation.<sup>409</sup> The 22-year-old and 48-year-old who have just had newborns are more likely to value a flexible schedule compared to their respective coevals without children—or at least young children. Likewise, another factor nested in the age effect is career stage. The notion that Boomers, an older generation, work harder and work longer is because they’re more likely—given the time they’ve spent in the workforce—to hold the higher positions in a company that demand additional attention and labor hours.<sup>410</sup>

The generational variance observed—though not uniformly—in attitude toward social connections in the workplace has also been speculated to be an age effect since younger generations are characterized as more concerned with a job’s social environment. The negative correlation of older cohorts and the importance of social connections can be explained by the conventional wisdom that older workers have already established their social ties and will likely carry them into the twilight of their lives.<sup>411</sup> An additional explanation for this variance is that it is influenced by the *type* of connections different age-groups want to engage in based on their career stage. The Silent Generation, inhabiting mentor roles at the turn of the century, placed value on forming connections in relationships where they served as an advisor or guide.<sup>412</sup> On

the other hand, entrant Xers more so sought connections that allowed them to establish their voice within an organization.<sup>413</sup> It is difficult to see where the line is, however, as the desire of Xers to establish their voice might also be attributable to their proclivity for autonomy and individualism. Similarly, Pogson et al. utilized the Multidimensional Work Ethic Profile to find that the career stage of individuals does yield some difference in attitudes and practices regarding work ethic.<sup>414</sup>

More researchers have looked beyond generational effects as the driving force of differences observed between generation groups. For leadership styles, Sessa et al.<sup>415</sup> wagered that there were differences in both behaviors and values between leaders of different generations, but Peter Urwin and Emma Parry<sup>416</sup> view these findings as indicative of maturational processes rather than generational processes. In evaluating how each generation is motivated in their work, Wong et al. indicated that older workers tended to be motivated by power and younger workers tended to be motivated by progression.<sup>417</sup> This can reasonably be perceived as an age effect, for those at the beginning stages of their career focus on advancement whereas those in the later stages of their career focus on reaping the rewards of their advancement. It's the same reason that members of older generations, who have likely already achieved status within an organization, place less importance on status than younger workers.<sup>418</sup> Job satisfaction, too, might be chiefly influenced by age maturation rather than generational identity. There exists a positive correlation between age and job satisfaction, especially with tenured individuals.<sup>419</sup> This age effect may be attributable to the natural development of personality that comes with maturation, including elevated emotional stability and cognitive capacity, which is linked to occupational enjoyment.<sup>420</sup>

Additionally, the nature of the job changes with career advancement and fosters more favorable conditions for satisfaction and fulfillment. Typically, high ranking job positions tend to be “characterized by a greater degree of autonomy, skill variety, and task significance,” and thereby relate to greater degrees of work-related happiness.<sup>421</sup> Indeed, factors beyond period or age effects can contribute to the differences found between generational groups. Though older generations are associated with greater organizational commitment and thus less likely to leave their jobs than Millennials might be, variables such as job satisfaction, employer support, education, and skill compatibility are much greater predictors of commitment and turnover levels than generational effects are.<sup>422</sup> Another example is offered by Twenge, who affirms that the ostensible increase in altruism with the Millennial generation—measured by the reported hours they spent volunteering during teenage years—is actually due to the integration of volunteering thresholds into High School graduation requirements.<sup>423</sup> To layer on yet another potentially confounding factor, increased engagement in volunteer activities as a result of their formalized incentivization may have kindled an enduring sense of obligation to one’s community in Millennials, thereby producing a genuinely robust degree of altruism among the generation.

In light of the complex and varied insights these researchers have produced, it is safe to say that generational differences within the workforce persist just as generational similarities do, and that at least part of these differences—which are not uniformly observed across all industries or in accordance with the Generational Profiles—can be accounted for by age, period, and other miscellaneous effects.

## **Intergenerational Difference Unsupported in the Workplace**

Hailing from this extensive and ever-growing body of empirical research that confirms intergenerational difference, a rising surge of how-to books offering workplace managers and leaders fixes to their multigenerational workforce problems has flooded the business shelves. Among these are: *Clash of the Generations: Managing the New Workplace Reality* (2016), *Generations at Work: Managing the Clash of Boomers, Gen Xers, and Gen Yers in the Workplace* (2013), *America's Generations in the Workplace, Marketplace, and Living Room* (2018), *Sticking Points: How to Get 4 Generations Working Together in the 12 Places They Come Apart* (2013), *The Remix: How to Lead and Succeed in the Multigenerational Workplace* (2019), and *Sticking Points: How to Get 5 Generations Working Together in the 12 Places They Come Apart Hardcover* (2020). As the body of research detailing such distinctions blooms, however, so too does the body of research disputing any significant intergenerational differences within the workforce.

In regards to organizational commitment, generational membership may not be a prominent factor. Instead, meaningful predictors rely more on the characteristics of the organization, such as the scope and difficulty of the work, the perceived level of support higher-ups provide, and the effectual leadership styles.<sup>424</sup> Indeed, Jean E. Wallace asserts that commitment levels between Boomer and Xer lawyers are indistinguishable.<sup>425</sup> Dr. Paul White complements these findings in his argument that the nature of early careers breeds job-hopping, and that there's no real difference between the organizational commitment demonstrated by Millennials recently entering the workforce and members of older generations when they first entered the workforce.<sup>426</sup> Macarena Soto Ferri of *scienceforwork.com* vehemently denies the presence of meaningful generational differences, arguing that the focus of organizational

management on diagnosing and mediating such differences is an entirely unwarranted waste of resources; she suggests that employers devote their energies toward conducting internal reviews of differences between individuals rather than groups to discern the areas that might benefit from conflict resolution strategies.<sup>427</sup>

This notion that employers should be hesitant in heeding the recommendations to base their management around compensating for generational difference is shared by Deal, Altman, and Rogelberg.<sup>428</sup> They point out, fairly, that employers should first judge whether or not perceived generational differences translate to genuine inefficiencies before enacting any corrective policies. To some, the chief measure of work ethic might be the number of hours spent toiling. For them, then, the various reports which find that Millennials work just as many hours as Boomers and Xers are reason enough to neutralize any claims that there might be differences in work ethic.<sup>429</sup> Wasting time, resources, and sanity poring over how to motivate Millennials to dedicate more energy to their work when nothing outside of dataless perceptions suggest that they aren't already dedicating as much energy as their coworkers of older generations, then, does become an ill-advised managerial strategy. It is worth noting that there is power in perceptions, however. Though productivity may not be harmed by Millennials' work ethic if it is not actually weaker than that of generations prior, intergenerational strife that arises as a result of perceptions that one generation is not pulling their weight may indeed become an impediment to productive collaboration. Still, in terms of the sheer number of labor hours as a metric for work ethic, it seems those generations are indistinguishable.

In regards to job satisfaction and work centrality, variations don't produce any fundamental effect on the workplace.<sup>430</sup> Though not a glowing testament to intergenerational camaraderie, Weeks and Schaffert highlighted an intergenerational similarity in each generation

perceiving other generations as motivated primarily from an extrinsic source of reward (i.e. money).<sup>431</sup> More flatteringly, they also found that across all generations, intrinsic values such as personal growth were the highest source of meaning and motivation within the workplace. Jean Twenge's findings on intrinsic self-fulfillment values are consistent with the notion that no substantial change exists between each generation's association of work and meaningfulness.<sup>432</sup> Further, altruistic values—which deal with one's aptitude for helping others' livelihoods and contributing to society's well-being, such as volunteering—were shown to be consistent across generations.<sup>433</sup> Such findings potentially dispel the idea that Millennials are more community-oriented or intrinsically-motivated than previous generations.

### **Intergenerational Difference Examined Outside the Workplace**

Outside the workforce, plenty of researchers have endeavored to draw specific distinctions between generations. These findings, however, relate to the Profile characteristics and each other in a similarly messy way as the research centered on work settings. Still, they provide valuable insight into the way generational members perceive and are perceived through the lens of generational identities.

One marketing research firm, Mintel, included Boomers and Millennials in a 2019 study consisting of self-evaluation questions ranging from lifestyle choices to advertising preferences; they find that perceptions of cultural landmarks are changing. 64% of Millennial respondents believe in the American Dream compared to 78% of Boomers.<sup>434</sup> This could be reflective of the disillusionment that has been somewhat associated with Millennials. Further, Millennials do not abide by the traditional markers of adulthood (e.g., marriage, home ownership) as previous generations once did. Much has been made of this adulthood postponement, with Millennials

being labelled the Peter Pan Generation.<sup>435</sup> These different visions of adulthood are ramifications of the unique historical circumstances each generation experienced during their formative years, however. As Darrin DeChane,<sup>436</sup> a Millennial, points out: the economic realities Boomers faced were more conducive for them to cross the traditional adulthood threshold.<sup>437</sup> The cost of tuition at public colleges for a single academic year have more than doubled since 1980<sup>438</sup>, and the median price of a house in that year was over \$93,000; in 2020, that number has risen to \$247,000.<sup>439</sup> So these milestones are often not feasible for Millennials as they emerge from adolescence, and it's often not desirable either; Carrol et al. argues that Millennials hold off on those actions because they first want to settle into their career.<sup>440</sup> Millennials, confronted with this unique experience, have developed a consciousness which perceives the ability to pay one's own bills, independently, as the definition of adulthood.<sup>441</sup>

Boomers have been pegged as the “Me Generation” in their time due to their part in making the 1970s, in Tim Wolfe's eyes, the “Me” decade.<sup>442</sup> As mentioned in Chapter 1, this near narcissistic emphasis on the development of oneself is an attribute researchers have more recently pinned on the Millennial generation—or as Twenge called them, GenMe. Congruently, Deal et al. point out that studies have verified this perception of narcissism increasing with Millennials.<sup>443</sup> They have cautioned that such studies are based around Millennials who were in 4-year college institutions at the time and thus aren't fully representative of the entire generation. This portrait of Millennials as self-involved is furthered by Twenge and Campbell, who conducted a time-lag study on personality traits to reveal elevated levels of narcissism and self-esteem in Millennial individuals.<sup>444</sup> Despite these apparent personality changes, Mintel gives cause to believe that fundamental value systems have not wavered. When asked what they would identify as the most crucial virtues an American should have, the top three answers for Boomers

were Integrity (77%), Compassion, (68%), and Work Ethic (63%) while Millennials put Compassion (65%), Integrity (59%), Work Ethic (55%).<sup>445</sup>

Generations contrast in their social relationships as well. Perhaps wrought by the prevalence of social media platforms within their generational consciousness, Millennials tend to be more willing to divulge and display personal information at the cost of their privacy.<sup>446</sup> It's not a stretch to suggest that social media also factors into the revelation that over half of Millennials curate the brands they wear to reinforce their desired self-image, more than about the third of Boomers who do so.<sup>447</sup> At the same time, Millennials appear to have a greater proclivity for resistance of social conventions than even Boomers did at their rowdiest age, which Twenge suggests is a potential result of the my-way-or-the-highway entitlement to which the Millennial identity is yoked.<sup>448</sup>

In the field of generational marketing, generation theory has been adapted to investigate the distinct inclinations and behaviors of consumers belonging to particular social generations. Charles D. Schewe et al. advise that marketers should include cohort influences among the Lifestage, Physiographics, Emotions/Affinities, and Socioeconomics factors integral to developing a successful marketing campaign.<sup>449</sup> Though he regrettably uses the term cohort in lieu of generation, they base their recommendation off the significance that “defining” crisis moments—imprints—hold in binding coevals together through their common experience on top of their common age. Such term overlap may obfuscate the book's meaning but not detract from its usefulness, for it details vital considerations marketers must make to more accurately predict the purchasing behavior of their consumer base.<sup>450</sup> Williams and Page agree with this assertion: "Age is composed of two things: lifestage and cohort. If you only look at age as a lifestage, you end up not getting it quite right."<sup>451</sup> They exemplify this understanding via the product of Viagra.



With each potential buyer in the same lifestage, the success of the marketing approach in persuading an actual purchase goes beyond simply addressing the realities of that lifestage. The Silent Generation, they argue, would respond best to an advertisement featuring doctor recommendations because Silents tend to respect authority figures.<sup>452</sup> For Boomers, a greatly informational message with an emphasis on vigor and an active lifestyle holds the most persuasive potential. A campaign which filters out unnecessary detail and foregrounds the bottom line of the product is most suitable for a Gen X audience. Ed Walker shares a similar interpretation of the value of generational marketing.<sup>453</sup> He asserts that a “comprehensive understanding of [the] attitudes and values” prevalent within a generational group is a necessary component of crafting a targeted and meaningful marketing strategy. In this way, a product can be communicated to an individual in a manner which appeals to the characteristic needs of their generational identity, thereby boosting the likelihood of purchase.

Yet more researchers affirm that shrewd marketing firms should account for crucial dissimilarities between generations and specialize their strategies accordingly. Dominant generational characteristics may make an individual belonging to a certain generation more favorably receptive to a particular advertisement style.<sup>454</sup> For example, Gen Xers are indifferent to marketing in general but not distrustful of it. Reminiscent of Schewe et al.’s judgement, Roberts and Manolis<sup>455</sup> attribute this to the realistic skepticism of the generation; they’re painfully aware that they’re being sold to, so that they’d rather the advertisement cut to the chase and spill how the product will make the consumer’s life better. Knowing that Xers are more predisposed to more straightforward campaigns than Boomers can give firms a strategic advantage.

For better or worse, mounting research is supportive of the mainstream perception that consumerism is blooming. The share of overall compulsive buying behavior (CBB) appears to have risen over the past few decades, from around 6% in 1989 to 10% in 2005 to 16.4% in 2017.<sup>456</sup> Using a prominent CBB screener developed by Faber and O’Guinn,<sup>457</sup> Roberts and Manolis confirmed that the increase was consistent across generations, but also that 11% of Xers could be considered compulsive whereas 7% of Boomers could be.<sup>458</sup> The overall rise visible in both generations speaks to the overarching culture that each is situated in, detailing how generational identities operate as subcultures rather than distinct entities. Furthermore, the degree of CBB across generations might be best explained by the age effect. Indeed, many researchers have noted that the prevalence of CBB minimizes as one ages.<sup>459</sup> The age effect is perhaps rooted in the maturational shift away from pecuniary and materialistic possessions as a significant source of happiness as one gradually accumulates such possessions.<sup>460</sup>

Shifting away from marketing and consumerism, Ronald Paul Hill spotlights the differences in the early educational environment each generation grew up with, which he suggests has carried forward into the workplace environment.<sup>461</sup> Boomers—per the nature of their eponymous population size—were modeled by overcrowded and strained school institutions where teachers exclusively praised top-performers and little league coaches benched under-performers. Ronald Paul Hill argued that Boomer classes were perceived as an “undifferentiated mass of humanity” unless singular individuals proved they were better than the best.<sup>462</sup> On the other hand, Millennials were not spared crowded classrooms, but an obvious shift in the treatment of students left this generation with a unique relationship with education. They were allowed to progress through early development systems during curricular and extra-curricular hours that accommodated their individual needs, lauded input effort more so than

output result, and bred compassionate teamwork instead of competitive advancement. Such an educational environment experienced in their formative years has, by extension, oriented adult Millennials' measures of success and motivation inward rather than outward.<sup>463</sup> This research perspectives align with characterizations of Millennials as communal and teamwork-oriented while at the same time contest claims of individualism and narcissism. The reading of Millennials as endowed with a healthy, if undue, sense of confidence is supported by these researchers, however.

Alwin and Krosnick offer a look into the stability of sociopolitical attitudes across the separate generational identities.<sup>464</sup> They pinpoint that some differences in stabilization rates do exist between cohorts, but upon further analysis, they conclude that the age-stability hypothesis—that beliefs and attitudes crystallize in adolescence and remain relatively unchanged over the life course—is a more tenable explanation than generational effects. Another miscellaneous examination of cohort differences comes from Stockard and O'Brien, who investigated youth suicides.<sup>465</sup> Though it has a conceptualization of generation effects inconsistent with the present paper, it suggested a mild correlation between distinct—perhaps formative—characteristics of a cohort. For instance, it noted that cohorts with high rates of nonmarital births also happened to have higher rates of youth suicides.<sup>466</sup> Faulty as it may be, the study represents another in a long line of attempts to discern where and why meaningful generational divides exist—if at all.

## **Methodological Woes**

The many researchers who have aimed to uncover, once and for all, verifiable intergenerational variance have done so with an equally wide and mind-bogglingly variable

range of methodologies. The dense and incohesive review of literature in sections prior illustrate the rampant contradictions, mischaracterizations, and inconsistencies accompanying this scholarly pursuit. This lack of a neat—or even emergent—consensus on the types and degrees (and existence) of generational difference originates in the dissimilar theoretical understandings and methodological approaches visible throughout the robust field of generational studies. Much has been made of these conflicting methodologies and their effect on the credibility of the studies involved; a small but meaningful pool of contributors has suggested avenues for making these kinds of investigations more uniform, more rigorous, and ultimately more useful. This section details such acknowledgements and suggestions.

Frustrated with the abundant but messy findings which constituted his research of the field, Lyons et al. encapsulated the core pitfalls of extant generational research thusly, “There is little collective insight that can be gleaned from these cross-sectional studies, as they sample from different countries and industries (e.g., construction, municipal government, hospitality and manufacturing), use different measures, compare different ranges of generations and were conducted over the span of more than a decade.”<sup>467</sup> With this quote, they captured the essence of three veritable issues plaguing generational research: studies center on a scattered set of countries and industries, studies utilize inconsistent generational time frames, and studies rely on cross-sectional designs which may be truly indicative of age or period effects instead of generational effects.

A mere snapshot of the variability of the nations and vocational industries sampled for study was included in previous sections of this chapter. The trouble with drawing comparisons between generations via a mass of international research is obvious. The most fundamental requisite component of a Mannheimian social generation is generation location; the scope of

historical and cultural circumstances facing today's Americans are vastly different from those facing today's Chinese, just as they are different from the circumstances which impressed upon the experience of American and Chinese nationals who lived 200 years ago. The fine distinctions in habitus between domestic generations cannot be measured by looking to those which exist in cultures abroad, for the parameter of experience—generation location—created by their societal conditions are not equivalent. The easy fix, then, would be for researchers to evaluate the generational makeup of the society they plan to conduct their study in and only apply their specific findings to that particular society; aggregators of generational studies would need to adopt a similar practice, pulling together sources which pertain to the nation from which the generations they intend to examine sprout. As for industry, there is less cause to believe that identification of generational differences will lack credibility if studies pull from different sectors of the workforce. More intensive examination of generational differences across industries might instead produce substantive findings. Since a member of the Millennial social generation who works within the hospitality industry should share a relatively similar generational consciousness with another Millennial who works in the educational industry, determining how much of an effect the characteristics of the work itself has on perceived generational differences can help researchers root out true intergenerational variance.

The second concern highlights the immense incongruity of generational timelines. Further emblematic of methodological inconsistency is the unending volley of mismatched generational names of which even the most forefront contributors to generational research are guilty; we've seen Baby Buster<sup>468</sup> or Thirteenth<sup>469</sup> in place of Gen Xer, or the Echo Boom Generation<sup>470</sup> or GenMe<sup>471</sup> in place of the Millennial Generation. The variation in how generations are demarcated isn't much of a concern in the eyes of Jane Pilcher, the keen

resurrectionist of Mannheim's social generation theories. She wagers that the fuzziness inherent to generational boundaries which are not determined by biological timetables means that the start and end dates researchers tag onto their cohort definitions shouldn't matter too much so long as they approximately cover the same years.<sup>472</sup> Generational trends, if they exist, will prevail whether or not Boomers were first born in 1945 or 1946. Despite this, Lyons et al. notes that such inconsistencies make aggregation of data difficult.<sup>473</sup> Indeed, the inability for consensus on perhaps the most minor facet of generational research indicates just how broad the heterogeneity of the findings can be. For Urwin and Parry, standardization of generation boundaries is the first step in the facilitation of true confidence in the credibility of generational studies.<sup>474</sup>

The third and gravest issue hindering generational research is the overwhelming selection of cross-sectional designs as the comparison metric. Cross-sectional designs are problematic because they do not control for period or age effects. The widespread use of cross-sectional designs understandably stems from their relative ease, and Lyons et al. suggests that such designs are important contributions to the "fossil record" of generational research.<sup>475</sup> From that record, meta-analyses can begin to map data into a coherent and informative narrative about the nature of generational difference. Still, researchers point to the inability of cross-sectional designs to disentangle lifestage effects—among other identity markers which could also be confounded in their place—from the observed variance between generation groups as grounds to deem such a methodology insurmountably flawed.<sup>476</sup>

Two alternative methodologies are a superior approach to unambiguously discerning generational effects: time-lag studies and longitudinal studies. Remember that time-lag studies survey different participants in different time periods, but these participants are of similar age when they give their responses. Because the age and life stage are similar, these variables can be

ruled out as viable explanations for any differences that are found. Time-lag studies do not sufficiently control for period effects, however, unless comparisons are made across multiple periods in time. Urwin and Parry<sup>477</sup> point to Twenge and Campbell<sup>478</sup> as a commendable example of a “cross-temporal meta-analysis” of archival data over many points in time.

Longitudinal data can also control for age and period effects. This methodology goes one step further than the time-lag study, for it assesses the same participants over time. The advantage of the panel data that longitudinal research makes possible is that it can additionally address other demographic variables which may cloud the true effect generations have in cohort differences.

Indeed, the factors which produce intragenerational variance—such as gender,<sup>479</sup> ethnic group,<sup>480</sup> and region<sup>481</sup>—have been speculated to exert some influence on intergenerational variance.<sup>482</sup>

Longitudinal studies, wherein the same participants and thus the same composition of these other variables remain constant, can more reliably reveal the true extent of generational effects.

Efforts to resolve these three issues will help improve generational research and render its findings more credible. Cross-sectional designs are likely to remain the norm, however. At the least, refinements of this methodology can be made. Lyons et al.’s clarion call for more well-rounded data entails cross-sectional researchers clarifying: the time period the study was conducted in, any prevailing economic or historical conditions which may constitute a period effect, full demographic profiles on the participants, and information on the life stage of each participant—including parenthood, marital status, career stage, and academic degree.<sup>483</sup> While this reformed cross-sectional methodology is still not ideal, implementation of this approach would yield more fruitful and consistent findings which can then more thoroughly fulfill the purposes of generational research.

## **Part II Conclusion**

Chapter 1 presented brief overviews of each of the living generations which precede Generation Z: WWII Generation, Silent Generation, Baby Boomers, Gen X, and Millennials. Conventional wisdom, popular perceptions, and academic studies were utilized to formulate these generational profiles. The characteristics, values, tendencies, and imprints discussed point to the presence of a generational consciousness for each of the generations, but no clear or conclusive determination about the nature of their generational identities is made because no real consensus exists. At the least however, one can glean from the Profiles the general habitus that has been attributed to each generation over the years.

Chapter 2 explored existing generational research on how these generational profiles manifest within the workforce and other settings. Overall, the portrait of generational studies included throughout the sections illuminates the complexity of this research inquiry. Intergenerational similarities have been highlighted with as much frequency as intergenerational differences have been , and often the extent of these differences have been noted as moderate. Empirical results from these studies have also verified some components of a particular generation's profile while conflicting with other components; between studies, contradictions exist in which components are verified and which are contested. Generational research is further complicated by the prevalence of cross-sectional methodologies because age, period, and other demographic effects can be confounded with generational effects in these designs. Despite these complexities, within the workplace and across other facets of societal life such as consumerist behavior, the notion of intergenerational difference purported by the concepts of Mannheimian generational theory and generation succession seems to be supported. However, to make the nature and extent of these intergenerational differences more clear, strides must be made to



operate from a more uniform understanding of generations as well as to improve methodological designs which empirically examine generations as they interact with the world. Doing so will help make generational research a less nebulous field and make any related discourse more meaningful, with true takeaways for the real world more evident.

The information explored in these chapters is crucial to understanding the unique positions Generation Z inhabits in the ongoing landscape of the social process. Evaluating how the historical circumstances and societal make-up of their time have uniquely applied to each of the widely-recognized generation groups allows for a more accurate evaluation of how these same forces might influence Generation Z's distinct parameter of experience and their resultant habitus. The societal, cultural, and historical effects which Gen Z might inherit as native circumstance is visible in the depiction of these established generational identities, and this may make identification of unique imprint phenomena Gen Zers experience more accurate. Indeed, by knowing the typical characteristics of preceding generations, we're better equipped to distinguish the traits of this new age-group to determine if it truly forms a social generation. We're better equipped to speculate on the impacts this generation might have on the social process which cultivated its unique consciousness. Further, the portrait of how generational research is conducted and interpreted provides a strong foundation for future researchers who endeavor to accurately compare Gen Z's characteristics in empirical settings. For this study, it presents a useful model for gauging the validity of findings on intergenerational difference and conflict—whether real or perceived—within organizations, which is useful for the exploration of generational dynamics within activist groups that comes in the later Parts of this thesis.

With the profiles of previous generations' consciousnesses—and the similarities and differences between them—established, an appraisal of Generation Z's profile is the next step.

Even though the earliest Zers have only recently come of age, many researchers have already tried their hand at decoding America's newest cohort. Their determinations are explored in Part III. Additionally, I contextualize an integral facet of Gen Z's parameter of experience: the crisis of Climate Change.

## Part III: Enter Gen Z

Generation Z has become the darling of generational theorists and researchers, though many commentators have tried to plant their own moniker onto this most recent, emerging cohort. Many did so with the intention of capturing the distinctive consciousness its members harbor, hoping to etch the prevailing moods and conditions marking this generation into the cultural psyche by giving the fresh-faced age-group its own catchy name. After coining Millennials, the Strauss and Howe duo aimed for a repeat in the *Homeland Generation*; the credit actually goes to their readers, who in an online poll chose to commemorate the Department of Homeland Security in a symbolic gesture of the uncertain post-9/11 world to which Gen Z babies opened their eyes.<sup>484</sup> Once upon a time, necessity shackled this cohort with *Post-Millennials*, though thankfully they have since shuffled off the name.<sup>485</sup> *Multi-Gen* has been considered in honor of the dominance the prefix “Multi-” has over this generation’s experience, seen in multicultural and multiracial and multilingual and multimedia, and the *Pluralist Generation* aimed to pinpoint the same trend.<sup>486</sup> As shorthand for the gamification and connectivity inherent to this generation’s experience, *Generation Wii* emerged; apparently, however, Nintendo was loath to receive free marketing forever and insisted that “we’re all part of Gen Wii.”<sup>487</sup> In reference to Katniss Everdeen of the cultural behemoth *The Hunger Games*, the name *Gen K* likened the dystopian undercurrents purportedly defining this generation’s youth to the dystopia described in the book.<sup>488</sup> Similarly, *Gen Edge* in part signifies that this age-group is on edge in the unsteady, unforgiving world surrounding their upbringing.<sup>489</sup> Further, a handful of names have sought to strike the theme of digital technology: *Gen Tech*, *Net Gen*<sup>490</sup>, *Linksters*.<sup>491</sup> *Digital Natives* is the most forward of these, truly serving as a descriptor distinguishing those born in the midst of such

technology with those adjusting to it (digital immigrants, as Marc Prensky popularized it); it should be noted that Millennials have been considered digital natives too, but a more accurate representation of their technological experience would be digital pioneers, for they developed alongside such innovations and became their early adopters.<sup>492</sup>

The greatest among them, for its layered cleverness and instantaneous connotation, was *iGen*. So good, apparently, that multiple commentators—including resident generational theorist Jean Twenge, who used the term to title her recent book—have claimed credit for its origination.<sup>493</sup> However, giving that much credit to Steve Jobs and Apple, and thus potentially alienating all Android users, fell flat. None of these valiant attempts to succinctly categorize the generation in a flashy name have succeeded. The latest contender, *Zoomers*, is also the one with the most potential for a 9th inning upset. An ironic spin on Baby Boomers that at once draws on the phonetic uniqueness of the Roman alphabet’s last-but-not-least letter to which the generation’s already been linked, the youth and liveliness of a cohort of individuals in their physical prime, and the ubiquity of the video conferencing platform that rose above the rest in COVID-era America, this nickname is most likely to persist as an alternative moniker for generation in question. Even Merriam-Webster is keeping an eye on it.<sup>494</sup> What seems unlikely, though, is that the “Zoomer” label will displace the “Gen Z” label like “Millennial” did to “Gen Y.” For the present moment, and for this research paper in particular, “Gen Z” is the victor.

The name is the successor of Generation X, which was first passed down to the subsequent Millennial cohort in the form of *Gen Y* before “Millennial” stuck. This alphabetical naming game seems, on the surface, uninspired. It is, but some deeper meaning can be cultivated from *Generation Z* in a way which does point to its distinctive consciousness. As the last letter of the alphabet, Gen Z represents a culmination of modern society and modern technology. Marked

so heavily by the height of the Information Age, this cohort sits at the cusp of unbridled technological advancement. If they're digital natives, their successors will be digital descendants. Such rapid technological progress and concomitant cultural shifts might compress generational time spans and muddle generational identities; instead of distinctive personalities being cultivated across a decade or two, shared parameters of experience might be limited to just a handful of years.<sup>495</sup> It's this reason that some have given Gen Z the more overt label *The Final Generation*.<sup>496</sup> I'm not convinced that it will be the last generation, but it is certainly possible that Gen Z represents the last breed of cohort-generations as we know it. That is, the relatively consistent pattern of cohorts evolving into generations might not be possible. The relationship between historical and cultural circumstances and the emergent cohort just might not function the same way; the baseline realities of individuals within the same cohort but set just 6 years apart may be so sufficiently different as to obstruct the formation of a shared generational consciousness. Gen Z as a term of finality, then, is fitting. A new era, one in which our present understanding of generational theory will be tested, is on the horizon. For now, though, Generation Z is the puzzle to decipher.

And in keeping with generational research of decades past, no one can agree on the first step of deciphering that puzzle. Treated with variability in name, Gen Z has also been struck by variability in timespan and population estimates. Withholding a cutoff point for Generation Z, some have wagered that this cohort beginning in 1997 is 90 million strong, making it more than a fourth of the entire United States population.<sup>497</sup> On the lower end, with the cohort stretching from 1996 to 2010, estimates put the population at 65 million.<sup>498</sup> Trying to strike at the goldilocks range, the cohort spanning 1998 to 2016 holds 82 million members, just surpassing Millennials at 80 million to be the most populous cohort.<sup>499</sup> For the purposes of this paper,

however, the Pew Research Center's<sup>500</sup> demarcation years of 1997 to 2012 will be utilized to define the endpoints of the Gen Z cohort. It is notable, though, that consensus hasn't been reached in regards to the year to cut off Gen Z; often, demographic ranges are capped only when greater insight into the parameter of experience for the next cohort has been achieved. This is why Gen Z begins some few years before 9/11 instead of the arbitrary but attractive year of 2000. The end point for Gen Z will be finalized when the starting point for its successor, the tentatively named Gen Alpha, can be surmised. As a brief aside: the cohort following Gen Alpha better hope that the Greek alphabet naming scheme doesn't catch on. Whatever form internet culture takes by that time, it won't be pretty for them. For now, however, the year 2012 serves well enough as the final birth year for the rising cohort at the center of our focus: Generation Z.

It is clear that, despite the variability of its generational range and generational name, a concerted effort to capture the consciousness of the coming-of-age Gen Z has been in the works. From the proposed names alone, we've caught a glimpse at what the emerging profile of this new generation is. But what really are the traits and characteristics which define this generation's identity? And what influences have elevated this cohort—related by age and potentiality—to a generation related by common experience and actuality? These are the questions which comprise the inquiry focus of Part III.

Chapter 1 details traits, characteristics, and attitudes attributed to Gen Zers; essentially, it offers the Gen Z generational profile. Chapter 2 discusses the crucial imprint events which cemented for this cohort a shared *generational* identity, particularly by examining how such events have affected and shaped the characteristics portrayed in Chapter 1. In Chapter 3, the proposed imprint of Climate Change is analyzed in great depth, for it is a defining element of Gen Z's experience and shared generational consciousness that subsequent Parts of this paper

examines further. By this Part's end, I hope to establish that Gen Z is indeed a Mannheimian social generation, provide insight into the particular facets of their emergent generational consciousness, and foreshadow the probable ways in which Gen Z may act in accordance with that generational consciousness to exert social change.

## **Chapter 1: Gen Z Profile**

The Generation Z profile is fleshed out via commentaries, observations, and studies offered by various researchers. Most analysts have viewed Gen Z through a marketing or educational lens, wherein they try to determine the consumer habits and learning styles of the age-group. Because only the very earliest Gen Zers are exiting the school system and entering the workforce full-time, limited research has been conducted on how their personas manifest within the workplace. Moreover, few studies have centered on the ways in which this generational persona clashes or aligns with the generational identities portrayed by predecessor generations in the workplace, though some have tried their hand.<sup>501</sup> Greater research in these areas will undoubtedly come as more Zers enter into the job market, and hopefully such research will be in keeping with the methodology recommendations outlined in Part II to yield more fruitful findings. Namely, to examine empirical generational differences through substantive longitudinal designs—or, less preferably but more practically, time-lag designs.

The purpose of this chapter is not to draw comparisons between Gen Z and prior generations, however. It is to hone in on the emergent characteristics which define this generation's experience and inform its consciousness. As a result, survey-based research is primarily included. While these quantitative study designs would be problematic in an attempt to juxtapose Gen Z with other generations, they're useful as isolated snapshots of the qualities

belonging to Gen Z specifically. Some of these qualities might be wholly distinct from those prior generations possessed, or they might overlap with such attributed aspects. In the cases where researchers note such distinctions or similarities, I will do the same. Differences or a lack thereof should be cautiously interpreted, though, because of the possibility of age or period effects serving as the true causative factors. Regardless, the spotlight is on the developing habitus which belongs to this coming-of-age Generation Z, and the available pool of self-response surveys suffice as a preliminary investigative tool.

The traits will be distinguished by sections headed by an apt descriptor of that trait. Some of the key facets of Generation Z include digital nativism, pragmatism, financial astuteness, and socially conscious activism. The nature of these traits is discussed, but Chapter 2 goes into more depth about their explanations and influences.

## **Digital Native**

The ubiquity and dominance of digital technology for Gen Z is best captured in their relationships to smartphones. The many researchers who have studied this offer staggering statistical data to showcase the presence smartphones have in Zers' lives. The Center for Generational Kinetics<sup>502</sup> finds that 95% of Gen Zers say they own a smartphone, a finding corroborated by Pew Research Center.<sup>503</sup> Zers' access to smartphones, perhaps owned by their parents or older siblings, is even higher at 98%.<sup>504</sup> The ubiquity of this device is invariable of household income; whereas 25% of households with incomes less than 30k a year don't have a computer for their teenager, only 7% of teenagers from households of the same income bracket do not have access to a smartphone.<sup>505</sup> And Zers are using digital technology to connect with each other in about the same numbers, for 92% of the generation maintain some social media



presence.<sup>506</sup> Perhaps it is this connectivity which drives the dominance of digital technology, particularly smartphones, in their young lives. Pew's 2018 survey of Zers teens revealed that 89% used their phone at least several times a day.<sup>507</sup> 55% of Zers teens utilize their phones for more than five hours in a day.<sup>508</sup> In that same study, they wager that a fourth of Zers are attached at the hip with their personal cell phone, spending at least 10 hours with it. That number increases when other devices such as laptops and desktops are taken into account, with about half (46%) of Gen Z spending 10 or more hours online in some capacity.<sup>509</sup> A portion of this time, at least two hours, is devoted to the video sharing platform YouTube, one of the most beloved apps marking this generation's experience.<sup>510</sup> Indeed, even the youngest Zers in elementary school have a strong tie to their smartphones, with over half of elementary school students noting that they use such devices regularly.<sup>511</sup> A Visual Capitalist<sup>512</sup> infographic asserts that 80% of Gen Zers become distressed when their access to their digital devices are limited.

Life for Zers, it seems, is fundamentally defined by virtual networks and online connection. Their milieu is not solely digital, but a great deal of it is. This is particularly distinctive because this generation, entirely born after the internet and the World Wide Web, has been rooted in this digital landscape from their births. Clearly, their day-to-day habits and the way they spend their free time is heavily centered on internet usage. And from this generation, there is nearly universal recognition that routine tasks are made easier via the technology at their fingertips.<sup>513</sup> It's likely why the way Gen Z learns is changing. A national report commissioned by Pearson in 2015 found that 82% of elementary through high school students believed incorporation of tablets into classroom instruction helped them to learn in a way that was best for them; similarly, 89% of these students say that digital devices make learning more fun, and 81% wager that it helps students to do better.<sup>514</sup> With such an intense acclimation to the digital space,

this generation's hyper-active usage of technology bleeds beyond academic resources.

Researchers note the many distinct ways Gen Z utilizes internet technology: search engines and how-to videos for information; social media, text messengers, contacts, photos, organization tools, and more for connection with their environment and their peers.<sup>515</sup> Often, Gen Z's usage of these different technological facets comes in quick succession or, more likely, at the same time. One commentator actually sees the 'Z' in Gen Z as short for 'Zap' because such a term is indicative of their digital prowess, wherein they can effortlessly hop from one device to another—from mp3 players to tablets, smartwatches to virtual reality headsets, social media to video game consoles, television sets to touchscreen desktops—without a second thought.<sup>516</sup>

Digital technology is irrevocably a part of life for Gen Z, and interaction with such technology is second nature. The rise of mobile formats, which Gen Z is uniquely native to and which has recently surpassed desktop formats to become the most prominent way to access the internet<sup>517</sup>, has increased the ability for Gen Z to remain “always on” and “always wired.”<sup>518</sup> This characterization of Gen Z as always connected is accompanied with some crucial implications. Technologies linked with the internet, and Gen Z's relentless usage of them, affords members of this generation a degree of networking power with diverse communities far outside their own locality. Their online connections can extend around the globe, revealing a wealth of information and cultural experiences from most every corner of the Earth that can be instantaneously accessed.<sup>519</sup> This social reality, so deeply etched in Zers' adolescence, represents a key distinction between the historical conditions marking Generation Z and those marking previous generations. The intense immersion into a digital world might be why Gen Z pays attention to privacy measures; 87% say that social media likes and shares aren't worth

compromising one's privacy, and 66% report that they have changed privacy settings on their social media apps.<sup>520</sup>

Certainly, Generation Z is digitally literate. The aforementioned evidence might even support the claim of digital obsession in Gen Z. The effect of Zers' relationship to digital tech on Zers' social relationships to each other has been, though understandably, investigated ad nauseum. The reasonable intuition that in-person social skills and connections would degrade as a result of digital dominance has been championed by Twenge and other generational theorists.<sup>521</sup> However, certain researchers contest this notion and instead claim that Generation Z still overwhelmingly prefers face-to-face communication over any technological substitute.<sup>522</sup> This has been observed in older Zers' forays into work settings, wherein surveys find three in four prefer face-to-face feedback from their employers.<sup>523</sup> This preference is not limited to professional environments. A Mintel survey<sup>524</sup> found that the top leisure activities which adult Gen Zers listed at any rank were as follows: 48 percent chose physically hanging out with friends, movies/TV in second with 41 percent, and console video games at 35 percent. Building off of this, face-to-face interaction has not fallen to the wayside because of expanded modes of communication but has instead become the most esteemed mode for this generation. In her survey,<sup>525</sup> Noreena Hertz found that 80% of Zers preferred in-person hangouts to online or virtual ones.

### **Multi-taskers**

Perhaps stemming from the digital nativism which enables Gen Zers to zap from device to device with ease, multitasking is an attribute scholars have identified in this generation. In fact, some have envisaged Gen Z's mastery of multi-tasking as its most distinctive characteristic,

suggesting that this skill demonstrates the ability to process and prioritize streams of information much faster than previous generations could.<sup>526</sup> Related to this characterization but far less positive are discussions about this generation's attention span. North American attention spans, as a whole, have decreased from 12 seconds in 2000 to eight seconds by 2015<sup>527</sup>; The findings of this widely publicized report stood out because it offered the revelation that we now had shorter attention spans than goldfish (nine seconds). Gen Zers, who traversed childhood during the specified years, are starting off at the eight second threshold.<sup>528</sup> Flooded with streams of digital media, their cognition is rapid-fire but their concentration is fleeting. Some have suggested that these circumstances have affected the way Gen Z's brains have developed, forcing marketers to go "bite-sized" with their advertisements if they want any hope of reaching the unfocused, hyperactive multi-taskers that are Gen Z.<sup>529</sup>

There are detractors, however, who do not subscribe to the notion that Americans—and by extension, Gen Zers—have forsaken their robust focusing power. Noting that the actual methodology utilized by the initial report to obtain those conclusions was—perhaps intentionally—obscured, such detractors additionally rebut the claims that even goldfish have such dismal attention spans.<sup>530</sup> They point to a century of neuroscience research which affirms that goldfish are model subjects for memory and retention studies, so their attention spans—and, frankly, intelligence—have been unduly insulted.

So while no rigorously-attained proof can point to a reduction in attention span for Gen Z, the rampant digitalization persisting throughout their lives suggests the plausibility of the claim. The generation's knack for multi-tasking is another interesting characteristic posited, if not universally recognized, by generational pundits.

## Diversity and Open-mindedness

An uncontested attribute of the Generation Z experience is diversity. As of 2018, nearly half (48%) of the cohort is non-white and about a quarter of the cohort is comprised of Hispanics.<sup>531</sup> For comparison, 18 percent of Boomers were non-white in the late 1960s and 32% of Millennials were non-white in the early 2000s. Indeed, Generation Z is growing up in a less ethnically homogenous America, for whites now account for less than a majority of new births according to the Census Bureau.<sup>532</sup> The make-up of the modern family continues to change, too. From 2000 to 2010, black-white marriages increased 134 percent and white-Asian marriages increased 87 percent.<sup>533</sup> Gen Zers are not only more likely to find diversity in their community growing up but also more likely to come from a diverse, mixed-race family than members of prior generations.

Indeed, the diversity prevalent in the Gen Z experience extends beyond ethnicity. Differences in sexuality and gender are more apparent in Gen Z's youth than with previous generations.<sup>534</sup> A third of Zers reported to a *Business Insider* survey<sup>535</sup> that they knew someone who went by a gender-neutral pronoun. Their exposure to diverse lifestyles, subcultures, and individuals is undeniable. And their parameter of experience is marked by powerful markers of diversity, each of which signaled a greater push toward inclusiveness and equality within society. Before any Zer became a teenager, America's first black president swore an oath to the Constitution. Before any Zer reached legal drinking age, a woman became the Democratic presidential nominee and snagged the popular vote by a couple million votes. And on the eve of the 46th anniversary of the Stonewall riots, the Supreme Court legalized gay marriage in all 50 states. These instances helped normalize diversity for this generation, making the possibility of a

black or female president and love-based matrimony more of a reality. They were reflections of the diversity that Gen Z already considered second-nature.<sup>536</sup>

For Zers, the most shocking thing about each of those events is that they happened within their lifetime rather than much sooner. Researchers find that diversity is incredibly valued by Zers; it's not merely tolerated or accepted, it is expected.<sup>537</sup> This is the essence of their generally open-minded approach to diversity. Growing up in a society cognizant and celebratory of the acute differences that exist between persons and peoples, their treatment of others is programmed with a certain level of respect and tolerance. The American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers<sup>538</sup> expands on this notion, affirming that Gen Zers "understand and recognize intersectionality and individuality and dislike being labeled." It's why 70% of Zers see themselves as open-minded.<sup>539</sup> And that open-mindedness is apparent in many ways. Anti-bullying campaigns have taken on active roles in Generation Z's educational experience in ways they didn't during previous generations' youth, bringing to Zers a great awareness of acceptance practices.<sup>540</sup> 48% of Zers believe that same-sex marriage being legal is good for society while only 15% believe it to be bad for society<sup>541</sup>, and a majority believe that identification options on personal information forms should not be limited to just male or female.<sup>542</sup> The fluidity of selfhood is ingrained within Gen Z's experience, much more so than any prior generation.

To fairly play devil's advocate, not all commentators agree with this perception of Zers as open-minded. A Harris poll conducted on behalf of the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) discovered that among 18 to 34-year-olds in the years 2016 to 2018, acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals has actually decreased.<sup>543</sup> The survey specifically found that at least a third of respondents in that age-group were uncomfortable with finding out that a child's teacher, their own family relative, or personal doctor were queer. It should be clarified,

however, that the 18-34 age bracket consists primarily of Millennials, with only the very oldest of Gen Z included. Still, whether this decline is attributable to the prior generation or the present generation, it is a sobering revelation for a society which mostly seemed to be progressing toward greater open-mindedness. Additionally, the “OK Boomer” incident, which purportedly ended friendly generational relations in the eyes of the *New York Times*’ Taylor Lorenz<sup>544</sup>, might be another indication of Gen Z’s limited capacity for tolerance. That Zers should be open-minded to what they perceive to be dogmatic, old-fashioned mindsets in their Boomer counterparts and thus should refrain from using such a term is itself a consideration without an easy answer. The bitterness and dismissiveness wrapped up in that word’s invocation may be an exertion of this emergent generation’s vision for the world, one which has no time for the anachronistic habitus of elder generations. More likely, however, its popularity among Zers is a product of the voracious internet meme culture which inexorably binds together Generation Z, for better or worse. Its eternal strength, and gravest Achilles’ heel.

Overall, though, the depiction of Gen Z as open-minded remains healthy. The overwhelming interpretation that the generation appreciates the profound diversity inherent in its demographics—from deeper awareness of ethnic backgrounds to possible reconceptualization of mental illnesses as neurodiversity and physical disabilities as physiodiversity—seems to be another defining characteristic. At the least, the presence of such profound diversity is indisputable. Indeed, there was never a time in Gen Zers’ lives where diversity was not a normal, celebrated facet of life.<sup>545</sup>

## **Most Educated**

Generation Z is going to become the most formally educated generation to date, continuing the trend extended by each prior generation. Various scholars have tried to gauge just how many Gen Zers teens have their sights set on college. The Center for Generational Kinetics's survey provides the estimate of 86 percent of pre-college Zers planning to enroll.<sup>546</sup> Others offer a more conservative estimate of 82 percent planning to go to college, though 75 percent of these Zers recognize that it is not the only viable path forward after high school graduation.<sup>547</sup> Pew Research Center offers actual enrollment numbers of college-aged Zers, finding that 57% attended college in 2018, up from 52% of Millennials in 2002.<sup>548</sup> It's unsurprising that the volume of follow-through did not coincide with intentions, but it's nonetheless reassuring that most Gen Z are pursuing the educational avenue they feel is best for them.

In preparation for Gen Zers' entrance into secondary education, some scholars have pinpointed common elements of this generation's learning style. Though the influence of digital technology has shaped the traditional classroom, Zers still prefer interpersonal learning to online education.<sup>549</sup> Further, they prefer to learn by doing rather than being lectured to and desire clear and consistent feedback so that they can course correct.<sup>550</sup> To effectively tap into their digital nativist side and engage them in the curriculum, Angela Guzman Palacios<sup>551</sup> recommends the gamification and virtualization of some content.

Despite new ways of learning, Gen Z still values traditional education and carries on the pattern of each successive generation becoming the most college-educated.



## Determined

Another trait Zers have been branded with is determination. There is a great deal of emphasis on success for this generation, and as such, a vigorous sense of determination to reach success. In a 2019 Mintel survey, 74% of Boomers and 64% of Millennials agreed that it was “okay to be average” whereas only 58% of Gen Z adults found mediocrity acceptable.<sup>552</sup> Further, 92% of Gen Zers believe that their parents expect them to succeed in academic and career pursuits; the same percentage wants to make their family proud. These statistics shed light on Gen Z’s particular attitude toward success. They’re presented as pressured yet determined, driven to break the mold of the ordinary and achieve something greater.

Harkening back to the elevated college enrollment rates of this generation, perhaps it is a mix of this elevated parental expectation, pronounced determination, and current societal norms which impelled this generation to graduate high school and attend college more so than its predecessors. Though many factors are at play, the marginal increase in high school graduation—80% for Zers in 2018 against 76% for Millennials in 2002 and 78% for Xers in 1986—might serve as an indication of this purported determination.<sup>553</sup> Corey Seemiller and Meghan Grace<sup>554</sup> believe so, portraying Gen Z as tenacious and strong-willed individuals prone to take charge and put the burden of success on their own shoulders. Additionally, she reports that seven in ten Zers see themselves as responsible, crediting the near-universal involvement with chores as one such activity which helped cultivate this inclination toward responsibility.<sup>555</sup> Of course, one would naturally expect few respondents to blast themselves as irresponsible and fewer still to have been freed from the childhood duty of housework. Despite this, such findings at least support that Gen Zers shared a common foundation with respect to tasks honing responsibility and diligence, though Zers are hardly unique in having chores thrust upon them.

This determined mindset, forged with early experiences and strengthened over time for Gen Z adolescents, may very well carry on into the workplace. Findings point to 77% of Gen Zers expecting to work harder than other generations.<sup>556</sup> 75% also want to take on more responsibility in the organization by taking up more than one role. These statistics further substantiate the conceptualization of Gen Zers as motivated, capable individuals. Indeed, four in five Zers say that they are more driven than their peers.<sup>557</sup> This speaks to a competitive nature to go along with their determination, a quality which Gen Zer Josh Miller<sup>558</sup> believes is epitomized in this generation's attitude toward winning. Fueled by childhoods dominated with parents flinging insults at youth sports referees from the sidelines, Zers are well acclimated to competitive arenas and have thus developed a craving for victory and accolades. Likewise, researchers have argued that this generation holds to the belief that it is hard work which will bring them to the doorstep of success.<sup>559</sup> As such, they are motivated to perform and win. Often, they'll perceive the losses of others as triumphs for themselves.<sup>560</sup>

These two fundamental pillars of determination, reverence for success and recognition of the tireless effort needed to achieve it, are distinctly positive qualities many researchers have seen in Gen Z. The combination of these traits is likely a contributor to the entrepreneurial temperament which many more researchers have pegged this generation with; this temperament will be explored in a later section.

## **Pragmatic**

Every generation has experienced hardship in their formative years, but many scholars argue that the heightened volatility and uncertainty which accompanied Gen Z's development has left them with a keen pragmatism. This characteristic isn't too surprising given that Gen Z is

primarily parented by Gen Xers, the original cynics. Zers, regardless of the historical conditions facing them, would always have grown up with a more clear-eyed, less idyllic worldview.<sup>561</sup> Indeed, Willard and Whitt<sup>562</sup> note that Gen Z are distinguished from Millennials in this respect, for their perspective is not bogged down with an overzealous entitlement. It's why some speculate that Gen Z is practical instead of optimistic when they enter the workforce.<sup>563</sup> And for these realists, work might not constitute their life's purpose but serves as the means for acquiring the necessary resources to make a comfortable living.<sup>564</sup> Remember, research on Gen Z in the workforce is sparse because so few have begun their careers; how Zers' sense of pragmatism manifests on the job, if at all, will be a sure focus of generational studies moving forward.

Other research affirms the extent of Gen Z's pragmatism, perhaps indicating a prevalent cynicism as well. Noreena Hertz<sup>565</sup> points to research stating only 10% of Zers trust the government to do the right thing, half that of Millennials. When it comes to corporations, Zers are even less trusting: 6% trust capitalist conglomerates to do the right thing, a fraction of the 60% of all adults who believe so. This collective distrust, apparently greater than that of previous generations, casts Gen Z as hard-boiled realists. When asked about their optimism for the future, 60% of Gen Zers affirmed that they were optimistic while 89% of Millennials claimed optimism.<sup>566</sup>

The "appreciation for pragmatism" present in Gen Z might, in part, guide much of their attitudes and perceptions regarding various aspects of life—especially as they emerge from the educational system and catapult into the responsibilities of adulthood.<sup>567</sup> A realistic lens, instead of a rose-colored one, for this generation.

## Financially Conscious

First and foremost, the chief influence on this characteristic has widely been recognized as the Great Recession. That imprint event will be discussed more thoroughly in Chapter 2. This section will specifically hone in on some of the lingering ramifications of that imprint: the characterization of Gen Z's outlook on finance. Indeed, there have been many ways to frame Gen Z's relationship with money, with most of these descriptions striking at the same theme: financially conscious, financially conservative, financially pragmatic, etc. Their commercial savviness, wherein Zers exercise influence on brands through their social media shares and likes, has been pinpointed as a dimension of this financial conscientiousness.<sup>568</sup> Self-described financial conservatism has been another telltale sign scholars have picked up on, with an empirical survey showcasing 8 in 10 Zers identify themselves in such a manner.<sup>569</sup> The most prominent behavior which has earned Gen Z their image of financial conscientiousness, however, is their financial planning habit.

Early in their adolescence, Zers were pulling out the spreadsheets. The average age most began planning their financial futures is said to be 13-years-old, and more than 89% of Zers feel empowered when they do this sort planning.<sup>570</sup> The M.O.O.D Survey—Measuring Optimism, Outlook, and Direction—found in 2016 that nearly two-thirds of Generation Z have begun to research on their own or reach out to their parents for fiscal understanding.<sup>571</sup> That same year, over half of all Gen Zers owned savings and checking accounts, and almost a third had a credit card filling out their wallet.<sup>572</sup> *Forbes* surveyed Zers to find that 57% aged 7 to 13 preferred to save the money they received rather than spend it right away.<sup>573</sup> Additional surveys reinforce the notion that Zers are more cautious and prudent with their spending, intensely regulated by cost-benefit analysis.<sup>574</sup> And often, money is on Zers' minds more than other facets of life. Self-

respondents noted that their top priorities included securing a job (74%), graduating college (74%), and saving money for the future (71%) whereas spending time with friends and families fall in at 59% and 65%, respectively.<sup>575</sup>

This focus on financial planning is heightened when it comes to college tuition and student loans, staple features of a life stage which most Gen Zers are beginning to enter. The condition of student loan debt in America gives Zers ample cause to be so concerned with their financial futures. Average student loan balance per borrower increased 6% to \$35,620 in 2019, which is nearly double that of student loan debt in the year 2007.<sup>576</sup> And eclipsing the number of borrowers belonging to other generations, a third of Millennials carry student loan debt.<sup>577</sup> Zers have grown up with the headlines which detailed the crippling debt students have taken on to pay for the increasing cost of college, so they're intent on avoiding the same mistakes. Nearly a quarter of Gen Zers believe that personal debt should not be incurred in any form for any item, slightly more than Millennials who believe so.<sup>578</sup> Those researchers point out that these numbers are interesting because Millennials have the benefit of hindsight to inform such belief while Gen Zers do not. Additionally, 70% of Gen Zers see student loans specifically as an inhibitor to saving for their future, further demonstrating a healthy financial pragmatism in this generation. Indeed, the top priority of their job search is competitive pay (72%) while inspiring work (64%) falls in second place.<sup>579</sup>

These attributions are for a generation which has grown up in a more financially favorable time, by some metrics, than prior generations did. Adjusted median household income was \$63,700 in 2018 compared to \$42,000 for Boomers in 1968.<sup>580</sup> While at first glance the level of relative affluence seems to be incongruent with Zers' palpable financial conscientiousness, the economic growth experienced in their childhood years is notably subdued. For Millennials in

2002, the median income was \$62,400.<sup>581</sup> Income increased steadily in the years between when Boomers were in their youth to when Millennials were youth; In contrast, income has been mostly stagnant from the time of Millennial youth to present day, when Gen Zers are in their youth. The lack of significant strides in economic well-being during their lifetime may have contributed to Gen Z's predilection for financial conservatism.

Overall, the claim that Gen Z is financially conscious is well-supported. The Center for Generational Kinetics<sup>582</sup> notes, however, that 62% of the Zers they surveyed expect a pay raise within the first nine months on the job. This could reveal, beyond a latent sense of entitlement, that Zers are not entirely realistic about their financial situations. Still, early generational research seems clear. As Gen Zers progress through their lifecourse and traverse financial milestones, a more conclusive determination can be made.

## **Entrepreneurial**

Another popular characteristic observers have attributed to Gen Z is their entrepreneurialism. Heavily linked with their financially-conscious trait, this characteristic entails the innovative, ambitious, business-oriented tendencies of Generation Z. The determination characteristic previously discussed in this chapter is also interrelated with entrepreneurialism. Gen Z's penchant hard work and ambitious expectations are additional factors stirring the entrepreneurial spirit many researchers have identified.<sup>583</sup> To be fair, Generation Z is situated during a time in history when the opportunity to be entrepreneurial has never been more unobstructed. The internet, and the self-education resources it gives access to, is a part of this. Also helping to energize Gen Z's entrepreneurial passion are intensive internship programs targeted at high school students, such as those offered by Microsoft and Lockheed

Martin; the Thiel Fellowship, which awards \$100,000 to over a dozen young entrepreneurs who want to shepherd their businesses instead of trudging through years of college, is another avenue available only in Generation Z's youth.<sup>584</sup>

While it may be easier to chase the entrepreneurial dream, attribution of this trait cannot be authentic unless Gen Zers actually *want* to chase that entrepreneurial dream. A flood of data more than suggests they do. Various studies lend that claim credence with their findings: 72% of high schoolers and 64% of college students (Gen Zers) want to run their own business as entrepreneurs;<sup>585</sup> 77% of students in grades 5-12 want to be their own boss and 45% wish to be so in a company they created;<sup>586</sup> 55% of Gen Zer adults want to create their own business;<sup>587</sup> 62% of Zers born in 2003 and earlier would rather carve out their own business rather than work for one already established in the marketplace;<sup>588</sup> 58% desire to be entrepreneurs;<sup>589</sup> nearly half of Gen Zer teens plan to be business-owners.<sup>590</sup> The numbers are varied, but the results compellingly depict a generation distinguished with entrepreneurial destiny. For those who are inclined to the entrepreneurial mindset, they appear to be *extremely* inclined to it. This doesn't necessarily translate into an intense drive for everyone to follow through with these desires, but Gen Z may come to be defined by the innovations and groundbreaking businesses they'll inevitably spearhead.

Some Gen Zers have begun early. Recalling again the "OK Boomer" fiasco, Gen Z did demonstrate a knack for entrepreneurialism when the generational debate heated up. Opportunist Zers manufactured and sold merchandise which reimagined iconic logos with the infamous phrase.<sup>591</sup> In utilizing the unique means available to them, many of those Zers were able to sleep soundly knowing that they made a dent in their impending college tuition expenses. *Newsweek*, in their recent analysis of Generation Z, offered another example in Ella Dana, a young creative

who cemented a stable place in the gig economy by building a strong presence on social media.<sup>592</sup> Her experience sheds light on why many Zers aim to create their own businesses and, more importantly, become their own bosses. Invoking clear-eyed pragmatism, she was driven to create her own business in the midst of her college tenure because she knew that no one could offer greater security and control of her financial fate than herself. She disavows the belief that office 9-to-5 jobs are stable because, at any point, an employer could decide to downsize or restructure.<sup>593</sup>

A mix of financial conscientiousness, determination, and pragmatism has worked with favorable circumstances and favorable opportunities to breed a fervent entrepreneurial spirit in Gen Z.

## **Mental Health**

A more concerning feature of Gen Z is their struggle with mental health. Undoubtedly, the reduced stigmatization around mental illnesses and mental health issues might contribute to an overexaggerated portrait of Gen Z's struggles because more individuals are more willing to be forthright. And, since most Gen Zers are still teenagers, an age effect of emotional volatility should be noted as a possible explanation. Bearing these influences in mind, Generation Z has been portrayed as a troubled lot in more ways than one.

In 2018, 91% of Gen Zers reported some emotional or physiological stress-related symptom.<sup>594</sup> Psychiatrists Mojtabai, Olfson, and Han have found that depressive symptoms have increased in adolescents in the past decade, particularly within the range of age 12 to age 20.<sup>595</sup> Conducting a striking survey on stress in America, the American Psychological Association (APA) discovered that Gen Zers are the least likely to report excellent or very good mental



health with only 45% doing so; this is compared to Millennials at 56%, Xers at 51%, and Boomers at 70%.<sup>596</sup> Further, 68% of Gen Zers feel stressed about the country's future.<sup>597</sup> On the bright side, however, 7 in 10 Zers feel hopeful about their own personal futures.

Once again, while some of these numbers are likely to stem from the more tolerant era Gen Zers were born into, wherein mental health issues are more normalized, they also stem from how stressful it is to come-of-age in such a volatile era.<sup>598</sup> In Chapter 2, the factors which might be stressing Gen Zers out are spotlighted.

### **Risk-averse**

Another side to Generation Z is their risk-aversion. For commentators like Twenge<sup>599</sup>, this trait is indicative of their childhoods bleeding deep into young adulthood; she makes the claim that Gen Z is less mature than prior generations. Drawing on the Monitoring the Future surveys of high school students, she finds trends which evince these immature or risk-averse characteristics, and she frames them against the backdrop of the iPhone's release in 2007. She noted that Gen Z teenagers are going out with their friends less; as a damning demonstration of this, she pointed out that in 2015, high school seniors hit the town fewer times in a week than 8th graders did in 2009.<sup>600</sup> She argues that with less need to go out—since social networks can be maintained on the nearest wi-fi connected gadget—Gen Zers are putting off getting their driver's license. Indeed, 16-year-olds equipped with a license to rev have dropped from 48% in 1983 to just 25% in 2016.<sup>601</sup> For 19-year-olds, the disparity remained: 87.3% possessed them in 1983 compared to 69.5% in 2010.<sup>602</sup>

Dating for teens has dropped across all grade levels, too.<sup>603</sup> This has corresponded to a marginal but clear decline in sexual activity in the past few decades, which has worked with

expanded sex education and greater accessibility to contraceptives to help curb teenage pregnancy rates.<sup>604</sup> The number of Zer teens who have dabbled with alcohol was 66% in 2013, down from the heights of 82% that Xers brought them to in 1991; substance abuse has also declined.<sup>605</sup> Rising alongside the purchases of the original iPhone, Twenge stresses, is the loneliness plaguing this generation.<sup>606</sup> Inversely, she finds the number of teens able to get more than 7 hours of sleep has plummeted in the past two decades. Overall, it seems, this generation is more averse to the traditional markers of maturity and independence than previous generations. This aspect of Zer identity falls in line with the cyclical generational theory posited by Strauss & Howe, for Gen Z is supposed to be a redux of the famously don't-rock-the-boat Silent Generation.<sup>607</sup>

They are, additionally, averse to working in their teenage years. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that at least a majority of teens (ages 16-19) in the 1980s and 1990s worked a job compared to roughly 35 percent of teens in 2019.<sup>608</sup> For high school seniors unencumbered by transportation and age limits, the drop was just as pronounced: three-fourths of seniors worked part-time in the 70s while just little more than half of seniors did in the mid-2010s.<sup>609</sup> Indeed, the peak of teen labor participation was 58% in 1979.<sup>610</sup> The explanation for this trend is not that Gen Zers are lazy, however. It's that their stacked priorities and busy schedules do not allow for working part-time jobs in adolescence. The highly competitive nature of college admissions—wherein academic achievement and extra-curricular well-roundedness is rewarded by universities more so than part-time employment at a sandwich shop—has primed Gen Zers intending to go into college to spend time on the activities which will facilitate their enrollment into the best schools.<sup>611</sup> Contrary to Twenge's view, this generation *is* grinding, but they're doing so with scholastic projects and responsibilities rather than in a summer job. In fact, the number of

students who completed high school with three years of hard sciences under their belt nearly tripled from 1982 to 2009.<sup>612</sup> 40% had at least three years of foreign language in 2009, which has increasingly become a base requirement for the highest distinctions and scholarships, compared to 15% in 1982. In 2015, nearly 45% of students were enrolled for summer courses; only 10% were in 1985.<sup>613</sup> Clearly, young Zers are far too stretched thin as it is to take on jobs. Indeed, the most prominent reason Gen Zers aged 13-21 cited for not having a job is that they simply don't have the time.<sup>614</sup> Another notable explanation for the decline in labor participation rate among teens is the fact that immigrants, college graduates, retirees, and adult workers in general have been competing for these same jobs since the two major economic contractions of the 2000s decade.<sup>615</sup>

In some ways, Generation Z is noticeably more risk-averse than prior generations were during their youthful periods. The cause for at least some of that risk-aversion and apparent postponement of traditional markers of maturity, though, isn't laziness or unenthusiasm.

### **Political Leanings**

No generation leans entirely to one side of the political spectrum, but this generation interestingly has qualities which can reasonably incline them toward both sides. For a conservative bend, 18% of Millennials and 26% of Boomers reported attending religious services regularly during young adulthood; 41% of Gen Zers report doing so.<sup>616</sup> Additionally, the risk-averseness and financial cautiousness which has been identified in this generation align with the conservative mindset.<sup>617</sup> Though they might be toying with substances less, Zers display social liberalism in their support for marijuana legalization.<sup>618</sup> Their documented acceptance for diversity additionally aligns them with the left side of the spectrum. Nothing better illustrates

how politically mixed Gen Zers are than a 2019 survey which depicted an even split between those identifying as conservative and those identifying as liberal, with each side attracting 25% of Zers.<sup>619</sup> The remainder either either didn't know which way they leaned, didn't want to say which way they leaned, or were more centrist.

Beyond political leanings, political engagement is an attribute which researchers are studying in Gen Z. Pew reported that in the first midterm in which they were able to vote, nearly a third of Gen Zers cast a ballot.<sup>620</sup> While their turnout was the lowest of all generations in 2018, indicative of the well-known age effect that sees most youth voters ignore their democratic privileges at the ballot booths, Gen Z's participation rate exceeded that of Millennial and Gen X voter during their first midterms—23% was the turnout for each. Further, a study by Irregular Labs—albeit an international one—pointed to the importance of political engagement for Gen Z: 73% heavily linked it to their identity.<sup>621</sup> A national poll conducted by Harvard Kennedy School's Institute of Politics in 2021 showed that 36% of 18–29-year-olds are politically active compared to 24% following President Obama's inauguration in 2009.<sup>622</sup>

The first real glimpse of the political prowess Gen Z stands to reveal came in the 2020 presidential election. An overwhelming majority of Gen Z were not eligible to cast a ballot, of course. And Gen Z is often lumped in with younger Millennials when data on youth (usually 18–29) turnout is analyzed. Nevertheless, the available data does speak to an unusual level of civic engagement this up-and-coming generation is demonstrating. A civic engagement research organization, Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), estimates that *half* of 18–29-year-olds voted in 2020, up just 39 percent in 2016.<sup>623</sup> The numbers are different, but the conclusions to be drawn from the Election Project's estimate are the same; 52.5% of youth participated in the 2020 election, the only time participation exceeded the

majority line in the 34-year history of the data set.<sup>624</sup> Youth turnout, certainly driven in part by Gen Z, in this election was no doubt impressive, but they're not necessarily extraordinary given the fact that the 2020 election had record voter turnout. 159 million Americans, or two-thirds of the eligible populace, cast a ballot in the 2020 election, the highest number of votes in history and the greatest turnout percentage since 1900.<sup>625</sup> Youth participation increased, but so did everyone else's. Still, the record youth turnout is extremely notable.

In chapter 2, I speak to the political events that may serve as the imprints informing and driving Gen Z's civic engagement.

### **Socially Conscious**

One of the most prominent claims made about Generation Z is that they are socially conscious. Stemming from that characteristic, Zers boast a passion for social change and activism.

92% of Gen Zers think it is essential to help others in need, a sign that their circumstances have not hardened these pragmatists beyond compassion.<sup>626</sup> Indeed, many Zers want to be that help. 60% of Zers want to change the world, notably higher than the estimated 39% of Millennials who said the same.<sup>627</sup> 3 in 4 Zers want to make a difference in the world, declaring that they would advocate for a cause they believed in.<sup>628</sup> This strong social conscience drives Zers to be active citizens of the world so that they might have some impact, and they often mobilize with local circles as well as global communities to tap into broader opportunities to affect their circumstances for the better.<sup>629</sup> They reach across the aisle and across borders to make change. Further, Gen Zers have been characterized as self-aware rather than self-centered;

from this recognition, they are compelled by their responsibility to take on an active role within the ecosystem—the society—of which they are a part in an effort to improve it.<sup>630</sup>

One way that Gen Z might demonstrate their social consciousness and endeavor to inspire change might be through the workplace. Early indications of their attitudes toward vocation substantiate such a claim: “Generation Z has indicated a desire to be involved with transformational rather than transactional activities in their world. In other words, they would rather have a career that engenders transformation in the culture than a career that simply provides them with financial prosperity.”<sup>631</sup> Carter is not alone in his assertion that decisions about work are influenced by their socially conscious mindset. Surveys suggest that 60% of Gen Z want to have an impact on the world with their work as the platform for doing so.<sup>632</sup> Zers may very well scope out companies—like Google, IBM, or Merck—that provide an opportunity to shape technology and by extension shape the lives of individuals around the world for the better.

Corey Seemiller, a prominent generational researcher, presented an anecdote wherein she captured her view of this new generation’s desire to inspire meaningful change in new and profound ways.<sup>633</sup> During a first-year class she was helming at a college, she noticed that her community service requirement of 10 hours fell flat. One student asked for clarification: could she fulfill those 10 hours with the time she spends running her own non-profit organization? Seemiller interpreted this to mean that many of these Zer students were already contributing to their communities in substantial ways and desired deeper involvement in making a difference. Further, she spotlighted that 40% of Zers want to create an invention which will change the world.<sup>634</sup> Gen Zers, then, may have profoundly entrepreneurial ambitions guided by social empathy and conscientiousness. Seemiller points to a young Gen Zer who epitomizes this characterization of Generation Z. Mikaila Ulmer of Me and the Bees Lemonade began her

humble beverage business to help spread awareness about the importance of protecting our bee population, and she donates a portion of profits to local beekeepers.<sup>635</sup> Moral of the story, for Seemiller, is that Zers care more about making a difference than making money, yet they are well aware that they need to make money to sustain themselves.<sup>636</sup>

In sum, these socially conscious tendencies and activist behaviors portray Gen Zers as veritable change-makers. The cautiousness and anxiousness which also accompanies Gen Z's personality is not, at least to Melissa Warnke,<sup>637</sup> an inhibitor to this generation's ability to make waves in their social landscape. Some of their drive to be so dedicated to the notion of bettering the world might be born out of their sense of pragmatism as much as their sense of social consciousness. The understanding that no one is going to change the world and better their conditions except for them has likely propelled them to take on the mantle of social responsibility. In any case, the parameter of experience specific to Generation Z has appeared to imbue its members with an activist spirit that is steadfast and strong.

In Part IV, I more deeply examine various activist movements that Generation Z has spearheaded or made their own, and I spotlight some of the Zer activists at the heart of these movements; they tell best the tale of how the Zer consciousness is motivating society-changing social action.

## **Chapter 2: Gen Z Imprints and Fulcrums**

With the generational profile for Gen Z completed as fully as it can be, it is important to examine whether the group can truly be said to satisfy the Mannheimian vision of social generation. To do so, we can trace some of the profile qualities to their related, potentially causative, imprint events. To reiterate, imprint events are shared historical and cultural circumstances that members

of a common cohort experience similarly during their coming-of-age years and, as a result, form similar beliefs, values, and worldviews within a generational identity. Imprints are what elevate a cohort from holding a shared place in history—*generation location*—to holding a shared interpretive and interactive framework of that place in history—*generation as an actuality*. The cohort of individuals born 1997 to the early 2010s have experienced a handful of significant events which function as the crystallizing imprints for a common generational identity, one epitomized by the characteristics explored in Chapter 1. This chapter will delve into these significant events in order to speculate the exact effects they have created for Generation Z.

It is important to first distinguish, however, between two kinds of extremely formative events which help to mold a generation's experience. Imprints are obviously one such kind of generational determinant. The other that I propose is a *fulcrum*. Whereas imprints are events influencing the lived reality of a cohort, a fulcrum is one which influences the baseline reality a cohort inhabits. Like imprints, fulcrums adjust the parameter of experience which a prospective generation faces, but they occur right at or right before the earliest birth years for a new cohort as opposed to the primetime of adolescence. Fulcrums are inherited as prominent historical circumstances for the emergent cohort, and as such serve as a crucial formative influence on the eventual generational consciousness which may potentially arise. Imprints, which bind individuals into that generational consciousness, impress a more direct and lasting effect because they are inexorably intertwined with a generation's lived experience. The difference between these types of events is not so much bred by their severity or kind but rather their timing in relation to a generation's initial birth years. A fulcrum event which transpired during a cohort's coming-of-age years would be considered an imprint, and an imprint crisis which preceded a



cohort's first year would be classified as a fulcrum. To best understand Generation Z's generational consciousness, both sorts of formative events must be considered.

Prior generations are illustrative of this distinction between fulcrums and imprints. For Baby Boomers, World War II served as a pivotal fulcrum. It was not a part of their actual parameter of experience, but it influenced the make-up of the historical, social, and cultural circumstances which were present in their parameter of experience. Most evident in the post-war spike of crude birth rates which granted the generation its name and in the post-war prosperity of a mobilized economy which marked their consumerist youth, the Second World War was a formative factor for Boomers. The Kennedy Assassination and the Vietnam War, which sparked civic-minded dissent and protest throughout coming-of-age Boomers, are considered imprints. For Gen Xers, the Watergate Scandal occurred a few years after the start of the cohort. Not many could understand the significance or complexity of the event since they were so young and not yet adolescents, so it can't be considered an imprint. Xers, then, grew up all too aware that corruption can brazenly exist in the highest office of the land, which likely fostered the cynical mindset this generation came to adopt. In this way, Nixon's fall from grace can be viewed as a fulcrum. On the other hand, events such as the Challenger explosion, the oil shocks of the 70s, and the AIDS epidemic can be viewed as imprints for Gen X since they occurred during formative years and reinforced generational characteristics such as their trademark disillusionment and skepticism. For Millennials, important imprints include the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center, the proliferation of the Internet, and the creation of early social media such as Myspace, Friendster, and Facebook. It may already be evident, then, how some of the events which defined the Millennial experience also serve as critical influences on the Gen Z experience. This will be expounded upon in the following section.

## **Gen Z Fulcrums**

The 9/11 attacks in 2001 and the invention of the World Wide Web in the early 1990s, which created the Internet as we know it today, are undoubtedly influences on Generation Z, for Gen Z is the first generation to come of age following these events. The label ‘digital native’ is proof enough of the Internet’s foundational role in this generation’s consciousness.<sup>638</sup> And many commentators have recognized the importance of 9/11 in understanding the historical context specific to Gen Z.<sup>639</sup> Indeed, 9/11 served as the perfect demarcation point for Millennials and Gen Z. As described by Pew Research Center, the generational bounds signify that most of Gen Z were not alive when the towers fell; if they were, they likely have no memory of it.<sup>640</sup> By contrast, Millennials—even the kindergarten class President Bush was reading to during the attacks—could grasp the significance that such an event held. Researchers pinpointed the real effects this event had for the generation, noting in an analysis of Rokeach Value Surveys conducted on teenagers before 9/11 and after 9/11 that safety values increased while self-esteem values decreased.<sup>641</sup> Indeed, Millennials watched as government surveillance expanded and TSA screenings became the norm while Gen Zers have always known these as social realities. Like with digital technology, Zers are native to the post-9/11 world. They are the first to be so. In this way, the relationship between these events and Generation Z are particularly unique. They act as fulcrums which configured the parameter of experience the Gen Z cohort faced, and Gen Z likewise acts as a reflection of the change in society which those historical events cemented. What were imprints for Millennials are fulcrums for Gen Z.

Important events which occurred prior to Gen Z’s formative years and served as key influences on the development of a distinct generational identity for previous cohorts do not

immediately constitute fulcrums for Gen Z, however. Events like World War II, the Kennedy Assassination, and the fall of the USSR have no doubt shaped Gen Z's baseline reality. By virtue of changing the course of history, the events have passed on certain ramifications to be felt by all generations coming thereafter, including Gen Z. Unlike 9/11, however, those events are history; they're further removed from the habitus Gen Z carries with them. Much of the alterations produced by an event like WWII have since been compounded by countless other changes, and the sum of these at the time of birth was ultimately instilled as native configurations of society to Gen Zers. That is, the direct effects of the WWII event on the Gen Z experience are diluted, so it can't be said that the event helped formulate a unique generational identity. Indeed, the impacts of a decades-removed event affect Gen Z no differently than they affect its subsequent cohort, the tentatively named Gen Alpha. The only difference in the relationship that Gen Z has with long-past historical events might be that with each successive cohort replacement, the importance of the event in the grand scheme of history—or at least its prominence in the textbooks—might diminish.

It's key, then, to note that the Silent Generation experienced World War II as an imprint, Boomers experienced World War II as a fulcrum, and Gen X experienced World War II as history. Similarly, Millennials experienced 9/11 as an imprint, Gen Z experiences 9/11 as a fulcrum, and the emergent cohort Gen Alpha will experience 9/11 as history. To the cohorts coming after Gen Z, the effects of 9/11 will be to them what the effects of the Suffrage Movement and the Civil War are to every recent generation: a distant historical development. For Gen Z, their parameter of experience is marked with the shadow of those fallen towers. The effects thereof, including the War on Terror, have played out for Zers in childhood and continue to play out in adolescence; this will be discussed in greater detail in the section on violence, but

the threat of terrorism unveiled by the September 11th attacks do serve as part of an imprint on Gen Z. For indeed, Zers did not witness the landmarks disappear, but they did understand the significance of the Freedom Tower as they saw it rise among the New York City skyline.

With the key influences of 9/11 and the Internet distinguished as fulcrums, a better examination of the imprints on Gen Z can be accomplished.

### **IMPRINT: Internet of Things**

The ubiquity and dominance of the smartphone in Zers' lives was well documented in Chapter 1. Such devices are the most obvious example of how digital technology has been imprinted on Gen Z. The obvious 'imprint event' to point to for this generation, then, would be the launch of the iPhone in 2007. Though an early, rudimentary version of the smartphone first came in the form of IBM's Simon Personal Communicator in the 1990s, the iPhone inaugurated a wave of devices with unbridled mobile access to the internet as well as software applications.<sup>642</sup> The most popular breed of these apps, of course, is social media. Gen Z doesn't personally remember the bulky cell phones of the bygone age, but they do remember the evolution in sleek touchscreen designs and processing power as Android and Apple iOS producers continually one-upped each other. Browsing the web on mobile became more natural than doing so tethered to a desktop computer.

Of course, citing the iPhone launch as an imprint event doesn't quite do justice to the massive technological changes which Gen Z is growing up alongside. This imprint is more about the complicated process of incremental innovations in digital technology that led to the expanded and expedited ability for Zers to connect over the internet. Indeed, when 4G broadband cellular network technology released in 2010, Zers became fitted with data speeds 10x that of 3G.<sup>643</sup>

Now they're about to experience, still in their youth, the dawn of 5G. The transition of cellular networks to 5G will take some years to ensure compliance with technical requirements, but the launch began in 2019, promising that—given peak connection—a download of a two-hour movie which took 7 minutes with 4G would take only 10 seconds with 5G.<sup>644</sup> Beyond this, the adoption of 5G will have other crucial impacts for Gen Z as they continue to come of age. A particularly fascinating advancement would be the rise in autonomous vehicles, for 5G can enable reliably immediate car to car communication and thus information on driving and braking conditions is available to ensure the safest rides. Equipped with 5G, municipalities can also monitor and detect lapses or failures in infrastructure so that their response can be carried out more efficiently; this, possibly, could even come remotely, with usage of machinery connected to wireless networks to amend decrepit bridges or construct new highways. Surveillance cameras, too, will get upgrades that can allow for real-time streaming of high-quality video for homeowners and city officials alike. When paired with video summarization software like BriefCam that can review and classify hours of footage into searchable data streams—such as, consumer patterns within a retail store or the gender, attire, and direction of individuals on the street—this prospect might expand Gen Zers' privacy concerns as they enter into a 5G adulthood. Continuing this trend of remote review and activity, health care may also be transformed by 5G. Surgeons may no longer need to be in the same room as their patients to operate on them, instead using remote-controlled robotics to carry out their life-saving duties. Augmented Reality may allow for physical therapy to be more fun, engaging, and ultimately effective. Trackable smart pills may allow physicians to monitor how their patients follow prescriptions.<sup>645</sup> Thanks to nearly nonexistent latency, 5G sensors attached to machinery have already been documented to reduce error rates in factories.<sup>646</sup> In short, the world will be streamlined.

Another likely effect of 5G is its facilitation of a more extensive, more efficient Internet of Things. The Internet of Things (IoT) encapsulates the interconnected network of objects through the internet, allowing them to ‘talk’—transfer data back and forth—without need for a human translator.<sup>647</sup> Certain aforementioned innovations to be expected from the 5G craze—such as sufficiently self-driving cars and remote-controlled machinery—are a part of this IoT. But the IoT is not a distant prediction; many everyday items have been upgraded to internet capacity during the course of Gen Z’s formative years. Following the smartphone, smart speakers that double as virtual assistants have entered millions of homes—Amazon’s Alexa-voiced Echo series and Google’s Home Mini are popular examples. Smart watches, smart TVs, smart fridges, and smart doorbells have become commonplace in Gen Z’s parameter of experience. The examples get more absurd yet riveting: smart color-changing light bulbs, smart dryers, and smart window blinds.<sup>648</sup> The IoT is in its early stages—and much is still to be done to ensure that security and privacy standards for all connected devices can dependably be maintained—but Gen Z is already operating comfortably with the technology. The IoT serves as another facet of the larger imprint process, one of intimate and constant connection to online domains via digital devices, which binds Gen Z into a common generational identity. The continued advancements of digital smart-technology reinforce boundless connectivity as a prevailing influence on Gen Z’s consciousness.

This imprint, coupled with the fulcrum of the internet which made it possible, has been instrumental in the development of many shared generational characteristics discussed in Chapter 1. The visibility of diverse ways of life—through social media, for instance—breaks down the barriers of ‘otherness’ and instills in Gen Z an appreciation for these diverse patterns of being. If not, then at least greater tolerance and understanding. Indeed, widespread and

immediate access to the internet has enabled Zers to remain informed about and connected to the world at large. In this way, technology permits young Gen Zers the ability to vicariously experience traumas which affect communities far removed from their own in intensely intimate ways.<sup>649</sup> A similar phenomenon was observed in the disaffected Boomers who helmed student activism in the late 1960s, for they were raised from infancy with television sets which more clearly captured the anguish within distant pockets of the nation and the globe.<sup>650</sup> This heightened awareness of the stories of others during Zers' formative years has been credited as the source of the socially-conscious compassion and thoughtfulness which some have found in Gen Z, not too dissimilar from the effect of television on Boomers, just far more potent due to its immediacy (events can be quickly uploaded or even live streamed) and clarity (in both video quality and in the likelihood that a viral video comes directly from the source). First-hand citizenship journalism, wherein anyone can graphically document injustices or disasters on their smartphone, has also endowed Gen Z with practical social awareness because they have always been able to see for themselves the brutality which persists in the world.<sup>651</sup> When suffering is visible, folks are compelled to care. When injustice is plain to the eye, folks are compelled to act. This digital technology imprint seems crucial, then, in cultivating the open-mindedness and socially conscious traits that have been recognized in Gen Z.

Further supporting this notion is how Gen Z does not see the digital space less meaningful or less real than physical space. Pinned as communaholics, Zers do not distinguish online friends from 'real' friends.<sup>652</sup> Digital outlets such as social media, which hold a firm presence in the Gen Z experience, grant Zers the opportunity to spend hours every week chatting with those they met online who may come from a different country, economic background, or way of life yet share some common interest with them. While members of other age-groups are

certainly not incapable of having the point of view that real bonds can be forged over the internet, that perspective and the technological means which shaped it have become second-nature to Gen Z. Again, open-mindedness appears to be reinforced by this imprint.

More grim consequences stem from the importance of digital connection technology, particularly social media, among Gen Zers. Such consequences are apparent in the stress and mental health issues that pervade Gen Z. Youth is an emotionally taxing time for any generation, but the innovation and adoption of social media outlets—such as Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, and TikTok—during Gen Z’s impressionable years seems to have compounded this inevitability in a distinct way. The APA found that 2 in 5 Zers feel worse after using social media.<sup>653</sup> For the ‘always wired’ generation, one of the most distinguishing aspects of life additionally constitutes one of the most stressful, etching that characteristic into their unique generational identity. Social media apps, indeed, account for a myriad of negative effects which correlate to mental health disorders. Reported by Gen Z users, social media inhibits sleep, breeds FOMO (fear of missing out), degrades body image, and ferments anxiety and depression.<sup>654</sup> Additionally, social media serves as a new arena for bullying. Cyberbullying has impacted about half of Gen Zers.<sup>655</sup> The negative psychological impacts of bullying, in any medium, do not need to be rehearsed for one to imagine how the digital space might account for the elevated mental health concerns facing Generation Z. Social media is not all wrath and ruin, however. Zers additionally recognize it as an avenue for self-expression, community-building, and emotional support.<sup>656</sup> In fact, 31% find mostly positive effects come from social media compared to 24% of Gen Zers finding mostly negative impacts.<sup>657</sup>

The social media component of this imprint has additionally yielded some ramifications for Gen Z’s consumerist tendencies. Social media influences the purchases of 39% of Gen Zer



adults, the chief factor affecting consumption for this generation.<sup>658</sup> The findings show that the effect of social media on buying behavior for Gen Z outstrips that of any other generation, including Millennials—a quarter of them noted it as their greatest influence, but most pinpointed online reviews as their guide. Further, Deep Patel<sup>659</sup> warns marketers to be aware of the effect that the proliferation of reality-bending technologies such as Photoshop—a mainstay for the ostentatious, gilded images which grace social feeds—has had on Gen Z. Because authenticity comes at a premium in the digital world, Zers value it immensely. Another way that social media has woven into the Gen Z experience is through the channels of information it offers. Over any other method, Zers primarily get their news from social media.<sup>660</sup>

As a brief aside, social media's most significant impact on the creation of a common generational identity for Gen Z is the life it gave to a complex, multifaceted yet nonetheless know-it-when-you-see-it internet culture. Gen Z came of age in a world where social media not only afforded unrivaled connectivity but also served as a genuine passtime. Zers relax, make friends, and engage with the world by making and consuming memes. Older generations may partake in this activity, and future generations certainly will. But only Gen Z will have lived out their formative youth during the time when the internet, and the characteristic brand of humor its most populous social networks gave rise to, was in its adolescence. That unique interplay between this generation and its chief mode of generating cultural artifacts is another key nucleus around which Zers form and maintain their distinct identity.

Digital technology has also helped shape the entrepreneurial spirit identified as part of Gen Z's generational consciousness. The “vibrant youth maker culture” which often centers on the digital landscape has been fueled by the accessibility of online self-education resources afforded by the little technological helpers of smartphones.<sup>661</sup> The power of information being

available at one's fingertips is a particularly monumental impression technology has made in Zers' lives, and it is not lost on the generation in practice even if it is taken for granted. Many young entrepreneurs utilize the outlets for discussion, resource-finding, self-learning, and connectivity that technology provides in order to introduce themselves to the business realm and guide their efforts in developing, manufacturing, and marketing transformative services. Online resources such as Khan Academy, Skill Share, Coursera, Outlier, and Masterclass represent the cream of the crop of the boundless opportunities available on the internet to obtain hours of education, advice, and practice.<sup>662</sup>

Beyond the cultivation and energization of the entrepreneurial bend Zers have, digital smart-technology has also impacted the way in which parents raise Gen Z. Noting that the fully online world limited the capacity for parents to shelter and protect young Zers, some have argued that the scourge of helicopter parenting has been replaced by dutiful education and preparation for children to confront the harsh realities of society.<sup>663</sup> Called stealth fighters, parents of this philosophy engage in their children's lives by responsibly and respectfully "monitoring their activity, communication and movements—zipping in, dropping bombs and redirecting as necessary—but just as quickly zipping back out."<sup>664</sup> This view that innovation in technologies has replaced the overbearing, growth-stunting parent is not universally shared. Others have wagered that the same technologies which have broadened young Gen Zers' ability to glimpse the muck of the world have also equipped parents with the tools necessary to impose draconian surveillance and restrictive oversight. A companion to the physical involvement of helicopter parenting, 'drone parenting' consists of relentless supervision of a child's online footprint.<sup>665</sup> Because drone parenting keeps an unseen eye on children, it is considered a more nefarious micromanagement parental style; it undercuts a child's development silently rather than overtly.

The impacts of this type of parenting—heavily tied with the innovative digital technologies imprinted on Gen Z’s experience—would likely result in the entitlement-mindset that Millennials have been hitched with, though for now Zers have dodged such characterizations. As more Zers come of age and enter adulthood, the true consequences of this proposed 21st-century parenting style can be more substantively examined. Until then, I present it as yet another impact this imprint has produced for Generation Z’s habitus.

Clearly, the imprint of digital smart-technology and the Internet of Things, epitomized in the launch of the iPhone, has bound Zers together in a distinct experience of life which in turn has yielded common effects on the perspectives, attitudes, and traits that they uniquely carry in American society.

### **IMPRINT: The Great Recession**

Just as the Great Depression served as an imprint for the emergent cohort of its time, the Great Recession functions as a severe historical crisis in Gen Z’s early formative years. As the second worst economic downturn in American history, the official duration of the Recession is December 2007 to June 2009.<sup>666</sup> The effects thereof, however, ran far beyond that tumultuous time period. The heart of the Great Recession is the housing bubble which burst in 2006. Driven by low federal funds rates and subprime mortgages—wherein borrowers with poor credit histories who otherwise would be considered high-risk loans were able to qualify—financial institutions and investors dived into the booming housing market with mounting disregard for risk, evident in the unprecedented exchange of mortgage-backed securities (wherein a great number of individual mortgages are pooled together and sold off in shares).<sup>667</sup> When housing prices dropped—home equity plummeted \$7 trillion over the course of the recession from its

peak in 2006—and the value of associated derivatives evaporated, borrowers defaulted on their loans and lenders had no way to recoup in the saturated market. Investment banks entangled with mortgage-backed securities faced credit crisis, for the shortage of inflowing cash—which normally would be lent out to more borrowers or used to purchase tantalizing, ostensibly safe triple-A rated asset-backed securities—buckled in their capacity to address their own debts.<sup>668</sup> The fifth largest of such banks, Bear Stearns, collapsed into the arms of JPMorgan Chase, the reigning banking frontrunner; the third largest, Merrill Lynch, escaped collapse by selling itself to Bank of America; and the fourth largest, the Lehman Brothers—which was founded in Antebellum America—represented the severity of the financial crisis when they declared bankruptcy.<sup>669</sup> The seizure of liquid capital by banks meant that many businesses were unable to obtain short-term loans necessary for their daily operations, so liabilities were shed in the form of employees.<sup>670</sup> About 8.7 million workers lost their jobs between 2007 and 2010 according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, resulting in the unemployment rate lurching from around 4% in October 2006 to its peak of 10% in October 2010, the largest post-WWII spike in unemployment America had seen at that point in time.<sup>671</sup> The unique combination of the housing and employment crises exacerbated both: “Because of high unemployment rates and heightened job losses, a growing number of households have found it difficult to make mortgage payments. This combination of negative equity and weakened household budgets has pushed many homeowners to default on their mortgages, as they can no longer afford monthly payments and are unable to sell their home to pay off their loan balance.”<sup>672</sup> Foreclosure starts quadrupled during the housing crisis.<sup>673</sup> Even years after the official end of the recession, nearly a quarter of homeowners remained underwater—the value of their properties sat far below the price taken in

loans to pay for them; only in late 2017 did the share of Americans facing underwater mortgages dip below 10%.<sup>674</sup>

Gen Zer children understood none of these workings of the financial system, and most now couldn't tell you what originated this grave economic downturn. They also didn't lose out on any personal savings or investments, for their parents bore the brunt of any financial strain. But in various ways, some more obvious than others, Zers felt the ramifications of the Great Recession. They felt the struggle of their parents, some of whom spent a lot more time at home after their lay-offs and some of whom returned to college to fish for a more viable degree in the lean job market. They witnessed the steady flow of allowance money dissipate and the size of birthday presents shrink. They experienced the loss of their homes and the unsteady adjustment to a downsized way of living. The share of children under the age of 18 growing up in impoverished conditions increased during the Recession, rising from 18% in 2008 to 22% in 2013, a difference of about 3 million kids.<sup>675</sup> These children disproportionately belonged to families of color. Again, only in 2017 did the number of children living below the poverty line decrease to pre-Recession levels, and in 2018 the percentage is reported at 16.2%.<sup>676</sup> Not all Zers felt so brutal a sting from the financial crash, but the impact of the Recession on this generation was sweeping and rarely subtle. Indeed, 73% of Zers recognized direct effects of the Great Recession on their lives.<sup>677</sup>

Like Zers themselves, researchers have also recognized the Great Recession as a generational determinant for Gen Z, especially when it comes to their financially conservative and pragmatic characteristics.<sup>678</sup> Indeed, the Brazilian equivalent of the Gen Z cohort, which endured a similar economic downturn as a result of the global recession, displays a comparable set of resultant characteristics.<sup>679</sup> Across two cultures, a similar event is connected to similar

generational traits. Such an observation substantiates that the American cohort's perspectives do appear to derive from the Great Recession and, as such, the Great Recession is a formative imprint which ties Gen Z into an actual generational identity.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the greatest influence of this imprint event on Generation Z is that it endowed them with a potent sense of fiscal frugality and preparedness. The struggle of difficult financial times has taught them to treat money with deference and wield money with cautiousness. The horror stories of Millennial college graduates weighed down by student debt were inflamed by the financial crisis, for these graduates were flung into a workforce with dismal prospects for job seekers and lingering uncertainty for the lucky hires.<sup>680</sup> Gen Zers paid attention to the effect the contracting job market, stagnating wages, and mounting student loan debt had on Millennials, and they endeavored to set themselves up so that they never get blindsided when it comes time for them to become professionals. Therefore, their approach to money is decidedly more cautious, with great emphasis on saving and avoiding needless spending.<sup>681</sup> It's not uncommon for Gen Zers to enter college already primed with a choice of major and a handful of backup plans to best prepare themselves for a smooth and steady transition into the workforce, global economy permitting.

Other characteristics of the Gen Z generational profile can be traced back to this imprint, too. Money on the mind might be stressing Zers out, but this imprint has taught them that thinking about finances is necessary. The APA found that money was the top stressor for Gen Z, with 81% of Zers grinding their teeth over it compared to 64% of Americans overall.<sup>682</sup> The unpredictability of entire financial systems and the fallibility of the institutions which prop them up may also play a role in Gen Zers' elevated mental health issues. Persis C. Rickes<sup>683</sup> wagers that anxiety and discomfort with uncertainty have been programmed into this generation because

of the Great Recession. On the other hand, the economic struggle has been said to have endowed Gen Z with level-headed realism.<sup>684</sup> Further, the shared impact of this imprint has shaped the compassionate side of Gen Z in addition to the pragmatic side, contributing to Zers' socially conscious behavior.<sup>685</sup>

Clearly, the Great Recession serves as a formative factor for Gen Z's distinct generational consciousness.

### **IMPRINT: Violence**

Another significant imprint process marking a distinct generational experience for Gen Z is best summarized as the insidious presence of violence. Two primary components of this umbrella imprint of 'violence' are gun violence—particularly in mass shootings—and the War on Terror.

The bolstered sense of an unsafe world is epitomized in the gun-related deaths Gen Z Americans have grown up alongside. The National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) found that in 2017, 39,773 individuals died in firearm-related incidents.<sup>686</sup> The Educational Fund to Stop Gun Violence conducted an analysis—which has since been replicated and verified by third-parties—on NCHS reports dating back to 1979, finding that gun-related deaths have never been higher. In 2018, the number of gun-related deaths decreased by 33%.<sup>687</sup> It should be noted, though, that about 60% of these deaths were suicides. This troubling degree of self-inflicted violence might remain an unfortunate staple of Gen Z experience given the well-documented mental health issues the generation faces. Some such issues can be traced back to the distress caused by the greater awareness of the threat of gun violence incidents. The average number of mass shooting events—detailing real danger—and the extensive media coverage thereof—

compounding real fear—has been increasing in the 21st century.<sup>688</sup> A particularly vile sort of mass shootings, school shootings, have also increased during the time all Gen Zers have been working through the educational system, with most of them still doing so. *The Washington Post* documents every case of public mass shootings wherein at least four victims were killed.<sup>689</sup> According to those guidelines, 15 of the 21 total school shootings in American history have occurred since Gen Z's earliest birth year. 8 of these have occurred in the past decade.

As a result, active shooter lockdown drills have become commonplace in American schools, mirroring the duck-and-cover atom bomb drills earlier generations faced in their educational institutions. A 2018 report from the National Center of Education Statistics noted that 95% of schools have lockdown measures in place<sup>690</sup>; an earlier report from the Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that about 96% percent of school districts with developed emergency procedures addressed active shooters as a threat, and 99% addressed intruders as a threat.<sup>691</sup> Undoubtedly an element of safety preparedness in schools, these drills are increasingly linked with anxiety and trauma experiences among students.<sup>692</sup> Research and recommendations released in a 2020 report by Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund, American Federation of Teachers, and National Education Association outline the abundant strides still necessary to ensure educational environments which protect the mental well-being of students in addition to their physical well-being from the threat of gun violence.<sup>693</sup> It's beyond clear how distinctly present the menace of school-related violence is in the consciousness of Gen Z.

Further, the prominence of violence within Gen Z's parameter of experience cannot be overstated because they're painfully aware that violent incidents do not need to take place within their own communities to threaten those communities. The War on Terror, where battlefields lie predominantly on distant soil, has been a recurrent theme throughout Gen Z's youth. Declared by



President George W. Bush soon after the 9/11 attacks, America rooted itself in the Middle East to combat terror groups such as al-Qaeda.<sup>694</sup> On paper, the Iraq war ended in 2011 and the Afghanistan war in 2014, though troops have returned to or remained in these regions in years since.<sup>695</sup> Only recently, near the 20th anniversary of the September 11th tragedy, did America officially withdraw from the effort in Afghanistan, allowing for the near-immediate recapture of the country by Taliban forces.

Though the War on Terror—a two trillion-dollar endeavor since its beginning—largely took place out of the scope of daily life, important developments periodically delivered grave reminders to Gen Z that they were and are indeed living in the midst of an unsafe, war-riddled world. President Obama announced Osama bin Laden’s death at the hands of Navy SEALs in Pakistan on May 2, 2011.<sup>696</sup> Offering a more sobering reminder of threat of terror, the attack on Benghazi on September 11th, 2012 resulted in the deaths of four Americans, including the U.S. Ambassador to Libya.<sup>697</sup> It had been decades since a U.S. Ambassador suffered a violent death. And most indicative of the ever-violent world in which they live, Zers watched the rise and fall of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in the mid-2010s. Founded in 2013 and self-declared a caliphate in 2014—meaning they proclaim themselves to be the political and spiritual head of all those of Muslim faith—as their territorial possession reached its peak, ISIS crumbled to ruin by late 2017 after leaving thousands of deaths and destroyed livelihoods in their wake.<sup>698</sup> By 2018, President Trump declared victory over ISIS in Syria and announced intent to bring troops home; in October of 2019, ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was declared dead, signaling the symbolic end of ISIS.<sup>699</sup>

Of course, the War on Terror recently returned to the minds of everyday Americans as President Biden followed through on a Trump-era agreement calling for the full and total

withdrawal of American troops. A messy evacuation effort which left a handful of American soldiers dead in a terrorist attack by the local strain of the Islamic State, left the lives of several children cut short as a result of an ill-executed American drone strike, and left behind an untold number of Afghan civilians who worked for or assisted the American government over its two decade presence does little to reassure Gen Z that the world will be less violent with the Taliban in power.<sup>700</sup>

Indeed, during the time the Taliban *were* at bay, Islamic extremists have committed multiple significant terrorist attacks that Gen Z very much could comprehend. In 2015, a couple attacked the Inland Regional Center, the San Bernardino-based non-profit agency that provides services to those with developmental disabilities at which one of them worked.<sup>701</sup> Before their attack killed 14 people, they posted a pledge of allegiance to the leader of ISIS. The 2016 Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando was also carried out by a radicalized terrorist who pledged his support to ISIS.<sup>702</sup> Given his history of hatred and belligerent behavior toward other groups of people, it is likely that he intentionally targeted a gay nightclub to inflict harm on the LGBTQ+ community.<sup>703</sup> 49 individuals were killed in that shooting, making it the deadliest mass shooting at that time in U.S. History.

More insidious, more frequent, and more deadly than the threat of Islamic terror is that of domestic terrorism. The 2010s have seen various horrifying instances of mass shootings perpetrated by predominantly young white men. Some of these men did so out of racism and alt-right extremism. In the city where the Civil War began and in the second iteration of a historically black church once burned to the ground for its role in anti-slavery activities, twelve members of a Wednesday night Bible study at Mother Emanuel Church accepted a stranger into their worship.<sup>704</sup> At the end of the session and in the midst of their prayer, he opened fire on

them. Nine black churchgoers were left murdered. The killer was a white supremacist who bought into inaccurate, racist theories of genetic differences he found on the internet, and he hoped to ignite a race war.<sup>705</sup> Instead, the Charleston community and the whole of America banded together in mourning and healing. Nothing exemplified this more than when President Obama ended his eulogy of Reverend Clementa Pickney by leading the church into a moving rendition of “Amazing Grace.”<sup>706</sup> There was indeed an amazing degree of grace shown by the victims’ family members to the killer, for many expressed forgiveness in his first court appearance.<sup>707</sup> A few years later, the 2019 El Paso shooting was also motivated by white supremacist fears of the changing demographic landscape of America. The gunman posted an online manifesto expressing his anti-immigrant views, travelled 10 hours to a city near the Mexican border with a high Latino population<sup>708</sup>, and waived his Miranda rights to confess to the officer arresting him that he was targeting ‘Mexicans.’<sup>709</sup> 23 people died in this attack.

Mental illness, and the lack of adequate treatment and support, is another common factor in the mass murders committed by young men over the past decade. The distinctly heartbreaking tragedy at Sandy Hook in 2012, in which 20 children and 6 adults were killed,<sup>710</sup> was perpetrated by a depressed and anorexic 20-year-old diagnosed with Asperger’s, anxiety, obsessive compulsive disorder who had an atypical fascination with violence and mass shootings in particular.<sup>711</sup> These unaddressed mental health issues, in addition to the easy access to his mother’s legally-owned guns and an “interest in children that could be characterized as pedophilia,”<sup>712</sup> set the stage for the horrific attack. Parallels have been identified in the isolatedness, social ineptitude, and mental health histories of the Newtown school shooter and the 19-year-old Parkland school shooter who killed 17 people in 2018.<sup>713</sup>

Then there's the Las Vegas mass shooting from 2017, the deadliest in United States history. A wealthy 64-year-old man shot down on a country music concert from his rooms on the 32nd floor of the Mandalay Bay hotel and killed 58 victims and wounded more than 500.<sup>714</sup> The death count recently was amended to be 60 following the passing of two women who suffered complications from the injuries they received that night.<sup>715</sup> The attack was meticulously planned. He brought 23 guns and more than a thousand rounds of ammunition up to his hotel room over the course of the week he stayed there prior to the shooting.<sup>716</sup> Years since his attack, the FBI has been unable to determine a motive for the killings.<sup>717</sup> Sometimes, it seems, the terror is committed out of a random, meaningless cruelty. That's a hard lesson for Gen Z to become so acutely aware of in their youth. But aware of it they are.

Indeed, strengthened by the permeance of online connection platforms, Gen Z waded through even their earliest years under no spell that the world was safe and kind. Various commentators have noted that terrorism perpetrated by foreigners and domestic nationals alike has further familiarized Gen Z with the harsh realities present in their parameter of experience.<sup>718</sup> Indeed, one survey found that 43% of Gen Zers consider the prominence of gun violence as the most influential impact on their own generation, even beating out social media.<sup>719</sup> Much of this impact can be located in Gen Z's relationship with mental health. The highest stressor for Gen Z adults, affecting 3 in 4, is school shootings.<sup>720</sup> While some of this may yield from an age effect of youth wherein the empirically-built capacity to delineate risk from inevitability is underdeveloped or from the constant stream of media coverage distorting the slight possibility of such events into a probability, as B. Janet Hibbs and Anthony L. Rostain<sup>721</sup> posit, the anxiety which Gen Z feels is undeniably pervasive. In addition to this imprint's formative role in Gen Z's mental health characteristics, exposure to the violent world has also reinforced their

pragmatic framework of interpretation. Their realistic perspective, some have noted, even finds cause in the increased attention surrounding sexual assault; the #MeToo movement has shed light on another layer of violence which further contributes to the pragmatic sensibilities of Gen Z.<sup>722</sup>

Proven by life in the shadow of 9/11 and Columbine and cemented by steadier and more heinous school shootings—such as Sandy Hook and Parkland—as well as by the ceaseless War on Terror, violence is all too prominent in Gen Z’s generational consciousness.

### **IMPRINT: Elections**

The 2016 presidential election cycle, which resulted in President Donald Trump triumphing over former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton with 304 electoral votes to her 227, was a polarizing affair. The divisive political climate was inescapable, and many Gen Zers were oriented to politics in a manner that they hadn’t yet been because of both their increased age and the relentlessness of politics in daily life. Political polarization had been occurring unbeknownst to Gen Z for many years; Pew Research Center found that the median ideological values for liberals and conservatives have consistently shifted further from the middle to their respective extremes between 1994 and 2014.<sup>723</sup> Much of the outward polarization stems not from real opinion differences—though evidence suggests that the ideological gap between the two major parties reached its peak in the 2010s<sup>724</sup>—but from the increasing divide between the goodness we attribute to individuals and the distance they are from our own opinion on the issues.<sup>725</sup> During the 2016 election, a majority of both Democrats and Republicans felt frustrated with the other side and close to a majority felt afraid (55% and 49% respectively) and angry (47% and 46%).<sup>726</sup> In terms of “Very Unfavorable” views of the opposite party, there was a dramatic rise from 21%

(Republicans) and 17% (Democrats) in 1994 to 58% (Republicans) and 55% in 2016.<sup>727</sup>

Additionally, the impact of social media on the divisiveness of this election cannot be overstated. With the infrastructure of social media platforms well-established and with nearly everyone involved in at least one of them, the opportunity for individuals to nestle themselves into blaring echo chambers, hurl insults to the other side, and reap the wonders of confirmation bias was practically limitless. Vitriol during political campaigns has always existed, but it had never been so loud or omnipresent.

In any case, the political division in the country came to a head during the 2016 election cycle. Since elections act as socialization forces which prime even the most tangentially involved to consider their own attitudes on the matter,<sup>728</sup> the 2016 presidential race can be seen as a political imprint event on Gen Z's emerging sociopolitical attitudes and values. The primary impact of such an imprint for this generation is not which way Zers tend to lean but the political engagement they'll have in whichever way they lean. That is, the degree to which Zers will exercise their civic responsibility to get involved in a variety of ways, but most primarily through voting.

Midterm turnout in 2018 was 53.4%, a 40 year high which succeeded the record low turnout of 2014.<sup>729</sup> Additionally, this turnout eclipsed participation in the presidential elections—which historically attract more people to the polls than midterms do—of 1996 (49%) and 2000 (51.2%).<sup>730</sup> This increase is an indication that the contentious 2016 election cycle renewed political vigor throughout the nation. Among youth voters, the increase in turnout was the highest among any age bracket with a 74% increase in participation from the 2014 midterm. Clearly, the political environment substantially transformed eligible-voter youth's opinions on political engagement. Of course, most Gen Zers were not eligible to vote and those who did were

clumped with a great deal of Millennials into an age bracket of 18-years-old to 29-years-old. Gen Z is not responsible for this uptick in political participation, but as described in Chapter 1, a greater proportion of eligible Gen Z voters cast a ballot in 2018 than Millennials or Gen Xers did in their first midterm election years.<sup>731</sup> This peculiar affinity for political participation at their young age is likely linked with the 2016 election cycle. Political participation in the 2018 midterms went up across the board as a result of the political vigor stirred by 2016, so it follows that the historic participation of first-time Zer voters during these midterms also stemmed from the heightened political awareness they gained in the 2016 cycle. This further substantiates the 2016 election as an imprint-level determinant for Gen Z's habitus. It's worth noting, however, that the contentious road to election night did not necessarily mean enthusiasm at the polls. The turnout rate for the 2016 election was 55.67%,<sup>732</sup> higher than the turnout in 2012 (54.87%)<sup>733</sup> but down from that in 2008 (58.28%),<sup>734</sup> which was the highest turnout for a presidential election in four decades.<sup>735</sup> *Electionproject.org* looked at the voting eligible population instead of the voting-age population to observe this same trend with slightly different but still relatively proportional turnout rate percentages.<sup>736</sup>

As discussed in the “political leanings” subsection, there was indeed a dramatic rise in youth participation in the 2020 election, thus continuing the trend established in 2018. Much like the 2016 election, the 2020 election cycle was a highly contentious, extremely politicized affair. Since the 2016 election, the prevalence of social media in election campaigns—both in terms of engagement on the politician's end and the voters' end—has dramatically increased.<sup>737</sup> In 2019, about three-in-four Americans said that Republicans and Democrats were incapable not just of agreeing on certain policies but of agreeing on basic facts.<sup>738</sup> That same year, surveys showed that members of the opposing parties feel the other side is more close-minded, immoral,

unintelligent, and lazy than ever.<sup>739</sup> A majority of Democrats and Republicans give the other side a “very cold” (0-24) rating on a thermometer scale of up to 100.<sup>740</sup> Compared to other Western nations, the polarization in the United States has continued to trend upward at a greater rate, even as some countries have seen decreases in polarization.<sup>741</sup> 90% of Trump and Biden supporters believed that if the other candidate was elected, their term would result in lasting harm to the United States.<sup>742</sup>

The intense political climate likely awakened many younger Zers to the world of politics and it certainly propelled older Gen Zers to exercise their political will by casting ballots. This record number of ballots cast, not just among youth but for the American populace in general (remember that two-thirds of eligible voters participated in the 2020 election), came to be so due to some crucial factors. One of which is the more accessible methods of voting, such as mail-in ballots and early voting periods. The other is the combination of historic circumstances America was faced with during the election cycle. At any rate, participation in the presidential election will be a momentous marker for the emergent Generation Z as it begins to wield genuine political leverage in society. A trifecta of pressing crises—the worst pandemic in a century, the most severe economic contraction since the Great Depression, and the most intense racial reckoning since the Civil Rights Movement—raised the stakes on this election. The looming crisis of unabated climate change, though less immediately consequential than these others, was also a prominent consideration. For once, the perennial declarations of the present election being this lifetime’s most important seemed to ring true. It is no wonder, then, that Gen Z reflected the overall increase in participation rates for this election.

Coming of age during a highly politicized time is still likely to spur a unique degree of electoral participation when more Zers reach voting age, and Zers who have already participated



in at least one election so far may find it easier to make a habit of returning to the polls. We will have to keep an eye on the 2022 midterms and the 2024 presidential election to determine if this high political participation is a fluke or a distinct characteristic of this emerging generation. Thus far, available data indicates that Zer citizens might become a uniquely influential generation in politics while still in their youth.

### **IMPRINT: COVID-19 Pandemic**

The most recent period event which will undoubtedly serve as an imprint for Generation Z and further crystallize their emerging generational consciousness is the COVID-19 novel coronavirus pandemic. As of this writing in 2021, the pandemic is ongoing. The ultimate outcomes and impacts of COVID-19's virulent spread remain shrouded, but the stark shifts in daily life amidst the crisis is not. Global economies ground to a halt, widespread social distancing measures and mask mandates were enacted, and self-quarantines and lockdowns emptied the streets. Originating in Wuhan—possibly from natural exposure to an animal infected with the virus, but the Chinese government's continued lack of cooperation for an official investigation lends considerable credibility to the lab-leak hypothesis<sup>743</sup>—in late 2019, the outbreak rapidly spread throughout the world in the early months of 2020, officially receiving classification as a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11, 2020.<sup>744</sup> Older individuals and those with immunodeficiencies are at the highest risk for developing severe symptoms,<sup>745</sup> and it is a stroke of grace that the virus is largely harmless to children, young adults, and healthy adults. The number of reported COVID-19 cases since early 2020 in the United States is 43 million as of October 2021, and the number of deaths related to COVID complications is 691,517. Despite the rise of the far more contagious Delta variant over the

summer of 2021, a rise in hospitalizations and deaths has been blunted because of vaccine access.

The fruit of around-the-clock efforts by hard working scientists around the world, multiple COVID-19 vaccines were created and shown to be safe and effective at mitigating the severity of COVID-19 symptoms and dramatically reducing the likelihood of death.<sup>746</sup> Of the three major vaccines distributed in the United States—Johnson and Johnson, Moderna, and Pfizer-BioNTech—the latter two built upon 30 years of research to develop a groundbreaking vaccine utilizing mRNA technology.<sup>747</sup> Each vaccine was given Emergency Use Authorization by the FDA, which entails a rigorous process of multiple clinical trials<sup>748</sup>. On August 23, 2021, FDA announced full approval of the Pfizer vaccine, giving the efficacy and safety of this vaccine an even stronger vote of confidence.<sup>749</sup> As of October 2021, 185 million Americans, or 55.9% of the population, are fully vaccinated; of the American population eligible to receive the vaccine (those aged 12 and up), 65% are fully vaccinated.<sup>750</sup>

Social distancing measures that ceased business operations across the country early in the pandemic spurred record spikes in claims for unemployment as workers were furloughed or let go.<sup>751</sup> In late April 2020, over 26 million Americans filed jobless claims, a staggering degree of unemployment (14.8%)<sup>752</sup> which rivaled that experienced in the Great Depression. The unemployment rate has since dropped down to 5.2% in August 2021, but that's still a ways off from the 3.5% it the U.S. reached in February 2020.<sup>753</sup> The economic downturn was steep and swift at the onset of the lockdowns, but National Bureau of Economic Research recently completed their analysis that affirmed the recession to be exceedingly short—only 2 months.<sup>754</sup> This is likely due to the transitory nature of the lockdowns and the unprecedented government response which, unlike the response to the Great Recession, cared little for deficit spending. The

unanimous passage of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Securities (CARES) Act—a historic emergency stimulus and relief package exceeding an unheard of \$2 trillion for businesses, public health institutions, and individuals alike—was the first of many fiscal policies executed over the course of the pandemic that kept the economy pumping. It worked, as real GDP growth in Quarter 2 of 2021 is estimated to be 6.7%, a solid follow-up to the 6.3% growth of Quarter 1.<sup>755</sup> This lively growth is accompanied, however, by rising inflation rates; Over the 12 month period ending in August 2021, inflation of all goods rose 5.4 percent.<sup>756</sup> The flood of federal dollars into the economy ensured that consumer spending has rebounded much sooner than suppliers have been able to return to their usual output, so inflation is being driven by a combination of devalued currency and demand-pull inflation. Fed Chair Jerome Powell insists that the high inflation rates will moderate to a friendlier rate by the end of 2022, but the inflation pressures are likely to remain high for the remainder of 2021 and quite some time thereafter.<sup>757</sup>

Further evidence to assert how directly, completely, and abruptly this global public health crisis has affected life is not necessary to rehearse. Gen Zers have been affected by businesses closing down and quarantine measures just as other generations have. School closures particularly affect Gen Z, however, since nearly all are still in the educational system. Many teenagers missed out on traditional rites-of-passage such as prom and graduation. The shift to remote learning, especially with curricula imagined for and usually delivered in face-to-face settings, harmed the educational experience of students in K-12 and postsecondary.<sup>758</sup>

While the pandemic has unfortunately had a long and monumental impact on everybody's lives, COVID-19 is distinct for Gen Z because it has occurred within their formative years, allowing for it to constitute an imprint event. The formative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are likely to be reflected in the core characteristics of Gen Z's consciousness. One can

speculate that their perspectives on health care, public health, government preparedness, and civil liberties might be changed or solidified in some ways. The surge in remote schooling and working afforded by teleconferencing platforms such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams might further complement Gen Z's familiarity and comfort with online digital connection technology; the prominence that these tools have when the pandemic ends, and the expectations Gen Zers harbor for them in the classroom and workplace, might irrevocably be altered for the generation of digital natives. Or the protracted dust up with remote learning will cement for Gen Z, and for the educators who still teach them and will teach their successor generations, the value of face-to-face settings for education. In a different vein, the passage of CARES and its subsequent iterations might affect their perception of the role of government, and ills of employer-based health insurance exposed by this crisis might guide this generation's views on single-payer healthcare.<sup>759</sup> Like security measures instituted following 9/11, irrevocable changes in health standards and the measures used to ensure them follow the conclusion of the COVID-19 pandemic; how will the characteristics of open-mindedness, mental health, and risk-aversion be affected by these changes? Reports of the lockdown motivating substantial reductions in visible air pollution in cities around the world might further cement Gen Z's views on Climate Change, which will be discussed in the following chapter. Their socially conscious compassion might be reinforced by the outpouring of gratitude for healthcare professionals who put themselves on the frontline to save lives and other essential workers who permit some semblance of normal life with their work. And, precipitated by another steep economic downturn in their young lifetimes—one which might supplant the Great Recession and, possibly, the Great Depression—the characteristics of pragmatism and staunch financial conscientiousness might become even more linked with the Gen Z identity.

The history of the COVID-19 pandemic is unwritten and its lasting impacts for the world—and for Gen Z’s generational consciousness—is unknown, but the present crisis will undoubtedly be lodged in the collective memories of all for decades to come.

The pandemic was not the only defining feature of the year 2020 for the United States. Early in the year, the deaths of Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor brought forth the considerations of racial profiling and police violence. On May 25, 2020, the death of George Floyd at the hands of police unleashed a swell of support for the Black Lives Matter movement and forced America to come to terms with the racism perpetuated by systems cultivated during the time when oppression was not just legal but the goal. That summer saw protests, clashes with the police, riots, looting, and more deaths. It may have been the largest social movement in American history.<sup>760</sup> It was undoubtedly a difficult time for America, one that affected those of all ages, but one which may have been imprinted on Gen Z. It dispelled any notion that the most diverse generation thus far would live in a world without the ugly head of racism rearing itself. Greater conscientiousness of systemic racism may very well tie into the socially conscious attribute of the generation. The suffering unveiled by these killings may also make Gen Z more pragmatic—or jaded—about the realities of the injustices that pervade American society today as a consequence of the mistreatment, discrimination, and oppression imposed by and suffered by members of generations before their time. And for Gen Z’s mental health, the immediate and unfiltered access this generation has to the sight of a man begging for and losing his life across eight grueling minutes is one no other generation had in their youth. The trauma that may arise from such access is something unique to this generation, too.

As a final note, I must give credit where it is due. Strauss and Howe used their generational cycles to predict that a great secular crisis would come in the year 2020. The vague

generalizations about this “hinge of history” did not pinpoint a global pandemic, but they landed the mark well enough and have likely earned a new class of generational researchers adherent to the cyclical model with their prediction.<sup>761</sup> A regretful bravo.

## Chapter 3: Climate Change as an Imprint Event

As discussed in the introduction of this paper, the number of severe environmental disasters—in the form of hellish forest fires, destructive hurricanes, vicious droughts, consuming floods, and relentless sea level rise—and the extent of the damage they cause to the economic, emotional, and physical well-being of humans around the world continues to grow. This chapter will provide a brief summarization of climate science detailing the link between these extreme weather events and human activities contributing to climate change, referred to as anthropogenic climate change.

The scientific foundation for this chapter is derived from two seminal reports published in recent years. The first is the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)'s special report on global warming released in 2018, with updated information from the 2021 “Physical Science Basis” of the IPCC's forthcoming Sixth Assessment Report. The IPCC is a body of the United Nations charged with the responsibility to comprehensively research and assess the state of anthropogenic climate change, its associated effects on nature and society alike, and possible response avenues to better inform international treaties such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.<sup>762</sup> With hundreds of contributing authors that draw from tens-of-thousands of scientific papers, each IPCC report is the culmination of many years of monumental effort; outside of the trio of special reports they released across recent years, their last major venture was the Fifth Assessment Report released in 2014.<sup>763</sup> Their work is thorough, encompassing, and the authority of climate science. The second seminal report is the two-volume *Fourth National Climate Assessment* (NCA4) released in 2017 and 2018; the first volume, *Climate Science Special Report*, works alongside the second volume, *Impacts, Risks, and Adaptation in the United States*, to detail the extent of human-induced climate change and the

consequences such a phenomenon produces for the United States specifically.<sup>764</sup> NCA4 was principally written by over thirty highly-qualified experts with backgrounds in academia, the public sector, and the private sector, and it drew on the research of more than 300 experts.<sup>765</sup> The multi-year production underwent a rigorous six-step verification and review process wherein multiple relevant subcommittees under the United States Global Change Research Program as well as the scientific community at large had opportunities to challenge the findings. The completed Volume II of NCA4 was released on Black Friday, 2018, in what appeared to be a politically motivated maneuver to dampen the non-partisan document's impact; Fridays have historically served as dump days for the White House's particularly unflattering news—this has been immortalized in Aaron Sorkin's classic political drama *The West Wing*—and America's busiest consumer holiday seemed an auspicious occasion to swallow up the revelations the report contained.<sup>766</sup> The findings of the IPCC's special report and the dual volumes of NCA4, despite attempts to obfuscate or conceal them, shatter any ambiguity on the matter. Climate change is a real threat that is worsening, and to quote the IPCC's position on how humans have influenced such climate change: "It is unequivocal that human influence has warmed the atmosphere, ocean and land."<sup>767</sup>

The reach of climate change penetrates the lives of every human regardless of generation or nation. For Generation Z, however, the mounting crisis serves as a prominent imprint event. Potentially influencing the shared characteristics Gen Zers possess, the common placement of this unfolding event in their developmental years has left the crisis—and its costly effects—as a distinct landmark on their parameter of experience. As awareness of the strengthening threat of climate change rises, so too do this generation's concerns thereof. The lasting impacts on this generation's identity, especially in regards to civic-mindedness and environmental attitudes, will



likely be substantial; this chapter attempts to reveal some such impacts. Given that the Generation Z I speak of throughout this paper operates from an American parameter of experience (think back to the geographic and temporal aspects of generation location), the climate effects I mention in this chapter pertain specifically to the North American region of the world.

### **Climate Change Cause and Effect**

The core, but not entirety, of climate change is derived from global warming. Compared to the pre-industrial baseline for Global Mean Surface Temperature (GMST) in the years 1850-1900, the 2011-2020 decade saw a 1.09°C increase in average temperature.<sup>768</sup> NCA4 affirmed that, yes, the United States is subject to global climate patterns, for an increase of 1.8°F (an equivalent change of 1°C) was experienced across America since the start of the 20th century.<sup>769</sup> Of this increase in average temperatures, 0.65°C came during the time span of 1986-2016.<sup>770</sup> The World Meteorological Organization (WMO) contends an increase of 0.2°C has occurred over the period 2015-2019 compared to 2011-2015 levels.<sup>771</sup> The globe is not only warming, it is warming at an accelerated rate. These stark changes cannot convincingly be explained entirely by natural climate variations or solar output changes; the experts draw a clear causation line that leads from the explosion in greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, particularly but not exclusively among carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>), to the large-scale industrialization of the latter half of the 19th century.<sup>772</sup> The greenhouse effect, of course, is the most prominent way human behavior induces warming. To give the basics: solar radiation hits the Earth's surface, and some of that heat is radiated back out into space while some of it is retained via the GHGs which capture that heat in the atmosphere and re-emit it down to the surface. It's a necessary natural process that makes life

hospitable on Earth. But with excess GHGs in the atmosphere, excess heat is being retained and our global temperature rises as a result. Since industrialization, humans have been sending a flurry of excess GHGs into the atmosphere, and we continue to do so at a still-increasing rate.

Energy-related CO<sub>2</sub> emissions alone pumped 33 gigatons (Gt) of warming gases into the atmosphere in 2019, matching 2018 as the highest year of such emissions on record.<sup>773</sup> The recent IPCC report contextualizes why this degree of emissions is so bafflingly high: “In 2019, atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations were higher than at any time in at least 2 million years (high confidence), and concentrations of CH<sub>4</sub> and N<sub>2</sub>O were higher than at any time in at least 800,000 years (very high confidence).”<sup>774</sup> The acceleration in the rise of global temperature originates not just from continued human-induced emissions but also the positive feedback loop (meaning the trend strengthens) from Earth’s natural climate system. This is evident in issues such as permafrost melt—which can release long-dormant GHGs into the atmosphere—and the likelihood that rising temperatures will diminish the ocean’s capacity to serve as a crucial carbon sink (uptaking CO<sub>2</sub> out of the atmosphere) because the solubility of carbon dioxide is reduced as water temperature increases.<sup>775</sup>

Carbon dioxide emissions are not the only way human behavior is exacerbating the greenhouse effect. Land uses such as forestry and agriculture, including the robust livestock sector, are principal contributors of key greenhouse gases methane (CH<sub>4</sub>) and nitrous oxide (N<sub>2</sub>O); based on emissions data in the decade ending in 2016, the IPCC finds that 23% of total net human-induced emissions of GHGs stem from agriculture, forestry, and other related land uses,<sup>776</sup> with an estimated 14.5% of total GHG emissions originating from the livestock sector in particular.<sup>777</sup> It is notable that not all human behavior immediately translates to a warming effect, for some human-caused aerosol emissions produce a cooling effect because they reflect the solar

radiation that would otherwise hit the surface. Human behavior that produces a warming effect greatly outweighs that which produces a cooling effect, so the overall contribution of post-industrial human behavior to the climate is indeed one of warming. IPCC researchers estimate that 1.07°C of the observed increase in GMST since pre-industrial levels was driven by human behavior.<sup>778</sup> Humans undoubtedly have the dominant role in these observed climate changes and the effects which are created by such changes.

It's important to note that recognition of humanity's potential impact on the global climate system is not brand new. Early revelations about the underlying forces of climate change came long before the signs of their effects. Back in the 1800s, physicists Joseph Fourier and John Tyndall pioneered understanding of Earth's greenhouse effect and the gases which can contribute to that effect.<sup>779</sup> In 1896, carbon dioxide and industrial coal-burning were linked with greenhouse effect's warming consequences by Swedish chemist Svante Arrhenius; he was awarded the Nobel Prize in chemistry some few years later for unrelated work.<sup>780</sup> At the time, he believed that any anthropomorphic emissions of CO<sub>2</sub> heightening the mean temperature of the Earth were beneficial, for it meant that humanity would escape any otherwise assured ice age.<sup>781</sup> However, his prediction that atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> counts influenced by human behavior could have direct effects on temperature increase has been verified by scores of researchers since then. Guy Stewart Callendar theorized in 1938 that the observed increase in GMST over the preceding half-century could reasonably be attributed to the large release of carbon dioxide over the same period.<sup>782</sup> In 1958, Charles David Keeling partnered with the Scripps Institution of Oceanography and the US Weather Bureau to analyze atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> levels in the remote areas of Antarctica and Mauna Loa Observatory, Hawaii.<sup>783</sup> Keeling made two momentous discoveries. Seasonal variations in atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations occurred from spring plant

growth breathing in the vital gas, and there was an emergent pattern of sustained increase of carbon dioxide ppm (parts per million) in the atmosphere which coincided with fossil fuel use.<sup>784</sup> He continued his work year after year, and the continuous incline in average CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations became known as the “Keeling Curve.”<sup>785</sup> It’s more of a line, one that’s growing steeper. But Keeling’s work helped verify that carbon dioxide, a greenhouse gas linked with a reported increase in temperatures, is taking up more of the atmosphere each year. Human behavior like fossil fuel combustion and land use changes such as deforestation and livestock production were also clearly contributing to this rise in CO<sub>2</sub> and thus to the rise in temperature via the greenhouse effect. By the 1970s, these discussions of global warming had arrived in earnest.<sup>786</sup> Since then, as our understanding of how and why this climactic change was coming about, our understanding of the effects such change would bring deepened as well.

The extent of these effects has been well documented. NCA4 Vol. I notes that the average concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere is now firmly beyond 400 parts per million (ppm), the highest since the mid-Piacenzian Warm Period about 3 million years ago when temperatures were at least 2.5°C higher and sea levels were at least 30 feet higher.<sup>787</sup> In today’s industrial era, initiated by the CO<sub>2</sub>-associated increases in global temperature, sea level rise has been significant, and it too is accelerating. The median sea level has risen steadily over the decades since the 1920s, sinking American coastlines about 9 inches,<sup>788</sup> which falls in line with estimates of global mean sea level rise of about 7-8 inches (0.2m) fueled by the thermal expansion of warmer ocean water and the increased volume of melted ice sheet runoff.<sup>789</sup> The authors stress that this rate of sea level rise in the past century is greater than that experienced in any century in at least three millennia, and nearly half of this rise has occurred since the 1990s.<sup>790</sup> Complemented by a 2019 WMO report which stated, compared to an annual mean rise

in sea levels of 3.2 mm since 1993, “Over the five-year period May 2014-2019, the rate of global mean sea-level rise has amounted to 5 mm per year, compared with 4 mm per year in the 2007-2016 ten-year period.”<sup>791</sup> That annual rise of 3.2mm would amount to about 12 inches of global sea level rise by the end of the century, but as the pace of sea level rise hastens in the 21st century, such an estimate may be exceedingly tame.

Indications of severe consequences of anthropomorphic climate change for America in particular are evident in a variety of areas beyond sea level. Throughout the 1900s, the amount of rainfall from single-day precipitation events has increased.<sup>792</sup> In the western United States from the mid-1950s to 2016, there were marked declines in snowpack, which coincides with a decrease of nearly a million square miles of minimum Arctic sea ice extent since the late 1970s, a phenomenon discussed more heavily in the introduction.<sup>793</sup> In the contiguous United States, no clear pattern of change can be described for droughts according to the Palmer drought severity index.<sup>794</sup> The 2021 IPCC “Physical Science Basis” report, however, affirms that there has been an observed increase in drought in at least the Western portion of the United States.<sup>795</sup>

In regards to America’s batch of the hydrosphere, the battering of its ecosystems by the effects of climate change are patently obvious as well. On both sides of American shores, the average distribution of marine wildlife is shifting to further depths (by 20 feet) and further North (by 10 miles) in their hunt for cooler waters.<sup>796</sup> Oceans—carbon sinks which act as a regulatory bastion against the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere—have suffered from acidification as a result of their inordinate carbon uptake of late, so much so that they are 30% more acidic now than they were before the start of the industrial revolution.<sup>797</sup> Acidification, which can impede the ability for coral and shelled organisms like oysters to create their skeletons

or shells, joins warming and deoxygenation as key stressors climate change places on oceanic ecosystems.<sup>798</sup>

Climate change has a pronounced impact on the severity and frequency of extreme weather events, and one needs not look any further than the most recent decade of American history to find evidence of this. Over 10 million acres, larger than the state of Maryland, were scored from wildfires in 2015; in 2017, a ferocious conflagration claimed more than 15,000 structures across California.<sup>799</sup> In 2020, the largest fire in state history, the August Complex Fire, burned more than a million acres.<sup>800</sup> In July 2021, the Dixie Fire nearly took the title when it burned through more than 960,000 acres.<sup>801</sup> In 2018, wildfire season ravaged the California landscape, producing the most destructive and deadliest fire in state history despite not being among the longest or largest fires: the Camp Fire.<sup>802</sup> It is telling that despite significant advances in fire suppression techniques and technology, this fire was the deadliest American wildfire in a century.<sup>803</sup> Research published by the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America (PNAS)<sup>804</sup> in 2016 heavily linked fuel aridity—the dryness of trees and other vegetation which makes them more prone to catching fire—with anthropogenic increases in atmospheric temperature and vapor pressure deficit. As a result, the extent of forest fire areas in the western region of the United States nearly doubled, and the duration of high-risk fire potential during a given year extended more than a week on average between the mid-1980s and the mid-2010s.<sup>805</sup> This constitutes human-caused exacerbations of the natural climate variations which did contribute to the increased fuel aridity and thus fire susceptibility of the region during the past decade. NCA4 supplements the PNAS report, finding that the average acres burned by wildfires has steadily increased since the 1980s.<sup>806</sup> All this affirms the findings that heat waves have more than doubled in average length since the 1960s.<sup>807</sup>

The fraught hurricane seasons of recent times and the near future signifies yet another way that climate change—particularly global warming—is facilitating dire consequences in extreme weather events. The notorious 2017 Hurricane season—featuring Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria—showcased the effects of powerful forces of nature augmented by climate change. Hurricane Maria fractured Puerto Rico’s energy infrastructure and degraded living conditions in ways still unrecovered.<sup>808</sup> A quarter of structures in the Florida Keys were wiped away by Hurricane Irma, and Hurricane Harvey inflicted rainfalls of 30 inches on nearly 7 million people.<sup>809</sup> The source of such an active hurricane season is warm water temperatures, which fuels the air with moisture necessary for hurricane formation and intensification.<sup>810</sup> The North Atlantic has been seeing above-average tropical storm activity as of late likely due to such conditions. The 2020 season was expected to be active, but it was record-setting. Beating out the 28 named tropical storms of the notorious 2005 hurricane season, 30 storms were strong enough to be designated with a name in 2020.<sup>811</sup> 2021 has also been particularly active, with 20 named storms as of the end of October, placing it in third place alongside 1933.<sup>812</sup> Scientists are examining how tropical cyclone seasons might change as warming continues. One report suggests that while the frequency of such storms may actually decrease, the intensity of these storms may increase.<sup>813</sup> The way things are currently heading, it seems that the severity *and* frequency of storms will continue to increase, which paints a perilous future for those residing on the Gulf and the East Coast.

If these environmental perils, and the untold damages they’ve caused in the lives of millions, remain unconvincing, the ever-strident rattle of economic losses might prove a worthy remedy for lingering doubts. For as William D. Nordhaus, a Yale economist awarded half of the split Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences in 2018, demonstrated in his recognized body of work:

there exist interrelated effects of climate change and the economy.<sup>814</sup> That 2017 Atlantic hurricane season resulted in over \$260 billion in damages, making it the costliest tropical cyclone season on record.<sup>815</sup> The Government Accountability Office (GAO), a non-partisan audit institution of the legislative branch, found that the extreme weather events associated with climate change has cost the federal government specifically—read: taxpayers—over \$350 billion in the decade ending in 2017.<sup>816</sup> The Universal Ecological Fund reasoned their call to climate action by noting that at least \$240 billion *a year* in total economic losses stem from the effects of climate change, with that number rising to \$360 billion a year within the next decade as the frequency of billion-dollar extreme weather events continues to increase.<sup>817</sup> These numbers and estimates are different methods of supporting, unequivocally, the assertion that climate change is detrimental to more than just our environment. Unsurprisingly, its adverse effects are amplified for historically marginalized and low-income groups.<sup>818</sup>

This collection of evidence affords the reasonable reader only one conclusion: a human-caused climate crisis is upon us. It is the conclusion scientists reached when faced with such overwhelming facts; in a 2020 article published in *BioScience*, over 11,000 scientists from around the world put their name to such an understanding: “we declare...clearly and unequivocally that planet Earth is facing a climate emergency.”<sup>819</sup> The consequences described thus far pertain to a world afflicted by 1°C warming above the baseline level. Imagine how these consequences will persist and be compounded by further warming. Warming we are barreling toward in our current state of affairs. This is the true nature of the climate crisis. It is not about stopping its arrival. It is about mitigating the fallout.



## Climate Change: Climate Futures and Mitigation Efforts

Because of the climate's feedback system, the warming effect of activities like CO<sub>2</sub> emission will persist for centuries.<sup>820</sup> Global warming, and the associated adverse effects, will not be undone even if all GHG emissions ceased overnight. However, the growth of human-caused global warming, and the extent of those adverse effects, *can* be mitigated. The chief target of climate change mitigation is preventing Global Mean Surface Temperature from breaking 2°C above pre-industrial levels, ideally keeping it at or below 1.5°C, by the year 2100.<sup>821</sup> To achieve such a feat, massive structural changes across economic sectors and in most all nations must occur. Limitation of temperature levels to this range will require net-zero carbon emissions by mid-century and net reductions in other GHG by 2030, according to a climate scientist involved in the Fifth Assessment Report released by the IPCC.<sup>822</sup> We may overshoot these thresholds—we almost certainly will overshoot the 1.5°C rise over pre-industrial temperatures—yet still stabilize the mean increase in temperatures to either of these goals by the 22nd century deadline, but intense mitigation efforts would need to begin now.

The IPCC developed Representative Concentration Pathways (RCP) to contrast the effectiveness of varying degrees of mitigation strategies. RCPs signal the target radiative forcing—the relationship of solar energy absorbed by the Earth versus that which is radiated back out into space, measured in Watts per square meter (W/m<sup>2</sup>)—achieved in a certain climate future scenario. Factors which affect radiative forcing include greenhouse gases, but they also include aerosols such as smoke and Earth's albedo, which is the reflectivity of its surface (whiter surfaces like ice and clouds are more reflective) and which can be affected by anthropomorphic land use such as deforestation.<sup>823</sup> The four RCPs, which all denote the increase in radiative forcing in W/m<sup>2</sup> in the year 2100 relative to preindustrial conditions, are as follows: RCP2.6,

RCP4.5, RCP6.0, and RCP8.5. For clarification, RCP2.6 represents +2.6 W/m<sup>2</sup> of radiative forcing over pre-industrial levels. These RCP scenarios provide a snapshot into the scale of mitigation efforts; for RCP8.5, emissions growth continues rather unabated while the RCP2.6 scenario suggests a future of massive systematic efforts to reduce radiative forcing factors such as net GHG emissions. In the IPCC's understanding, the RCP2.6 pathway presents a strong likelihood of remaining entirely below the 2°C threshold and stabilizing around 1.5°C in 2100; in fact, it is the only RCP with a Global Mean Surface Temperature change below +2.5°C, for end-of-century mean estimates for RCP4.6 sits at 2.5°C, RCP6.0 at 2.9°C, and RCP8.5 at 4.3°C. The upper-bound of the range of RCP8.5 is 5.7°C whereas the low-end for RCP2.6 is 0.6°C above pre-industrial levels in the year 2100; both extremes are unlikely, but they detail just how variable climate futures can be given the sorts of actions we take.

Calls for limitation of average global temperature rise over pre-industrial levels are so grave because the negative impacts of the increase thus far experienced (1°C) will be multiplied in magnitude. This is apparent in forecasts of the economic toll weather events related to climate change will levy. GAO warned by mid-century, the annual cost of climate change that the federal government will incur will be \$35 billion; by the turn of the new century, that annual price tag could exceed \$112 billion.<sup>824</sup> The National Resource Defense Council—a national nonprofit organization centered on environmental conservation—wagered that the *annual* health costs to be borne per year in the United States as a result of climate change factors including pollutants and extreme weather events is over \$840 billion.<sup>825</sup> The NOAA keeps a tally of the number and total cost of billion-dollar weather events that have occurred in the United States since 1980. Over 4 decades, more than 300 billion-dollar weather events have resulted in an accumulated cost of more than *2 trillion dollars*.<sup>826</sup> And as we've seen with other elements of this climate

crisis, the frequency and severity of these billion-dollar disasters are increasing. 29 billion-dollar events occurred throughout the 1980s and 123 billion-dollar events occurred in the 2010s.<sup>827</sup> More disasters of this magnitude occurred in the last 5-year range of 2016 to 2020 (81 disasters) than in the 1990s decade (53 disasters) and the 2000s decade (63 disasters). The same trend is observable when average per-decade is taken into account. From an average of \$18.4 billion in the 1980s to an average of \$84.5 billion in the 2010s, more extreme weather events are clearly bringing forth more extreme economic damage.<sup>828</sup> With just two years in the 2020s decade—one of which is yet to be fully completed—this trend is on track to continue. At least 40 disasters give a decadal average of at least \$102B thus far.<sup>829</sup>

Climate-related risks on human societies and natural ecosystems are heightened by any degree of warming, but risks are intensified by greater degrees of warming even in our best-case pathways. The half-celsius point difference of 2°C and 1.5°C afforded by a successful RCP2.6 can mean a difference of 4 inches in sea level rise, which would likely prevent 10 million from exposure to associated risk/impacts.<sup>830</sup> The IPCC projects with high confidence that the frequency and intensity of hot days will increase, with warming occurring primarily over inhabited land regions. Similarly, the frequency and intensity of precipitation events—especially associated with tropical cyclones—will drench the fields of Earth in greater amounts. Flood hazard areas will expand. Limitation to 1.5°C would reduce degradation of biodiversity which would arise from species extinction, habitat loss, and disrupted migration patterns.<sup>831</sup> Cryospheric changes are expected to worsen, with significant ice sheet dissipation—likely with iceless summers in the Arctic Ocean, a catastrophic possibility for wildlife there—as well as compounded glacier retreats and permafrost thawing.<sup>832</sup> The story for pathways RCP4.5 with a mean of 2.5°C and RCP8.5 with a mean 4.3°C temperature levels over pre-industrial averages

will be worse; the latter pathway, of course, represents a more dismal climate future—to the economic tune of \$224 billion per year in damages—than RCP4.5.<sup>833</sup> The higher pathway will result in over nine thousand more individuals dying per year in America’s 49 most populous cities due to the increased temperature disparity, guaranteeing that at least double that many individuals will endure emotional suffering in addition to any non-fatal damages sustained by their persons or to their livelihoods. Further, revenue streams will dry up in these higher pathway futures. Coastal properties and real estate will be defunct, more electricity will be needed to cool down homes and business, and recreational activities such as winter sports and fishing will be hindered. Nearly a billion labor hours will be lost, slicing into productivity across various economic sectors.<sup>834</sup> Another grave consequence that will only get worse in the coming decades is climate migration. The World Bank estimates that climate change may force internal climate migration of more than 143 million people in three subregions of the world: Latin America, South Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>835</sup> It is not a stretch to imagine that as these economies stall and living conditions worsen, millions of climate refugees will seek entry into more developed nations such as the United States. As America stands to face its own substantial internal climate-induced migration away from the dryer, more wildfire-prone West and the hotter, more hurricane-prone South,<sup>836</sup> a perpetual refugee crisis is bound to present logistical, economic, and political troubles. On top of all this, NCA4 authors offer the sobering perspective that there is a realm of unanticipated consequences from augmented climate change about which, due to present data, they cannot yet reasonably speculate.<sup>837</sup> The possibility of compounded extreme weather events are latent risks to bear in mind when viewing this climate crisis.

The effort to ensure that our climate future is on one of the friendlier pathways, even with overshooting, will require a degree of global coordination and commitment that is daunting.

NCA4 argues cumulative carbon emissions must remain under 800 gigatons of carbon (GtC) in the atmosphere to keep temperatures below the 2°C threshold; their projections suggest we have 230 GtC of emissions left before we exceed this limit.<sup>838</sup> On pathway RCP4.6, this emission level would be surpassed before 2040. Efforts needed to curtail this level of emissions are dramatic but not unclear. Authors with the World Resources Institute call for a “CarbonShot Initiative” in the United States to dramatically reduce the amount of carbon dioxide emissions to net neutral levels by 2050 so that we may stay within the 2°C threshold.<sup>839</sup> They evaluate a host of carbon removal options which the federal government could foster or implement as policy to secure a sustainable climate future. Their carbon removal pathways included surefire tree restoration programs—land’s natural carbon sink could cumulatively remove more than 7 GtCO<sub>2</sub> by 2050—and direct air-capture technologies, wherein carbon dioxide is removed from the air and typically sequestered deep underground, which could reach the capacity to remove up to 1 GtCO<sub>2</sub> per year by mid-century if given meaningful investment over the next few decades.<sup>840</sup> Additionally, possibilities for carbon removal lie in effective management of agricultural soil, development of enhanced root crops, and acceleration of natural carbon mineralization processes. Pursuit of all these pathways would require federal investments at an annual average of over \$5 billion according to their estimates.<sup>841</sup> This cost is noticeably and significantly less than the yearly cost of damages incurred by extreme weather events.

A regulation governments can impose to curb emissions is a carbon tax. Each ton of GHG emitted by corporations is subject to a specified excise under such a policy; per economic theory, emitters will be prompted to limit the tons of GHG they produce or turn to alternative energies and technologies in order to avoid the tax.<sup>842</sup> Carbon taxes can produce a hearty source of revenue for federal governments, which can be reinvested in further climate mitigation

measures.<sup>843</sup> No such federal tax exists in the United States. Nordhaus is one vocal proponent of this form of mitigation, suggesting that significant carbon tax policies should be instituted to secure long-term climate and economic health even if they dampen revenue streams for producers and raise costs of goods and services for consumers in the short-term.<sup>844</sup>

Another well-known carbon reduction initiative is cap-and-trade systems. Like a carbon tax, emissions trading systems incentivize emitters to gradually shift toward cleaner energy sources. The “cap” is a limit on the pollution a region will permit; allowances are distributed, sometimes through an auction, to emitting facilities.<sup>845</sup> The “trade” comes in when facilities that have complied with the cap and thus have excess pollution-allowances can trade or sell them to other facilities. In this way, the set target for environmental protection can be achieved through a more market-driven incentivization program.<sup>846</sup> Caps must be set in a goldilocks range, however, so that genuine climate mitigation can occur without stifling the economic strength of businesses transitioning to renewable alternatives. Despite estimations that it would eventually grant a sum \$24 billion *reduction* in budget deficits, legislation providing for a federal cap-and-trade policy never made it to the Senate floor after narrowly passing in the House in 2009.<sup>847</sup> Similar mitigation measures include planting more than a trillion trees to serve as a carbon sink, tightening fuel-efficiency standards for personal and commercial vehicles, and providing other incentives to push industries toward renewable energy sources. These policies could help slow down and minimize America’s contributions to climate change on a national scale, but they remain unimplemented.

The disheartening tragedy of the climate change crisis is that it is not inevitable. With the wealth of scientific knowledge briefly discussed here, policymakers and world leaders have yet to undertake the meaningful actions necessary to mitigate climate change and adapt our societies

to a climate changed biosphere. At present, not only are our current national and international commitments to emissions reductions *not* capable of limiting temperature increase to even the 2°C threshold, but we are not fulfilling those commitments. Goals set in accordance with the non-legally-binding Paris Climate Agreement to reduce GHG emissions by the year 2030 do not effectively curtail temperature rise to below 2°C and may not even for 3°C.<sup>848</sup> Meeting these goals *and* massively furthering efforts to magnify emission reduction and scale up removal capacity is necessary to prevent such an overshoot by century's end. The United Nations Environment Program releases an annual Emissions Gap Report to assess the status and future of greenhouse gas emissions on the global scale and reinforced this grave insight that current climate policies fail to comply with both insufficient unconditional and insufficient conditional commitments in their 2020 edition.<sup>849</sup> Should countries actually follow through with their unconditional nationally-determined commitments (NDCs), total international GHG emissions for the year 2030 would be 56 GtCO<sub>2e</sub>; the metric denotes the gigatons of various greenhouse gas emissions which produce the same warming effect as an equivalent amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere.<sup>850</sup> To ensure warming eases to below 2°C in 2100, global emissions would need to be at 41 GtCO<sub>2e</sub>; the present mitigation commitments, if fully and successfully implemented, would only bring emissions down to 54 GtCO<sub>2e</sub>.<sup>851</sup> In order to successfully align with the 1.5°C pathway outlined by the IPCC with limited overshoot, climate policies that more than halve our current rate of emissions would need to be instituted—global emissions would need to fall to around 25 GtCO<sub>2e</sub>. In short, our bare minimum pledges are woefully short of what they must be in order to curb warming to reasonable levels. And of course, current policies fall short of even those bare minimum pledges. Global total GHG emissions in 2030 are currently predicted to be 59 GtCO<sub>2e</sub>.<sup>852</sup> Remember, since 2019 emissions were 52.4 GtCO<sub>2e</sub>, the effort is

still on slowing down the growth of global GHG emissions and not yet on amplifying the reduction of such emissions.<sup>853</sup>

America's place in this bleak outlook is clear. The United States' emissions have been declining for more than a decade and the nation is on track (thanks in part to the impact of COVID-19 on energy consumption during the past year) to meet its 2010 Cancun Pledge to reduce emissions to 17 percent below 2005.<sup>854</sup> This is commendable, but America is still the highest per-capita emitter of GHG. As world leader and the most influential state, America must be at the forefront of the global effort to mitigate this global climate crisis. Other nations which are still industrializing and thus still dramatically increasing their GHG emissions, such as China, will feel no pressure to rapidly course correct if the United States is unconcerned with making meaningful strides in its own emission reduction, let alone that of the rest of the world. Gen Z has a vested interest in ensuring that the United States, a powerful member of the global community, adopts more intensive climate policy for itself and advocates for similar policy to be implemented in other nations as well. It's important to note this because while climate activists, and certainly young climate activists, are operating all over the world to raise awareness for mitigation needs and options that must be taken on a global scale to truly be effective, the social generation referred to in this paper as "Gen Z" is molded from the American cultural-historical perspective and their efforts will chiefly pertain to seeding change in the American government's approach to climate policy. Gen Z is not the only collection of climate activists pushing for their nation to have a more aggressive response to climate change, nor is the climate crisis meaningfully mitigated if only Gen Z is successful in strengthening their nation's climate policy. This is a global crisis after all, and its global consequences are more pronounced in nations less developed and less wealthy than the United States. But because of the international influence



America has and its ongoing role as one of the world's largest contributors to the climate crisis, Gen Z succeeding in their particular climate activism and doing so soon is certainly essential in resolving the crisis.

## **Climate Change and Gen Z**

The effect that climate change has had on Generation Z—and the signs that it has tethered generational members together in a common identity—is evident in the awareness of the climate change crisis and the concern Zers express over it. A growing sense of urgency—fermented by these revelations on the pathways necessary to achieve secure climate futures and how distant current policies are from these pathways—has also helped unite a segment of this generation in confronting this crisis. The following section examines the extent of the climate change imprint event on Gen Z.

The logic that youth—more inundated with extreme weather occurrences attributed to human-induced global warming and doomed to face worsening impacts as they grow older—will more adamantly recognize and fret over climate change extends to Gen Zers, the generation thus far burdened with the most empirical evidence of the climate change crisis. Generational researchers have already begun to credit climate change as a defining experience, after all.<sup>855</sup>

Surveys of and including Gen Zers point to the conscious recognition of climate change as a defining experience of their time. Motivated by the string of costliest-ever disasters which dotted their upbringing, 76% of Gen Zers have considered themselves concerned about global warming.<sup>856</sup> A Future of Humanity survey conducted by Amnesty International supplemented this portrait of a concerned generation, for climate change was ranked the most important issue

facing the world by young adults.<sup>857</sup> In 2013, a Unilever white paper examined the depth of knowledge and concern Zer children aged 8-12 had about global topics, finding that 80% knew of man's impact on the environment and 71% were concerned about this impact; fewer knew about climate change specifically (63%) and about half (54%) were concerned about it.<sup>858</sup>

A compilation of five in-depth surveys by the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication noted that younger adults were more likely to affirm climate change is happening, human-caused, and worrisome than older adults; additionally striking is that there is more agreement across party lines on such affirmations among younger folks.<sup>859</sup> Complementing this finding, Pew Research Center surveyed Gen Z (and Millennial) Republicans to find that they recognized climate change and supported mitigation efforts such as energy alternatives more than their older counterparts.<sup>860</sup> About half of these younger Republicans believed the government was doing too little to reduce the effects of climate change, and more than half felt government action to protect air and water quality was insufficient.<sup>861</sup> Although the percentage of Republicans that want to expand the use of fossil fuels has increased and the percentage that want to expand the use of renewable energy sources has decreased since the 2020 election, Gen Z Republicans are still far less likely to favor fossil fuel usage and far more likely to support energy alternatives.<sup>862</sup> For instance, 48% of Gen Z conservatives favor more offshore oil and gas drilling compared to 79% of Boomer conservatives. In that same 2021 Pew Research Center study, further confirmation of the heightened concern for climate change among this youngest generation can be found. While Millennials aren't too far behind, more Gen Zers declared addressing climate change as one of their top priorities (77%) and as their top priority (37%) than other generations.<sup>863</sup> Additionally, more Gen Zers talked about the need to combat climate change at least once per week (67%), saw social media content related to climate change (56%),

engaged with social media content related to climate change (45%), and took activist action beyond merely engaging with social media posts (32%) than the other generations.<sup>864</sup>

Roser-Renouf et al. distilled the motivation to engage in climate action into four key beliefs: (1) certainty that the climate is changing, (2) perception that negative effects will occur as a result of climate change, (3) belief that humans are partly or mostly causing climate change, and (4) faith in collective efficacy to address climate change.<sup>865</sup> The first two points relate to risk perception, and the latter two to efficacy. The more an individual has of each of these, the likelier they are to turn to activism. The recent prominence of affirmative scientific studies—like the NCA4 and the IPCC’s special assessment and their earlier iterations—as well as increased attention to significant weather events within their formative parameter of experience has certainly elevated the risk perception Gen Z feels about the climate crisis. Heightened risk perception, however, is not enough to spur participation in the social process to combat climate change. With low efficacy, climate action may be impeded by feelings of helplessness, avoidance, or denial that humanity has much to do with contributing to the crisis.<sup>866</sup> Therefore, it’s a particular segment of Gen Z, those who believe that humans can mitigate their negative treatment of climatic processes and thus have higher efficacy, who will spearhead efforts for social change. Remember, the whole of Gen Z has been affected and bound together through the experience of the climate crisis. Not every Gen Zer, however, will interact with this prevailing circumstance of their formative years in the effort to respond to and change it. The small but sturdy portion that do will comprise their own generation unit, and this particular unit of Gen Z will manifest the overall generational consciousness in their interaction with the very crisis that has in part cultivated and crystalized that consciousness. In this way, they’ll elevate the

generation to a social force which is not just affected by historical circumstances but itself begins to affect historical circumstances.

Climate change has given Gen Zers a distinctive outlook on nature and humanity's place within it, cementing an understanding of the power our species wields in destabilizing ecosystems across the globe and the damaging consequences such misuse of power will return back to us. Learning about and perhaps witnessing these instances of environmental havoc may shape their views on the culpability of human actions in such instances, supporting a more hardened pragmatic perspective in line with Gen Z's generational profile. The chief effect of this imprint on this generation, however, is their socially conscious trait. Part IV substantively details the flood of climate change activist groups spearheaded by dedicated Gen Zers endeavoring to make their mark on the world so that it may be passed on in better shape than how it was inherited. Such Zer activists know that to make such improvements in regards to climate change, a great deal of noise and pressure must be sent the way of national legislators and world leaders.

### **Part III Conclusion**

Part III was devoted to Generation Z's status as a social generation formulated by significant imprints and fulcrums and exemplified by an array of generational characteristics. Chapter 2 showcased Generation Z as a *generation as an actuality* rather than merely a cohort; the proposed imprints of digital smart-technology, the Great Recession, gun violence along with terrorism, 2016 and 2020 elections, Covid-19 pandemic, and climate change satisfied the requisites outlined by Mannheim's conception of social generation, for they were significant enough intellectual currents to impress upon the cohort a certain style of perception and belief like no other—a distinct generational identity. This generational identity, configured by the

characteristics and traits shaped by the fulcrums, imprints, and other socio-historical circumstances surrounding Gen Z's developmental period, were explored in Chapter 1; prominent characteristics included their digital native, financially conscious, open-minded, socially conscious, entrepreneurial, pragmatic, stressed mental health, and pragmatic nature. Chapter 3 honed in on the climate change imprint, and it contained a significant amount of evidence in support of the veracity of the climate crisis as a principally man-made issue that is happening, ongoing, and worsening. The chapter also affirmed that Gen Z is intimately aware of and deeply concerned about the consequences they are already enduring and the many that are yet to come.

It is important to note that Gen Z is still coming-of-age, and so their generational consciousness is yet malleable. The generational identity described is likely accurate, but as Gen Z enters the workforce and greater generational research is devoted to their collective character, more conclusive depictions of Gen Z can be made. Additionally, some of the characteristics within the profile may derive from age effects because Zers are still in their youth. When Gen Z is disentangled from youth, the validity of certain characteristics may become more apparent. Nonetheless, it is in youth that lasting beliefs and qualities are forged; taking inventory of their generational identity as they come of age is striking when the iron is hot.

Further, it was paramount to indicate the emergent generational consciousness belonging to Gen Z, for it is from these distinctive qualities that a reasonable assessment about the distinctive place this generation holds in the social process can arise. Generational theory examined in Part I is clear: generations reflect and drive social change via their unique consciousness. In the effort to imagine what social changes Gen Z might produce, it was necessary to pinpoint how Gen Z's consciousness is developing and the ways in which the

culmination of prior historical happenings are manifested in that consciousness—as was the purpose in this Part III. As social and cultural stimuli appear in Gen Z’s future, generational members will operate from the inclinations and traits which compose their generational consciousness in generally predictable ways. It is through this understanding of the generational influences working on Gen Zers that we can meaningfully engage with their potential contributions to the social process and expect, in some capacity, the new direction of history they’ll set forth—the same history that will be programmed into all future generations as a baseline reality.

For instance, Gen Z will likely not impel social change that rolls back advancements in civil liberties for those of minority racial and sexual orientation identities because of the prominence of diversity and acceptance in their overarching generational consciousness; it’s more likely that they’ll spearhead further expansions in civil liberties, such as those pertaining to transgender rights. Zers, in their financially conscious ways, will likely be more expectant and better prepared for ‘sudden’ economic downturns; the impact their inclinations might have on policies and practices regarding speculative investment may shear off the frequency and severity of financial crises. And, most principally, Zers won’t be on the streets protesting for a reinvigoration of the coal and fossil fuel industries. Indeed, the intersection of the climate change crisis with their socially conscious, pragmatic framework represents a major role Gen Z will assume in the social process. Many Zers, in fact, are already precipitating such social change in their youth; in Part IV, this undertaking of social change via climate change activism will be explored in detail.

Before closing out this Part, however, it is important to acknowledge the intragenerational variance which undoubtedly pervades Generation Z and the depiction of its

generational consciousness I have presented here. Though endless influences guide and warp our worldview, we are all ultimately products of ourselves. Though someone belongs to Generation Z, their personality may not include pragmatism and their actions may not be steered by financial conscientiousness. Though the crisis of climate change in the 21st century represents a clear, significant force binding the generation into a common relational experience, there is not a monolithic attitude across all Gen Zers. This intragenerational difference can be delineated through Mannheim's *generation units* concept discussed in Part I. Zers who identify with the reality of climate change and adjust their lifestyle in accordance to that identification constitute a different generation unit than Zers who only identify yet do not respond pointedly, and both of these generation units are separate from the unit composed by those who deny the extent or existence of climate change. Belonging to the same generation, the Zer who composts and the Zer who doesn't take care to limit their water usage might be of separate generation units; likewise, the Zer who might compost and might take care to limit wastefulness belongs to an entirely separate generation unit if they disavow human involvement in climate change. Each embodies the distinct consciousness of the larger social generation, but each also represents a particular segment of that consciousness' manifestation in the real world.

For the purposes of this paper's inquiry focus, I'm most interested in the first of these generation units. Therefore, Gen Z will henceforth be operationalized as the specific generation unit which affirms the crisis nature of climate change and actively acts to remedy it. All climate change activists of the Gen Z cohort, then, fall into this generation unit. Part IV will examine the role activism—particularly among youths—plays in driving social change. Additionally, the swarm of climate change activist groups populated and sometimes created by Gen Zers will be

presented as examples of the early strides this generation is making in affecting the social process and fulfilling their entelechy.



## Part IV: Activism Analyzed

The scope, severity, and urgency of the climate crisis has awakened an activist spirit within Generation Z and their young peers around the world. On March 15, 2019, the Global Climate Strike for Future brought out more than 1 million students around the world in protest against unfettered human-induced warming.<sup>867</sup> In September, a week of climate strikes around the world were capped off with 2 million students and workers taking to the streets, as estimated by event organizers.<sup>868</sup> These efforts to challenge the global systems enabling climate change are manifestations of the Gen Z generational consciousness outlined in Part III, including that climate change functions as a formative imprint, and thus represent opportunities to imagine the specific effect this generation might have on the course of history. For this reason, an evaluation of Gen Z participation in climate change activism is relevant. While units of Gen Z certainly display the social generation's collective identity through involvement in other intellectual currents—such as gun control-related activism—the direness of current climate predictions all but anoints this generation as the last with the capacity to work true mitigation before human actions irrevocably fling us past the best-case scenarios. Inaction is woefully consequential for members of Generation Z. Even for the generational units who don't recognize it. Action, for those who do, is preservation. The health and security of their future is intertwined with the progress they achieve primarily as youth over this next decade. In this way, the analysis of their involvement in climate change activism as a gateway to understand their potential impact on the social landscape makes this particular investigation not only relevant, but essential.

Gen Z will more than likely carve out their niche in the social process via climate change activism; the thumbprint they leave on civilization will be their response to the climate crisis.

Gen Z has the potential to successfully churn out social change through activism because activism is a proven vessel for social change. Activism, as I consider it to be, is conscious participation in activities with the intent to have some transformative effect on social and political matters. This broad definition of activism, which encapsulates the myriad of organized change-making actions citizens can undertake, will be referred to throughout this Part IV.

Chapter 1 will detail the intricacies of behaviors which constitute activism and share examples of dedicated activist efforts which have achieved real, lasting change in society.

Additional aspects relevant to this discussion are the general forms of activism in which Gen Zers engage: youth activism and digital activism. These facets work in tandem with Gen Z's established characteristics to distinguish their interaction with the social process, including with climate advocacy. Often, youth are equipped with certain qualities conducive to the pursuit of societal reformation yet are limited in their avenues to do so. Currently, Gen Z entirely occupies the life stage of youth. Further, digital activism, wherein social media and other online platforms expand the outreach of social movements, is a vital component of this digitally native generation's experience of activism. These dimensions of activism and the effect they have for social change efforts, especially those by Gen Z, are explored in Chapter 2.

In Chapter 3, the deep involvement of various Generation Z units in social change endeavors will be explored. Some prominent activist figures and social movements which reflect the generational consciousness of Gen Z at large and have wrought visible change within society will be spotlighted. Then, I will detail the climate change activist groups created or accessible by Gen Zer youth of our operationalized generation unit who yearn to make their mark on the world—by saving it.

## Chapter 1: Activism as Social Change

The definition of activism described in the chapter introduction indicates its close relationship with the social process. However, a meaningful understanding of the components of activism will better reveal the ways in which activists influence the social order. To begin this discussion, a brief overview of the types and tactics of activism is necessary.

An exceedingly amorphous term, activism has attracted a variety of interpretations from researchers over the past century.<sup>869</sup> A greater variety of approaches to the theoretical concepts and empirical applications underpinning activism exists within relevant scholarship.<sup>870</sup> Some common assumptions contextualize any invocation of activism, however. They are evident in the definitions of terms often used interchangeably with activism just as this paper has done and will continue to do. Civic engagement, social action, and political participation all entail intersecting involvement with civil structures and processes in order to generate some effectual change in society.<sup>871</sup> This change may be rendered through reinforcement, reconfiguration, and/or redefinition of certain priorities, policies, and principles at the core of social systems. Activism, therefore, is closely related with these aforementioned concepts; behaviors which constitute political participation may also constitute activism, as can be said for the rest.

Activism occurs on multiple scales of complexity and organization—from isolated individual choices to local campaigns up to mass actions by social movements—but always entails a sense of mission for institutional, structural, and societal change.<sup>872</sup> Activist groups and organizations are crucial in facilitating social change, for they combine the efforts of many individuals toward a common, well-defined mission. In particular, the advantages of these coalitions include increased outreach and influence, task specialization, and mutual emotional and intellectual support among activists.<sup>873</sup> Whittier<sup>874</sup> defines social movements—the greatest

scale of an activist coalition—as “clusters of organizations, overlapping networks, and individuals” that share a common goal and are “bound together by a collective identity and cultural events.” The sociological field is swollen with studies and theories surrounding the origins and mechanisms of social movements—finely distilled by Donatella della Porta and Mario Diani in *Social Movements: An Introduction*—but a common chord struck among all of them is that such collective action intends to, often successfully, breed societal transformation.<sup>875</sup> Campaigns to sow change, however, need not be full-blown movements to have impact. But the notion that identity-building and identity-reinforcement occurs among activists belonging to a common movement is illustrative of how generations can bisect into generational units that engage with their circumstances in alternative ways—this is the case with the generation unit of Gen Z advocating within the Climate Movement.

As Mary C. Joyce described, activism can additionally be segmented into four dimensions: participants, causes, tactics, and tools.<sup>876</sup> The participants dimension encompasses the “who” of activist endeavors: are they principally black or Asian, middle-class or impoverished, undocumented immigrants or indigenous, factory workers or farmers, male or female, or etc.? And, indeed, adolescent or adult? The characteristics of the participants, as will be discussed along with youth activism in Chapter 2, have consequences for the avenues of activism in which they are allowed to and able to engage. For our purposes, emphasis will be granted to generational distinctions between participants in subsequent chapters.

Second, the cause dimension refers to the explicit, specific change which an individual or group is intending to induce. An activist cause may involve resistance to undesirable features existing within society or resistance to an undesirable future wherein some features have been changed; for instance, an array of low-income earners may protest existing wage laws while a

union may be advocating against a forthcoming legislative change which would undercut their bargaining powers. The cause of the Climate Movement which this paper principally focuses on is, of course, to achieve international warming-mitigation policies. Because a requisite aspect of Gen Z's generation location is the cultural landscape of the United States, climate action by the American government in particular is viewed as a foundational goal.

Next, tactics refer to the “how” of activist efforts—how are they taking action in the interest of achieving their goals?<sup>877</sup> These tactics can be norm-adherent or norm-defiant;<sup>878</sup> Brian Martin wagers that they must be unconventional in any case.<sup>879</sup> Numerous activities have been identified by activists and researchers alike as activism. One could: join or create an organization, participate in organizational events, petition on behalf of the cause, vote for candidates aligned with the cause, canvass throughout local neighborhoods, donate money or supplies to social organizations, participate in protests, volunteer locally or abroad, contact local representatives, purchase cause-related accessories or cause-friendly products, and leverage personal spheres of influence to spread the word.<sup>880</sup> Researcher and political scientist Gene Sharp, in his *The Methods of Nonviolent Action*, noted these and plenty more among the 198 options he supposed activists can take to spur change.<sup>881</sup> Encapsulating protest, persuasion, and noncooperation, the following are just a handful of the actions Sharp outlined: picketing, rent withholding, marches and parades, sit-downs and sit-in variants, boycotts of government institutions, protest disrobing, singing, sloganing, selective patronage, public speeches, mass petitions, alternative communication outlets such as radio, and more.<sup>882</sup> Undoubtedly, there is not a lack of engagement opportunities for aspiring activists.

Finally, the tools dimension of activism has burgeoned with the rise of new technologies allowing for deepened connections between activists and facilitating expedited, grander versions

of these activists' social actions.<sup>883</sup> The most prominent tool, the digital spaces afforded by the internet, will be examined in Chapter 2.

The crux of activism is to bring about social change. Many sorts of change-makers are signified under the banner of activism. Individual actors independent of any social movement and groups of individuals who make up a broader coalition are equally activists. Regardless of the mode, activism is a direct and conscious expression of the desire—and endeavor—to produce change within the social order, contribute to the social process, and benefit the commonwealth. Despite the necessary recognition that activism on any scale and through any tactic is crucial to such change-making efforts, it is also important to recognize that some forms of activism are visibly more transformative for society than others. Organizations which unite a range of activists, and therefore unite a range of experiences, skills, and talents, are more likely to have the various capital necessary to sustain the activist pressure needed to bring about change. Individual efforts are compounded when they are supported and guided by a larger strategy, something offered by organizations in addition to all the other resources and benefits. Still, a dedicated few can inspire great change and any individual, even if they act as a lone wolf, can make a difference. History is bloated with examples of successful activists who operated within a larger movement or who spawned their own. The stories of some of these activists are detailed below.

Ralph Nader, a career consumer advocate and 4-time presidential candidate, is a lifelong activist who has irrevocably changed the world in more ways than one. His seminal bestseller *Unsafe at Any Speed: The Designed-In Dangers of the American Automobile* published in 1965 rocked an automotive industry which resisted attainable safety standards for economic gain to the detriment—and death—of drivers.<sup>884</sup> In 1966, the book and Nader's subsequent Senate

hearings ignited a firestorm leading to the passage of the National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act and the creation of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), which helped to enforce newly mandated safety measures such as seatbelts.<sup>885</sup> The impact of this activist effort has been undeniable. Motor vehicle deaths per 100 million miles dropped from 5.7 in 1966<sup>886</sup> to 1.11 in 2019, according to reporting from the NHTSA.<sup>887</sup>

Since then, Nader has continued to get involved in social change, challenging water polluters<sup>888</sup> and the airline industry—particularly Boeing in the wake of the hundreds of deaths in 737 MAX crashes<sup>889</sup>—for their insufficient quality and safety standards. He carried his advocacy onto the campaign trail multiple times, most successfully in the historic 2000 presidential election when he garnered nearly 3 million votes; just 538 of those votes<sup>890</sup> would have pushed Florida and thus the Electoral College in favor of Former Vice President Al Gore instead of President George W. Bush, a circumstance which Nader has routinely been blamed for<sup>891</sup> and absolved of.<sup>892</sup> He was undeterred, however, by the results of the election and his perceived contribution to it, for he conducted presidential ventures twice more in an endeavor to stir change true to his beliefs.

The theme of his life is that a few agents of change can fork the path of history to something better and brighter. In 2016, his *Breaking Through Power* encapsulated the essence of these ideas. He centers his book on the perception that a privileged few live a life of “maximums” while the masses endure a state of “minimums”; this dynamic is continually reinforced, in his view, by the hyper-capitalist American plutocracy comprised of inordinately wealthy and powerful corporations and individuals which undermine free, “democratic spaces...of national public interest, media, human services, and environment.”<sup>893</sup> He provides a great deal of disheartening examples to support his labeling of America as a plutocracy

throughout his book, but I will note a couple of examples which pertain to our focus on the climate crisis. In 2015, the Environmental Protection Agency uncovered an intentional effort by German automotive manufacturer Volkswagen to cheat emissions regulations; over 11 million vehicles worldwide were equipped with devices which allowed emissions of nitrogen oxides—which contribute to smog—at levels up to 40 times regulatory standards in the U.S.<sup>894</sup> The air, a commons of the people, was tragically and avoidably being polluted as a result of greed and dishonesty.

Another example details how little our national resources are valued. The provisions of the Mining Law of 1872, which governs the prospection of federally-owned Western lands, still apply today. Under the law, individuals and companies are free to explore, claim, and extract from hard rock (gold, copper, etc.) mineral sites that fall on public domain land—territory which has continuously remained under federal stewardship since their original addition or cession by a foreign entity to the United States.<sup>895</sup> Until a 1994 moratorium, prospectors could file for patents with the U.S. Bureau of Land Management to obtain private ownership of the land and its resources, including minerals, without any further mining-related compensation to the government;<sup>896</sup> for lands not in the public domain but owned federally—by way of purchase from individual citizens or lower governments, for example—and thus not subject to mining claims, patents were the only option to obtain rights to mine.<sup>897</sup> The maximum land title fee, since the inception of the law, is \$5 per acre.<sup>898</sup> This figure remains unadjusted for inflation. Suppose the moratorium on patents were lifted this year. Individuals and companies would then be able to pursue lucrative mining profits by filing patents under this unchanged fee. Once again, in Nader's view, the federal government would be giving away valuable land, resources, and revenue.<sup>899</sup> Indeed, the Mining Policy Center claims that after 120 years since its enactment, the



Mining Law has facilitated the transfer of over \$231 billion in mineral reserves away from U.S. treasury.<sup>900</sup> The Goldstrike mine of the Barrick Gold Corporation is a rare but telling example of how the Mining Law patents could result in meteoric profits; in the 1990s, the company paid \$5,190 for 1,038 acres—\$5 per—for a plot of land with mineral reserves estimated to be worth nearly two million times that at \$10 billion.<sup>901</sup>

The moratorium established in 1994 has prevented that admittedly extreme scenario from recurring. However, the Mining Law still applies to public domain lands wherein the federal government is obligated no compensation beyond an annual fee of \$100 dollars established in 1992—previously, mining claims could be maintained simply through annual “assessment work” of the site, a process which was either mostly ignored or environmentally damaging when actually conducted.<sup>902</sup> Limited to only public domain lands, an opportunistic few have still found ways to enrich themselves from mineral assets by exploiting provisions in the Mineral Law. Proper discovery of the *potential* for commercial viability, payment of an annual fee of \$100 dollars, and mine-related usage of the site by claimants effectively and indefinitely nullifies the federal government’s possession of the land save for a buyout. This buyout, rather than any mineral reserves, has been an attraction for claimants. When the government wanted to use a particular swathe of land in Nevada—wherein over three-fourths of the land is managed by the federal government—as a waste depository, a savvy local staked invalid claims to hundreds of acres of such land under the Mining Law; rather than wade through a slow and costly validation process, the government expended about \$250,000 to reobtain legal access to the federal land.<sup>903</sup> If claimants pursue the difficult path of actually mining on public domain land, they can be assured they needn’t pay any special royalties to the government. Congressional efforts to

stipulate a royalty rate for minerals extracted from federal lands in the 21st century ended with the 111th Congress in 2009 and have yet to meaningfully be taken up again.<sup>904</sup>

Clearly, to activists like Nader, there's a belief that powerful structures exist within society that are resistant to change. Structures which do not serve the People at large. The answer for how to break through this plutocratic power is activism. Organizing. Civic engagement.

In mobilization, change is possible. Nader affirms that in civil resistance, a “rumble from the people” emerges to unveil the power of democracy.<sup>905</sup> At the core of his argument is the belief that plutocracy can be broken, oppression diminished, and social gains achieved from just a small contingent of intensely dedicated, well-organized citizens. Wholehearted activists can advance long-overdue societal changes and sway public opinion by igniting and maintaining the ‘rumblings’ which can diffuse throughout the country; as Nader affirmed, “One voice becomes two, and then ten, and then thousands.”<sup>906</sup> The effects of these humble, grassroots endeavors can ripple throughout the entire country and, now more than ever, the globe. Abolition in the 19th century and suffrage and unionization in the 20th century, all of which Nader claims never had more than 1% of the population *actively* pressing for them, represent such examples of demonstrable change achieved by the committed efforts of a few. Erica Chenoweth, a political scientist teaching at Harvard Kennedy School, echoes these sentiments in her research. Over the course of the 20th century, every resistance campaign which achieved the participation of more than 3.5% of the population was successful in their activist goals.<sup>907</sup> Additionally, she and co-author Maria J. Stephan notes that non-violent civil engagement proved twice as effective as violent resistance efforts.<sup>908</sup> Notably, all activism discussed in this paper is expressly non-violent. And most can be traced to just one individual who took a stand and who was noticed. Social change followed.

Another example of how activist movements initiated by just a few individuals can successfully challenge the plutocracy and influence the government to make desired changes is the early incarnation of the environmental movement. This movement was built on the foundation laid by the preservationism and conservationism of the early 1900s, which were two distinct ideologies respectively advocated for by John Muir and by first chief of the U.S. Forest Service—famously established under President Theodore Roosevelt—Gifford Pinchot. The former was concerned with separation of certain swathes of nature from industry so future generations might enjoy them while the latter was concerned with sustainable use of resources so future generations might still have access to them.<sup>909</sup> Decades later, the people’s “rumble” started from Rachel Carson's landmark *Silent Spring*; published in 1962, the predictive title draws from the real-life destructive consequences of the insecticide DDT to warn of a future where the "voices of spring" are silenced across America.<sup>910</sup> Detailing the damaging effects of human-deployed chemicals to wildlife, ecosystems, and humans themselves, Carson launched the modern iteration of the environmental movement<sup>911</sup> and paved way for the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency—a federal regulatory, research, and enforcement body—under President Nixon's administration in 1970.<sup>912</sup> In 1972, the agency initiated a total ban on DDT crop uses, serving as a particularly fitting marker of the social change Carson spurred a decade prior.<sup>913</sup> Just as with Nader's automotive safety movement, the activism began in the grassroots from one source and reverberated up into the government, causing true change. Nixon was peculiar in his tendency to heed the sprouts of social unrest which activist movements propagated, for he signed into law additional basic regulatory bodies like the Occupational Safety and Health Administration and the Consumer Product Safety Commission.<sup>914</sup>

Additionally, strides in nuclear disarmament were achieved under the Reagan administration as citizens—including former military personnel—mobilized into the Nuclear Freeze movement.<sup>915</sup> Fundamental to these efforts were individuals like Randall Forsberg, a lifelong peace activist who dedicated her life to minimizing the risk of catastrophic wars.<sup>916</sup> A particularly striking example of dedicated political activism is the 24/7 anti-nuclear vigil that a one-woman peace activist, Concepcion Picciotto, set up across the White House in Lafayette Park in 1981 and maintained for nearly 35 years until her death.<sup>917</sup> Not every activist needs to be so dedicated to advance movements and sow change, but the humble elder and her rag-tag team of helpers proved that *anyone* can participate in change-stirring activism. While the rate of nuclear disarmament has since slowed, organizations remain committed to eliminating the threat of nuclear weapons through abolition of remaining stockpiles.<sup>918</sup>

Nader highlights further examples. He points to the impact of individuals like Kate Hanni, founder of Flyers Rights,<sup>919</sup> a non-profit which has won a multitude of victories on behalf of airline consumers including clarification of airfares to be less deceptive and limits to legal tarmac delays.<sup>920</sup> Another notable example was the effort principally waged by Rev. Everett C. Parker in pining for the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to withhold a broadcast license renewal for WLBT, a broadcasting station in Jackson, Mississippi, for their failure to adhere to the Fairness Doctrine—the obligations of licensed stations to offer balanced, contrasting viewpoints of controversial issues that are sufficiently significant to the public—during the Civil Rights movement.<sup>921</sup> Brought before a federal appellate court wherein future Chief Justice Warren E. Burger presided, the landmark decision in *Office of Communication of the United Church of Christ v. Federal Communications Commission* (1969) marked the unprecedented reversal of an FCC broadcast license for the first time.<sup>922</sup> No longer would the

large population of black citizens in Jackson, Mississippi have to tune into a station that had no black employees, featured hardly any stories relevant to their community, and denied airtime for civil rights advocates like Medgar Evers while the station manager Fred Beard admonished the admission of a black student to the University of Mississippi under that flexible guise of states' rights.<sup>923</sup> The television station which delivered bigotry and thus actively defied its charge to be of public benefit was forced to change hands to an interim group that oversaw the hiring of more black employees and a shift toward less biased news coverage, allowing it to be more representative and serviceable to its audience. The legacy of this case is that it demonstrated the right and the route for the public to take action against institutions that did not work in their best interests.<sup>924</sup> Activism does not need to result in a national movement to be successful or impactful.

Epitomizing the capacity for activists to pierce the power of institutions viewed as damaging to society is the decline of Big Tobacco. In 1964, a report<sup>925</sup> from the United States Surgeon General Luther L. Terry unveiled the host of smoking-related health detriments which are widely known today, most principally lung cancer and laryngeal cancer.<sup>926</sup> An issue of consumer taste became an issue of public health. Concerned citizens acted promptly. Founding Action on Smoking and Health (ASH) in 1967, self-proclaimed legal activist and professor John F. Banzhaf III spearheaded the mounting public opposition to tobacco companies.<sup>927</sup> He garnered his own concessions from the FCC that first year, granting free airtime to anti-smoking messages on radio and television; additionally, he and his organization were instrumental in expanding smoke-free areas and defining the rights associated with smoking, of which there are none in the Constitution, over the next decades.<sup>928</sup> In the years since that momentous report, the percentage of Americans who smoke have dropped from 42% in 1965 to 14% in 2017.<sup>929</sup> In 2009, Congress

vindicated the dedication of anti-tobacco activists when they granted regulation powers to the Food and Drug Administration over tobacco companies in the Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act.<sup>930</sup> Recently, the proliferation of ostensibly benign smoking alternatives like e-cigarettes have reinvigorated concerns over the impacts of smoking—now vaping—on health, especially among younger individuals.<sup>931</sup> The groundwork laid by decades of anti-tobacco activism allowed for a rapid response to the emergent health crisis of vaping, which the CDC notes has been linked to thousands of hospitalizations and 68 deaths as of February, 2020.<sup>932</sup> The FDA delivered a warning<sup>933</sup> to JUUL, the undisputed e-cig industry giant<sup>934</sup> and manufacturer of high-schooler-beloved flavored pods that reinforce the habit of vaping much more than tobacco or unflavored e-cigs,<sup>935</sup> because of their dishonest marketing practices which were not in keeping with federal regulations.<sup>936</sup> JUUL has adjusted accordingly.<sup>937</sup> Often ongoing, activist efforts are nonetheless vital every step of the way to secure advancements that are within the public interest.

Activism, clearly, can spark social change. Activism by just a few citizens, even, can spark monumental changes like those previously mentioned, something many authors recognize.<sup>938</sup> Relating to generational theory, it is through activism that generations can deliberately Vanguard social change in the way described in Part I. The principal process by which this is achieved is, again, the mechanics of generation succession. Within activist organizations, the effect of this biological and cultural mechanism of continual change is supremely evident.

The work of Whittier best showcases this argument. She examined various waves of the feminist movement and classified individuals into separate “political generations,” which draws from Mannheim’s social generation framework. Recall that political generations are comprised

of individuals who enter into the movement during the same prevailing set of circumstances, endowing them with a set of like perceptions and viewpoints related to the movement and its goals; the imprinted mindset of particular political generations is not forged when they biologically come-of-age, as with social generations, but when they politically come-of-age.<sup>939</sup> In this way, two members of the same political generation within a social movement are related through that collective identity even if they belong to different cohorts or, indeed, different social generations. Practically, however, the operationalized unit of Gen Z which is detailed in Chapter 3 came of political age as they did social age by virtue of their contemporaneous participation in the Climate Movement. As a result, they comprise—but not exclusively so—a shared political generation.

Whittier further complicates her framework by introducing political micro-cohorts, which are the equivalent to generation units in Mannheim's generation theory. Individuals who join a few years apart may be of the same activist wave, but the external factors and context surrounding the movement might be sufficiently different enough that these individuals' experiences—the position they hold in the collective memory, the responses they take to emergent stimuli, and the formation of a sort of political-generational consciousness which endures throughout their time in the movement—might be distinct.<sup>940</sup> To illustrate, someone who joined the feminist movement at the dawn of the MeToo movement is in a different political micro-cohort than someone who joined around the release of *Bombshell* (2019), a narrative motion picture detailing the fall of the sexual predator at the head of the Fox News corporation some few years earlier. Despite the differences in cultural context which would impress a marginal variation in the parameter of experience they would bear in the social movement, these individuals would be more closely related to each other than to someone who joined in third-

wave feminism and thus belongs to a different political generation. She empirically verified this phenomenon by looking at the common consciousness which activist feminists of distinct political generations possessed. Two-thirds of the feminist veterans she surveyed noted continued participation in demonstrations; most, Whittier found, retained the label of feminist, worked for small-scale change in their daily habits, and maintained the distinct brand of feminism they formed during their time in the movement.<sup>941</sup> Notably, however, these collective mindsets shifted somewhat to recognize the racial homogeneity pervading women's organizations and to include cross-sectional goals such as LGBT freedoms and humanitarianism as the movement evolved and spawned new political generations, which extended these cross-sectional concerns and applied them to social media spaces made available in recent decades by the advent of internet technology.<sup>942</sup> The uptake of new ideological principles and the expansion of activist goals within social movements as the checklist collects tallies and the landscape of needs evolves, then, are a result of the changing of the guard that comes with generation succession.

Nancy Whittier notes this. As generation succession occurs within a social movement—either by older political generations exiting or losing power, allowing the members of newer political generations to take up more prominent roles—the direction, characteristics, and make-up of that social movement change. This notion that as new generations—beholden to their own unique consciousness—assume more influential positions in an organization, the established patterns instituted by prior generations in accordance with their own common identity are replaced along with them is fairly straightforward. Indeed, Ryder was earliest to recognize how the demographic metabolism of organizations can present real opportunities for the cultural norms and practical objectives pervading such organizations to change.<sup>943</sup>



Thus, generation succession allows for the evolution of social movements, directing activism to become more relevant and effective for the present circumstances in which the emergent generation came of age. Remember, the distinct Habituses—which unique impressions on a still-forming generation influence—cause an evolution of values and thus a differentiation of behaviors between generations which spurs incremental, accidental changes on the societal scale. But activism is a means through which purposeful, dramatic leaps in social change are won. Succeeding generations endowed with their own distinct collective consciousness produce change within activism, and so generations produce change in society. Generation Z activists, crystallized in the Climate Movement in a common political generation and equipped with defined generational characteristics as a social generation, have the very real potential to inspire progress in the social process. Because of the severity of the climate crisis, they can't afford not to. Because of their nature as digital native youths, they're best positioned to do so.

## **Chapter 2: Youth Activism and Digital Activism**

This chapter delineates two important dimensions of activism to which Gen Z activists, as a result of their parameter of experience and generational consciousness, are inextricably linked at the moment. In exploring the influence of youth activism and digital activism on the effectiveness of efforts to produce social change, the argument that Gen Z activists are fundamental in aligning the social process with the Climate Movement's goals is well supported.

Youth is defined by the United Nations as individuals aged 15-24.<sup>944</sup> Such a range is particularly apt, for principal brain development tends to extend until about the age of 25—much of these late-adolescent neural changes occur in the emotional centers of the brain.<sup>945</sup> Thus, per

their generational timeline, Generation Z are still-developing youths; as of publication, no Zer has graduated from this particular life stage and some Zer children have yet to age into this life stage. As a result, the civic engagement they undertake can be classified under a certain type: youth activism. When the 2030 deadline for best-case climate change mitigation rolls around, most Gen Zers will still be considered youth activists. It's important to evaluate, then, the advantages and limitations associated with this form of activism Zers perform within the climate movement. In Section 1, I frame the potential effectiveness of Zer climate activists by tracing historical examples of successful youth activism and highlighting the unique age-related aspects which empowered such youth to make an impact. I further hint at the limitations placed on youth participation which in turn limit the extent of social change youth—Gen Z—activists might achieve.

With the advent of advanced digital networking technologies, the capacity of activists to connect, advocate, and sow societal change has expanded in the 21st century. As established throughout Part III, Generation Z's relationship with digital technology is distinctly powerful. It holds, then, that they're inclined to incorporate digital tools for activism into their social change efforts more naturally and intensely than activists of other generations. The benefits of digital activism within social movements and Gen Z's predisposed prowess in eliciting such benefits are established in Section 2.

## **Youth Activism**

Activism conducted by youth, rather amazingly, constitutes this paper's definition of youth activism. As described by the editors of a compendium on the empirical and theoretical underpinnings of youth civic engagement, the activities involved in youth activism are

reminiscent of those available to adult civil participants: “Volunteerism, service-learning, community organizing, activism, military service, youth councils, and youth media production...offer youth the potential to influence collective social life...”<sup>946</sup> Some youth activist tactics, as with those employed by adult activists, vary in degrees of their visibility and directness. Youth councils, or youth advisory boards, are often less visible routes of pursuing social change than protests might be, but they provide a unique opportunity for young citizens to exert influence and equip themselves with the skills necessary to scale up their engagement. Youth councils are advisory bodies which allow youth to voice their concerns and foreground issues important to them, and they can be established within municipality governments or activist organizations to ensure that these community leaders and decision-makers abide by the wishes of a great segment of the population.<sup>947</sup> Participation in youth councils may not yield the most sweeping change, but it presents civic-minded youth the opportunity to become practiced in developing and executing initiatives to make incremental improvements in their community. Applying Nader’s view, just a small contingent of these dedicated youth might be responsible for igniting and shepherding movements which work the grander changes in society. But it begins with expressing the need for change and involving oneself in the activities which make such expressions unmistakable. There are multiple avenues, researchers contend, through which youth might do this.

Karen O’Brien, Elin Selboe, and Bronwyn M. Hayward<sup>948</sup> present a framework for the dynamic expressions of dissent able to be furnished by youth activists, and as it happens, they speak of these in context of the climate movement in particular. Their typology consists of dutiful, disruptive, and dangerous. The last of these—epitomized in ‘degrowth’ movements which aim to contract the scale of production and consumption within society in favor of more

compassionate style of economic well-being—is dangerous not in the sense that it poses a threat to persons involved but that it generates visions of radically alternative systems to bedrock society.<sup>949</sup> Dutiful dissent—such as joining a political organization or a local youth advisory board—pertains to working within established institutions to resist conventional responses whereas disruptive dissent—boycotts and protests—attempts structural change through the modification of dominant components of the status quo.<sup>950</sup> Each of these complementary forms of dissent represent a pathway for youth to assume measures of agency and influence within their world. Informed by the successes of the Civil Rights movement and LGBTQ+ equality effort, O’Brien, Selboe, and Hayward argue that youth climate activists should operate from a mix of these dissent expressions to “reclaim, reframe, and transform” their societies in the desired ways.<sup>951</sup>

Much of these dissent and mobilization avenues, however, are traditionally reserved for adult activists perceived to have more stake in and more influence over the conditions of society. Indeed, even when youths become legal citizens, the formal political establishment may continue to see them as illegitimate or unimportant.<sup>952</sup> As a result, youth activist efforts are often limited in scope. If not, they’re discredited and ignored. Further, the degree of youth engagement may be curtailed further when compounded by the familiar barriers of social inequalities—those of class, race, education, gender, etc.—which limit participatory power of all generational members.<sup>953</sup> These factors and others—including the degradation of American social capital, as Robert Putnam believes—have worked to crunch youth engagement.<sup>954</sup>

Beyond institutions which do not easily support civic participation among youth, the actions of the federal government appear to serve as a symbolic dismissal of young individuals’ prerogative to engage in citizenship. The United States is the only member in the world yet to

ratify the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child despite signing and having a dear hand in drafting the treaty more than thirty years ago.<sup>955</sup> Failure to ratify, of course, does not indicate any antagonism toward the well-being of children or state-sponsored disregard of the rights outlined in the treaty. After all, some of these rights, including the right to free expression and peaceful assembly, are taken straight from the Constitution.<sup>956</sup> But the reluctance of the U.S. Senate to officially ratify the Convention beyond its Optional Protocols<sup>957</sup> signals broader government inaction to address the plights of children around the nation, particularly those gripped in poverty.<sup>958</sup> It raises the difficulty of youth seizing civic participation possibilities, for the structures which invite such possibilities are insufficiently available to them. The government's refusal to provide the clear recognition of children's rights to "participate in family, cultural, and social life" at their full potential and free from discrimination on the international stage encapsulates the dismissive attitude many have toward youth who attempt to affect cultural and social life.<sup>959</sup> Sarah Zeller-Berkman<sup>960</sup> upholds this perspective. Jessica Taft, a sociological researcher who examines youth activism within Latino cultures, makes a similar assertion; she concludes that a "social amnesia" plagues the youth, preventing them from seeing themselves as the instruments of change they have the potential to be when opportunities are not withheld.<sup>961</sup> The uphill battle of youth activism is not just championing a cause and not just proving that they're capable of championing a cause. It also includes struggling for the awareness that, as full participants in life, it's their prerogative to advocate.

The avenues for change, then, are not so easy for youth activists to pursue. This reality will be expanded upon in greater detail in Part V. For now, though, it's critical to note that regardless of the obstructions they faced, scores of young people across history have persisted in

their efforts to reap concessions from a society they deemed unsatisfactory. Youth, in many ways, are programmed to make change. Here's how.

Hank Johnston<sup>962</sup> offers a paramount exploration of how the psychological context of youth development inclines these individuals to participate in large social movements. He presents four major markers of youth's predisposition to activist behavior, which he aptly calls the gang of four. The first is identity exploration; scaffolding off esteemed psychosocial analyst Erik Erikson's theories,<sup>963</sup> Johnston writes, "An individual's identity can be integrated by how ideologies render it meaningful. The question 'who am I?' is partly answered by 'what I believe,' which, in the context of dense social networks of youth groups, is accomplished via discussion, debate, and intense interactions."<sup>964</sup> Propelled by a desire to experiment with the philosophies and facets composing their character, youth may be attracted to communities that are involved in social change. This first concept also reiterates the process by which a unified *generational* identity might be formed and exhibited, a notion examined by theorists Gilleard<sup>965</sup> and Corsten<sup>966</sup> and discussed in Part I; as one fortifies their own personal identity through the social actions in which they partake, so too does their generational identity become fortified.

The next age-based factor inclining youth to activism is risk-taking behavior. Because their cognitive schemas of interpretation are less laden with experiences of disappointment and failure, an unrealistic optimism pervades the youth outlook and shrouds the risk of behaviors like activism. The prominence of this age effect for Gen Z—tentatively distinguished as a more risk-averse, realistic generation—might be subdued.

The third in the gang is emotionalism. The capacity for emotional control increases with age whereas emotional intensity tends to decrease.<sup>967</sup> Subject to greater emotional volatility, then, youth are more likely to engage in more passionate forms of activism such as protest;

evident in the Soweto riots of Apartheid South Africa, Johnston<sup>968</sup> additionally wagers that this cognitive factor compels young activists to initiate or retaliate with violence more so than older activists. A CBS special report conducted in 1969 corroborates this perception of youth activists as more passionate, less risk-averse breed; in their study, 62% of college youth believed disobedience of police authority was justified, a belief distinctly contrary to the views which were held by the adult members of society they interviewed and surveyed.<sup>969</sup> When it comes to the social issues for which Zers deeply care, then, their tendencies to shy away from risk may be entirely eclipsed by their socially-conscious hunger for justice.

The final mechanism in the gang of four is cognitive triggering. Equipped with their experience, older generations often look to “problem-solving algorithms” which have worked in the past when they confront new issues.<sup>970</sup> These tried-and-true tactics might not easily transfer as solutions for unforeseen complications, however. Youth activists—primed with accelerated processing power and unencumbered by past experiences—are able to interpret circumstances and generate connections in ways their older counterparts cannot. It is why youth tend to pioneer new forms of resistance expression.<sup>971</sup> Adora Svitak, who published her first book at age 8, additionally confirms this optimistic, out-of-the-box thinking that distinguishes the young from the old. She offers the example of glass-blown artwork to showcase how the fettered imaginations of adults limited their proposed designs to boring, albeit practical, ideas.<sup>972</sup> Children, however, do not drown their ideas when they skirt too close to the edge of possibility. This bold creativity is tempered to a degree as children enter adolescence, but it still endures as a key characteristic of youth mindset and behavior. Youth, then, offer creative innovation to social movements who are in need of fresh strategies for raising awareness or mobilizing participants. For a pragmatic Gen Z, this creative drive could be invigorated by the recognition that, as youth,

they're most inclined to generate these new models of activism. In this way, youthful Zers are primed to serve as fundamental actors in the quest for meaningful social change.

Indeed, these psychological components of youth are reminiscent of key generational tenets regarding the unique impact of the emergent generation—unified in a distinct interpretation of the present and vision for the future—on the social process as a whole. Ryder supplements this claim further. He affirms that youth propel societal transformation because, as a budding cohort, they are the least *of society*.<sup>973</sup> Members of older generations, established in their life routines, are less likely to pursue social change because efforts to alter facets of their experience in society may be perceived as fruitless if those facets appear too fixed or unnecessary if they don't desire such facets to be adjusted. Obviously, any activist of any age is trying to inspire social change. Activists of an emergent generation, however, are more likely to take up certain causes more fervently because their parameter of experience has yet to be fully socialized by predominant norms and values; still developing, they recognize an inherent capacity to rewrite the social code of the society into which they're being thrust.<sup>974</sup> How they attempt to rewrite the social code, of course, is informed by the fulcrums and imprints which acted and may continue to act upon youth's ongoing formative years. Thus, youth are uniquely placed within the social process as change-makers; likewise, young generations are uniquely positioned to Vanguard social change consistent with their burgeoning generational identity.

The attraction youth have to transformative activism is beneficial for themselves as much as it is for society. Orientation to socio-political matters, and participation in them, is viewed as a crucial component of healthy youth development.<sup>975</sup> Indeed, a variety of scholars since the early 2000s have pinpointed the pronounced positive effect of youth civic engagement on adolescents' socio-political, moral, and cognitive development.<sup>976</sup> Zeller-Berkman<sup>977</sup> points to an



overwhelming consensus regarding the same pronounced impact youth participatory action has on the development of communities and the growth of social groups. And meaningful involvement in community organizations such as activist groups helps to instill competencies and prevent delinquencies in budding adolescents, which have been foregrounded as paramount considerations in youth developmental science.<sup>978</sup>

As a result of these deepened understandings of the productive role youth have in society as genuine participants and contributors, the number of social action programs tailored to youth in the United States began to multiply with the arrival of the 21st century, coinciding with Gen Z's parameter of experience.<sup>979</sup> These initiatives aim to dissolve the barriers preventing youth from truly engaging with the circumstances which compose their lives. Many organizations explicitly facilitate this involvement with youth-centric or youth-exclusive programs so as to better fulfill their self-prescribed function in society, much in the same way as the following organizations: Key Club, to continue as one of the oldest youth service organizations; Youth Invincibles to stir greater involvement in the political process; SparkAction to connect and elevate the activist efforts of youth by sharing their stories and highlighting resources; United We Dream to support immigrant youth in informing and protecting their communities; HeadCount to facilitate voter registration at live music venues which youth may frequent; Nonprofit Vote to work alongside the nonprofit organizations already engaging youth by promoting voter participation; the Andrew Goodman Foundation to carry on the legacy of its namesake in building a strong citizenry of young individuals; Civic Nation to unite various social initiatives that foreground youth's capacity to demand and work toward justice under a common banner; Youth Service America to foster widespread introduction to and involvement with service projects by outlining ideas and organizing Global Youth Service Day each year; City

Year to develop key civic skills as youth serve as peer tutors and role models for underprivileged students. Additionally notable are the Girl Scouts, Brothers as Allies and the One Circle Foundation, WE Charity. Campus Vote Project, Youth Giving, Big Brother Big Sisters, the YMCA, and any local community-focused organizations.

An even broader pool of organizations which are available to youth without explicitly catering to them offer some avenues for social action. That list includes: American Association of State Colleges and Universities, AmeriCorps, Children's Defense Fund, PETA, the Human Rights Campaign, PFLAG, Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network (RAINN), League of Women Voters, the American Heart Association, the American Cancer Society, UnidosUS, the NAACP, Amnesty International, Compassion International, Habitat for Humanity, and far more grassroots orgs that might not have national reach but still provide meaningful impact. These lists intentionally excluded environmental groups, for Chapter 3 will address such activist organizations.

Despite acknowledgement that society and youth mutually benefit from youth activism and the previously listed breadth of organizations which aim to foster youth activism, a lack of research foregrounds youth as principal components in social movements. Nonetheless, an array of examples prove that youths have devoted themselves to activist efforts and/or ignited social movements of their own which have produced real change.

Svitak, the young author with a book under her belt before graduating elementary school, has carried into young adulthood her belief that youth offer a special insight into the woes of the world and a special passion to correct them; her 2020 published book, *Speak Up!*, features over forty significant youth advocates.<sup>980</sup> The book sheds light on numerous heavy-hitter environmental activists, including a particular Swede that will be discussed later in the chapter.

Svitak also spotlights the contributions of scientists and innovators like Easton LaChappelle—who started the company Unlimited Tomorrow to develop inexpensive robotic arms for those in need—that inspire change through less traditional modes of activism.<sup>981</sup> It’s another affirmation of the extensive impact which extraordinary youth who are dissatisfied with the trajectory of the social process and undeterred by the systems in place which halt change-makers of any age but especially those who are young can yield when they operate from the imaginative, irrational, boundless ideas which spring from their creative minds. Jessica Taft explored an international example of effective youth activism in her book *The Kids are in Charge*.<sup>982</sup> As fundamental contributors to familial subsistence—by way of supporting “farms, market stalls, and helping with child care and cooking”—Peruvian youth organized the Movement of Working Children to advocate for their place as equal participants in society.<sup>983</sup> In *Teenage Rebels: Stories of Successful High School Activists, From the Little Rock 9 to the Class of Tomorrow*, the author details numerous accounts of youth activists who achieved the change they yearned for; noted advocates fought for school integration in the 1950s, Gay-Straight Alliance clubs in the 1980s, less restrictive dress codes, and environmental awareness during the first Earth Day in 1970.<sup>984</sup>

In perhaps the greatest social movement in America’s history, the Civil Rights movement, youth played a critical role in catalyzing and guiding the society-changing activism of the era. The Greensboro Sit-in, in which four young black men rooted themselves in a segregated eatery in North Carolina, launched a wave of similar nonviolent demonstrations in 1960.<sup>985</sup> Soon, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)—co-founded by Diane Nash, a veteran of the Tennessee sit-in protests<sup>986</sup>—emerged to give a voice to young civil rights activists.<sup>987</sup> A critical component of the 1961 Freedom Rides and the famous March on Washington,<sup>988</sup> the SNCC was intimately involved in the fight for and achievement of basic civil

liberties for persons of color. More recently, youth activists were instrumental in securing the Deferred Action on Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program in 2012. The DREAM act—initially proposed in 2001 and reincarnated as numerous short-lived variations since then—was legislation that would have granted undocumented immigrants raised in the U.S. legal status.<sup>989</sup> When it failed, young DREAMers and activist allies continued to push for policies which would allow them to live, work, and learn in the nation they considered home while protected from the possibility of deportation.<sup>990</sup> When the Obama administration created the DACA program, which allowed for these immigrants to receive work permits and a renewable guarantee from the federal government that deportation proceedings will not begin during the 2-year grant period, they achieved this. It is still, however, only a temporary non-legislative solution that doesn't eliminate the possibility of deportation for these DREAMers. In 2017, President Trump aimed to fulfill campaign promises by initiating a plan to end the DACA program, but his rescission was blocked by lower courts and ultimately prevented by a Supreme Court ruling in 2020 that despite preserving the program gave no official judgement on its merit or legality.<sup>991</sup> In 2021, US District Judge Andrew Hanen halted President Biden's plans to approve new first-time applicants to the program by ruling DACA illegal.<sup>992</sup> Current recipients are still able to apply for renewal of their status during the entirety of the appeals process, but as long as their fate is decided in the courts rather than in Congress, the security these DREAMers are afforded will always be an impermanent one. And as long as that is the case, dedicated immigrant youth will not cease their endeavors to be secure within their own communities.<sup>993</sup>

The most prominent examples of the power of engaged youth are the campaigns led by student activists in the 1960s and 70s. The Free Speech Movement (FSM), which swept through the University of California, Berkeley in 1964, was an early testament to the change which could

be wrought from a mobilized force of intelligent young minds. Ignited by the arrest of Jack Weinberg, a student who set up tables with political information in defiance of the newly-instituted ban against political activity on campus, thousands of protesters clamored for an end to the University's policy in demonstrations lasting over 36 hours.<sup>994</sup> The movement, named shortly after these first protests, found a de facto leader in Mario Savio; removing his shoes before climbing atop the police car holding Weinberg, his addressal of the crowd earned him the enmity of the University's administration.<sup>995</sup> A passionate and distinguished orator, Savio exemplified Nader's argument that a movement can snowball from the unwavering persistence of just a handful of visionaries. The movement blossomed across Berkeley, and Weinberg ad-libbed the eternal phrase "don't trust anyone over thirty" to become the guiding principle of the movement.<sup>996</sup> Months of advocacy, including class strikes and sit-ins resulting in hundreds of arrests, finally culminated in the restoration of student political activity on campus in December, 1964. Significantly, the FSM was the first mass civil disobedience on college campuses in the 60s, setting a precedent for the effectiveness that widespread and committed advocacy can produce.<sup>997</sup> Youth activists took note, ringing in a stream of New Left movements that would find roots in postsecondary educational institutions throughout the decade.

A prominent player in confronting racial inequalities as well as contributing to second-wave feminism, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) was a youth organization of the 1960s most notable for their critical role in the Vietnam antiwar protests.<sup>998</sup> Staunch constituents of the New Left, SDS was "an amalgam of left-liberal, socialist, anarchist and increasingly Marxist currents and tendencies."<sup>999</sup> It's important to note that SDS and other activists with the New Left were a generation unit of the Baby Boomers. While imbued with the generational consciousness and identity which unified Boomers, they did not represent the entirety of that generation. Still, it

is equally important to recognize how linked these activist engagements—centered on a prevailing imprint circumstance yet conducted by only a portion of the generation—are with the legacy of the Boomer generation. The generation unit of Gen Z which responds to one of the dominant experiential phenomena of their time—climate change—through activism is similarly likely to represent the historical endowment to the social process for which the generation as a whole will be remembered. Indeed, today's Zer climate change activists have striking parallels with early members of the SDS in terms of their circumstance and worldview. The original draft of the 1962 Port Huron Statement, shared by organization leader Alan Haber at an SDS conference, offered a call to intellectual arms reminiscent of the motivations which current youth activists of the climate movement harbor today:

Every generation inherits from the past a set of problems—personal and social—and a dominant set of insights and perspectives by which the problems are to be understood and, hopefully, managed. The critical feature of this generation's inheritance is that the problems are so serious as to actually threaten civilization, while the conventional perspectives are of dubious worth. Horrors are regarded as commonplace; we take universal strife in stride; we treat newness with a normalcy that suggests a deliberate flight from reality.<sup>1000</sup>

The manifesto went on to name nuclear war as an existential threat to all of humanity; replacement of such references with 'climate crisis' would make it appear that the eloquent critique of society and government was drawn from the 21st century experience of Generation Z. But as direct American involvement in the Vietnam war commenced with the Gulf of Tonkin

Resolution in 1964, SDS cemented their claim to history through their pivotal involvement in the antiwar movement.<sup>1001</sup> On the grounds that war was detrimental to Vietnamese and American peoples—and that the well-being of such peoples happened to be a real concern among compassionate citizens—SDS began to organize a march on Washington D.C. in protest of military involvement by the United States;<sup>1002</sup> SDS even created and distributed study guides to better inform students about the realities of the Vietnam War.<sup>1003</sup> These efforts to ignite a movement were successful. After President Lyndon B. Johnson escalated involvement in North Vietnam with a policy of "sustained reprisal" in early 1965, their antiwar march on April 17 garnered tens of thousands of additional demonstrators, far exceeding organizer expectations.<sup>1004</sup> Antiwar fervor and concomitant demonstrations only progressed until American involvement reached its denouement in the 1973 Paris Peace Accords.<sup>1005</sup> Though the SDS faded from prominence in the movement—they officially disbanded in 1969 as a violent wing of their organization, the Weathermen, subverted the civil disposition most members wished to portray<sup>1006</sup>—the group serves as an unmistakable indication of the power which youth activism can hold. These young activists left true marks on society.

As antiwar activists continued to decry the unnecessary involvement in Vietnam following the SDS' dissolution, a momentous event immortalized the dangers of protest. The Kent State University massacre, which recently crossed its 50th anniversary, occurred when four students were killed and nine students were wounded by gunfire from the Ohio National Guardsmen in an on-campus protest.<sup>1007</sup> The iconic image of a distraught woman kneeling over a classmate's body in the aftermath of the massacre is a searing portrait of the scars the Vietnam War inflicted on the youth of that era; the intimate display of needless violence sparked a new wave of antiwar sentiment throughout the nation. According to Dr. Jerry Lewis, Professor

Emeritus at Kent State who was present at the time of the shooting, the subsequent protests shut down over 800 campuses and saw the participation of 4 million students in strikes.<sup>1008</sup>

Emboldened by tragedy, youth turned to solidarity and action. And they didn't stop until there was peace at last.

Ultimately, these antiwar movements and other endeavors for social change helmed by youth activists were explicit influences on the lead organizers of the Youth Climate Strike—co-director Haven Coleman and press director Maddy Fernands—who helped organize the American sites of protest for the Global Climate Strike addressed in this Part's opening.<sup>1009</sup> This seems to be another fundamental benefit of youth activism: it inspires more participation by passionate, civic-minded youth. And so it inspires more change. Gen Z youth activism within the climate movement is imperative, then, not just to secure gains in mitigation policies for themselves as they enter into adulthood but also to lay the groundwork for their upcoming generational peers—and, certainly, members of subsequent generations—to advance our society to a point of environmental sustainability.

## **Digital Activism**

Alternatively branded as 'cyberactivism'<sup>1010</sup> or 'net activism,'<sup>1011</sup> droves of scholars have tried their hand at defining digital activism.<sup>1012</sup> Their efforts essentially cast digital activism as the usage of internet-based resources to perform activism, the definition which will be used throughout the paper. So donation in person becomes donation on websites; petitioning on the street corner becomes drafting and sharing a petition on platforms like change.org; door-to-door canvassing becomes online newsletters and Facebook Group invitations; digital spaces can even



meaningfully serve as a place for strikes or rallies, as the “CoronaCrisis”<sup>1013</sup> has recently taught us.

In spite of these additional modes of interacting with the social process, digital activism is sometimes viewed as a detriment to activism and its effectiveness. In some corners, digital activism is known as “clicktivism,” or the more blatant portmanteau “slacktivism.”<sup>1014</sup> These terms package in the idea that individuals are merely superficially engaged with activist efforts, only contributing a few quick clicks before their civic responsibilities have been fulfilled. The actual relationship of digital forms of activism with traditional forms of activism, as manifested by engaged citizens themselves, paints a different portrait.

A joint study by Georgetown University’s Center for Social Impact Communication and reputable strategic communications firm Waggener Edstrom Worldwide surveyed 2,000 individuals who identified themselves as supporters of some cause as well as active users of social media.<sup>1015</sup> It offered a plethora of insights into the advantages, and peculiarities, of digital activism. One clear benefit of digital platforms like social media is their ability to spread awareness of an issue, cause, or movement and to spark mobilization. A sizable majority of the respondents (82%) affirmed the effectiveness of digital platforms as a way to engender more discussion about certain issues; this is important, for these activists have a personal desire to spread the word about the issues near and dear to them and involve their friends and family members in their efforts, as 76 percent of respondents noted.<sup>1016</sup> Because they unveil access to “information distribution, logistical support, [and] participation fora,” digital spaces like social media are crucial assets in the modern social organization’s arsenal.<sup>1017</sup> Social media, after all, was reported as the primary way in which activists first learned of a cause.<sup>1018</sup> Opinion leadership has been noted as an effective way to spur public awareness and engagement on

issues in general—interpersonal influence can extend three degrees of separation for topics such as obesity—but especially for climate change.<sup>1019</sup> Online avenues for opinion leadership, such as social media, serve as an indispensable addition to an activist’s toolkit. The internet, then, provides boundless potential for dedicated activists to amplify their outreach. As such, digital activism empowers activists to generate momentum and incorporate additional participants for their endeavors.

For busy individuals who still want to participate in civil society in some capacity, digital activism provides another benefit: convenience. The Georgetown study found telling results. About a third of respondents strictly supported causes online and more than half are more likely to support via digital outlets rather than in-person; around 2/3rds of participants pinpointed that the time-saving nature of digital activism is what makes it their preferred choice.<sup>1020</sup> This convenience—or clicktivism—comes at a cost, however. Activists perceive a more muffled impact on the community, organization, or movement when they’ve engaged in online activism instead of offline activism. 94 percent of surveyed activists feel that they are making a difference through in-person support of a cause compared to 78 percent through digital support.<sup>1021</sup> Though a clear tradeoff is present, most respondents still view digital activism as a viable way to contribute to real change. Moreover, digital activism may function as an effective gateway to additional forms of contribution. More than half (55%) of respondents were motivated to take further action after social media engagement with activist causes. Digital social action, then, can feed into sustained participation beyond just clicks and scrolls.

In another Georgetown University Center for Social Impact Communication study, this time jointly conducted with Ogilvy Public Relations Worldwide, digital social action is actually presented as an indicator of greater activist participation. The notion of slacktivism, in their

analysis of the results, is ultimately misguided.<sup>1022</sup> Activists who participated in cause-promotion through digital means such as social media were strikingly more likely to participate in more traditional forms of engagement than activists who did not participate in ‘clicktivism.’ Digital activists were twice as likely to volunteer (30% vs 15%), twice as likely to take part in walks (25% vs 11%), four times as likely to motivate others to contact local representatives (22% to 5%), and five times as likely to recruit others for petitioning (20% to 4%).<sup>1023</sup> Further, the likelihood to donate money was evenly matched at 41% of digital activist respondents and traditional-only respondents each. The revelation here is that digital activists are using tools like social media as supplementation for their advocacy, not replacement. This, perhaps, is the strongest testimony there is for the capacity of digital activism to facilitate more effective activist efforts, thereby bringing about social change more quickly and completely.

Additional benefits distinguish digital engagement as a valued mode of activism, especially when it intersects with youth activism. Time and time again, youth reconstitute new forms of media as vehicles for social action.<sup>1024</sup> From zine culture—wherein indie activist magazines in the 80s and 90s served as a precursor to the blogs we know today—to social media influencers, young people employ innovative uses of the tech of their time.<sup>1025</sup> Youth are often assets to activist efforts, then, because they can uncover new methods of engagement and fine tune them so these methods become more valuable tools moving forward.

Further, digital technology is important for youth activists not just because it offers the opportunity to pioneer new ways to advocate but because it grants youth access to already established tactics of activism. The traditional activities which youth might be barred from can still be accomplished, at least to some degree, within online spaces. Ashley Lee, whose doctoral dissertation at Harvard centers on the intersection of media and youth political participation,

affirms that for youth in particular digital spaces open up new possibilities for involvement in politics.<sup>1026</sup> In *Young People and the Future of News: Social Media and the Rise of Connective Journalism* (2017), Lynn Schofield Clark and Regina Marchi<sup>1027</sup> reiterate how digital platforms are particularly important in drumming up awareness and engagement with social causes among young individuals. By and large, individuals historically excluded from mainstream movements—including youth and those of underprivileged identity markers—can utilize the internet as an outlet for activism. Gayle Kimball<sup>1028</sup> recognizes this, asserting that digital media functions as expression outlets and accessible wells of information for adolescents, especially young girls and youth of color. Ultimately, this mode of activism allows for digitally-inclined youth to have a better grasp of the issues pervading society, the ways in which people are trying to solve those issues, and the pathways they have to add their voice to the conversation without compromising their own safety.

Indeed, safety is another crucial allowance of digital activism. Youth are enabled to operate within social movements and perform activist actions from an environment wherein they are comfortable, secure, and unjudged. The dissociation of physical presence and personal identity from activist works—such as what may be achieved through online donations or petitions—creates a shell of anonymity, and thus protection, for advocates. Sage Grace Dolan-Sandrino, a young transgender rights activist, is particularly appreciative of this dimension to digital activism.<sup>1029</sup> Often, Zer youth like Dolan-Sandrino might see digital technologies such as social media as their only means for safe but effective social action; Lane Murdock, an activist against gun violence who mobilized with her fellow students through social media platforms, shares this belief.<sup>1030</sup> The takeaway here is that the political self-efficacy of Gen Z is deepened by the online technologies which are already immensely intertwined with their distinct

generational parameter of experience. Illustrated by the Georgetown study wherein the respondents were classified into four groups based on their degree of engagement with social movements, youth are at the forefront of digital activism. “Maximizers”—the most dedicated bunch in the sample, averaging support for 12 causes across offline and online forms of activism—skewed younger than any of the other classifications.<sup>1031</sup> Clicktivism, then, is a firm prerogative for the digital-native generation which comprises America’s present youth. And as with youth activism, Gen Z is able to look to peers and predecessors for assurance that digital activism does yield visible change.

Evidence of youth in particular working some small but genuine changes in their parameter of experience comes from across the pond. A group of British teenagers took to social media to advocate for better sex education and contraception awareness, fitting in with a pattern of young 'cyberfeminists' taking advantage of the internet's reach to forge online communities with like-minded peers. Columns and blogs, such as Julie Zeilinger's FBomb, extend the feminist social movement to individuals who otherwise would not have felt empowered to get involved.<sup>1032</sup> Around the world, digital activism has been particularly instrumental in the animal welfare movement because information on mistreated, at-risk, endangered, or homeless animals can be spread rapidly. Gayle Kimball<sup>1033</sup> also provides an example for how the internet can accelerate and create effective social change. She discusses Asmaa Mafhouz, an Egyptian political activist who roused the 2011 political revolution by using Facebook to appeal to her countrymen; one week following her upload, the movement for legal and civil rights was written into history via a demonstration in Tahrir Square beginning on January 25, the date of their national police holiday. Egyptian President Mubarak was forced to step down after two weeks of deadly protests. This uprising was just one of many which comprised the Arab Spring, a

movement pursuing the abdication of undemocratic leaders in nations like Tunisia, Libya, Syria, and Morocco—successfully so, insofar as removal of the regime leaders, in Tunisia and Libya<sup>1034</sup>—primarily through the online networking of the younger population.<sup>1035</sup> The positive organizational capacity which social media permits was at the core of Bulgarian protests, primarily youth-driven, against the government in this past decade.<sup>1036</sup>

Another online movement which mobilized citizens of all ages was the MeToo movement. Initiated by Tarana Burke on MySpace in 2006 and reignited on Twitter in 2017 after dozens of women came forward to detail Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein's deep history of sexual assault, the MeToo movement epitomized the internet's capacity to facilitate rapid and sweeping change.<sup>1037</sup> A watershed moment, the movement—which sparked successors like Time's Up—helped oust scores of powerful men from their previously untouchable positions and encouraged millions impacted by sexual misconduct to share their stories.<sup>1038</sup> True, positive change was achieved through digital activism. Among influential figures, 7 convictions and 4 charges regarding sexual misconduct have been achieved since MeToo.<sup>1039</sup> And counting. The change goes on, with digital activism as a chief element in making these stories and efforts heard.

All in all, digital activism provides alternative and supplemental opportunities for engagement with social causes and participation within civil society. The connectivity afforded by digital technologies and media has transformed activism—more for the better than for the worse. Previously silenced voices can be heard and previously shrouded images can be seen and previously concealed stories can be shared. And through this new awareness, action and change can be sought.

## Chapter 3: Gen Z Activism

Youth as a driving force of activism and digital means of activism as an increasingly essential mode of achieving effective participation make for a powerful combination in Generation Z, a group of young digital natives. In their activism through these forms, Gen Z are truly participants in the social process in a way which encapsulates the concept of generation as a social force.

This chapter will frame the particular climate-concerned generation unit as a social force because of their activist efforts.

Members of the cohort (age-group) and social generation (consciousness-bound group) of Gen Z have already Vanguarded social change in a variety of areas of life unrelated to climate change for individuals around the world. In other words, the peers of the Gen Z generation unit oriented around climate activism showcase that youth of their age group and of their particular social generation can succeed in activist pursuits. Section 1 spotlights the activist figures and social movements that have secured such progress. Because they are similar in age and/or similar in generational personality, these examples of change-makers demonstrate the potential of the climate-focused Gen Z generation unit to make a genuine impact on today's societal conditions.

Section 2 will explore the deep involvement of Gen Z in the climate movement. Drawing on the four-dimensional framework of activism, the climate movement's cause is to mitigate the negative impacts of human behavior on the climate. The collective of individuals and organizations expressly working toward this goal composes the climate movement. While under the umbrella of environmental activism, the climate movement is pursuing its own distinct social change outcome. Within a multitude of general and youth-centric climate change organizations, Gen Z is spearheading the effort to reach this outcome.

## Activism of Gen Z

Best known mononymously, Malala Yousafzai has become one of the first and foremost peer heroes to Generation Z. When Taliban extremists oppressed a variety of rights throughout Pakistan—including the right of education for girls—Malala used her voice in advocacy of free, quality education accessible by anyone regardless of gender. Turning to digital avenues at age 11, she wrote an anonymous blog series for BBC Urdu to ensure the truth about life in districts like her home in Swat Valley was available to the public.<sup>1040</sup> She was outspoken in person, too, even after being displaced for a time. She became noticed, and so the extremists sought for her to be silenced. In 2012, at age 15, Malala was targeted by the Taliban on her school bus and shot in the head.<sup>1041</sup> She was not silenced. Utilizing her global platform, she spoke at the United Nations<sup>1042</sup> and with her father established the Malala Fund, a charity dedicated to expanding girls' education by developing schools and pressuring world leaders to more meaningfully invest in them.<sup>1043</sup> Becoming the youngest Nobel Peace Prize laureate in 2014 for her fierce activism in the face of life-altering consequences, she stands as a pillar of how fearless youth can inspire change throughout the world.<sup>1044</sup> Malala's story is moving to all, but it is especially important to young girls. As she writes in her autobiography, "If one man can destroy everything, why can't one girl change it."<sup>1045</sup> Though Malala isn't of Gen Z's social generation because of her disparate generation location, she is a part of the age-range which the Gen Z cohort inhabits. She also happens to be one of the most well-known examples of successful, modern youth activism. In this way, her story showcased to Generation Z that they too had the agency to influence the world, even if just on the small-scale. For young Gen Z activists, her service is indelible in more ways than one.



Out of painful tragedy came action. In Parkland, Florida, a shooter equipped with an AR-15 took the lives of fourteen students and three staff and injured 17 others at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School.<sup>1046</sup> It was Valentine's Day, 2018. It was also the start of a movement. The survivors, members of a generation surrounded by the reality of violence in schoolyards, became the first to declare that enough is enough. Reeling from the trauma of lost friends, they sought sensible gun control which likely would have prevented the shooter from acquiring his weapon; the shooter passed a background check<sup>1047</sup> to receive the AR-15 despite mental health issues and a patterned history of violent tendencies, which resulted in multiple tips to the Broward County sheriff's office and one tip to the FBI<sup>1048</sup> a month before the shooting that explicitly signaled the killer's potential to become a school shooter.<sup>1049</sup> Key voices emerged to give guidance to the wave of indignation and frustration which flowed from America's young. Voices of those like Jaclyn Corin, who organized the first march at Florida's capital of Tallahassee. Or Cameron Kasky, who challenged Marco Rubio to reject further donations from the NRA in a public town hall. Or David Hogg, who navigated multiple conspiracy theories related to his family history<sup>1050</sup> and co-wrote a *New York Times* bestseller with his sister Lauren.<sup>1051</sup> Perhaps most prominent among them is X Gonzalez (formerly Emma Gonzalez), who gained recognition in a speech just a few days after the shooting when they roused the crowd to call BS on archetypal gun-lobbyist arguments.<sup>1052</sup> #NeverAgain became another rallying cry, and it became the name of the political action committee, Never Again MSD, started by some of the shooting's survivors.<sup>1053</sup> It wasn't long before these students, conscious that their media attention and thus window for spurring immediate change slimmed with each passing day, began to organize the event protest which would become the new namesake of the movement: March for Our Lives.<sup>1054</sup> Sarah Chadwick, co-founder of March for Our Lives, affirmed how organizers depended on digital means,

principally social media, to coordinate what would become the largest gun violence protest in American history and the third largest protest behind the Women’s Marches in 2017 and 2018 with at least 1.2 million participants.<sup>1055</sup> Some estimates placed the March 24, 2018 event as the highest single-day protest turnout in the nation's capital.<sup>1056</sup> Here, Gonzalez shined through again. Distinguished by their shaved head and pin-laden bomber jacket, Gonzalez announced the names of all 17 victims who died within the 6 minutes and 20 seconds of the shooting. Suddenly, Gonzalez’s voice, taut with intensity and swollen with passion, ceased. Gonzalez stared out into the crowd through an unrelenting silence with an unwavering power even as tears streamed down their cheek. After 6 minutes and 20 seconds elapsed since they arrived at the podium, Gonzalez recounted how the shooter escaped with the fleeing students before his arrest and told the crowd to “Fight for your lives before it’s someone else’s job.”<sup>1057</sup>

Since that mass non-violent protest, the movement’s agenda continued to take shape. Their mission as they describe it is to stop the gun violence epidemic which is killing tens of thousands of Americans—including children in schools—each year by lobbying for lawmakers to reform gun ownership standards, ban assault rifles along with high-capacity magazines, and institute government buy-back programs.<sup>1058</sup> They’ve co-opted traditional forms of resistance activism and merged them with modern technologies, creating and disseminating an online zine called the “Unquiet.”<sup>1059</sup> Showcasing how youth activism feeds off youth activism, the Freedom Rides spearheaded by student activists in the 1960s became the inspiration for Road to Change, a tour of the nation intended to register thousands of voters and spawn local grassroots initiatives.<sup>1060</sup>

Other Zer youth activists have been inspired to champion gun safety reform in their local communities alongside other social organizations. On the opposite coast from Parkland, Ryan

Pascal initiated a school walkout in remembrance of the lives lost in the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas because of her acute understanding that her own high school's name easily could have been printed in the headlines.<sup>1061</sup> Her efforts were jump-started by her spreading the word through social media, just as the MSD students did.<sup>1062</sup> She's since joined the non-profit Everytown for Gun Control as part of the Students Demand Action board, striving to reduce the pervasiveness of the gun violence which has helped define her generation's identity.<sup>1063</sup>

March of Our Lives is an example of the circumstances contributing to a generational identity also contributing to the drive of that generation to work social change. The spectre of violence which loomed over Gen Z's formative years struck a deep nerve as many Zers came of age, and so the activism which stemmed from the Parkland massacre was an inevitable generational response. According to Giffords Law Center, 110 gun safety bills became law across 32 states and District of Columbia since the Parkland shooting.<sup>1064</sup> It's unlikely that these Zer activists will stop pushing for policy changes anytime soon, especially since most Americans are in favor of stricter gun laws according to a Gallup study.<sup>1065</sup> However, as the original founders of the movement dispersed to their various universities and the years since the tragedy crawled by, the momentum to spur federal-level changes has notably declined. Unfortunately yet inevitably, it will be another tragedy that ignites a new wave of activism among Zer youth and older allies. Until then, a devoted few press on in a ceaseless march for our lives.

Not of Gen Z and not truly present in the minds of Gen Zers—perhaps regrettably so—the efforts by Hong Kong youth to relentlessly clamor in favor of democracy and against authoritarian rule by the Chinese government is noteworthy.<sup>1066</sup> The series of protests—initiated by a 2019 extradition bill which would have curtailed protections for citizens of the city and empowered Beijing's grip on the autonomous region<sup>1067</sup>—are incredibly complex, with primarily

student activists<sup>1068</sup> dedicating their free time to preserve the freedoms their home city once assured them. Cleverly utilizing technology to their benefit—such as coordinating on the anonymous messaging service Telegram—and employing tactics to undercut the surveillance technology the Government has—such as using laser pointers to blind cameras, umbrellas and other concealing attire to shield one’s identity from the peering aperture, and one-way cash-paid tickets to make sure they can’t be tracked via their subway card—these activists have consistently displayed an admirable inventiveness in protecting their identities so they can carry on pursuing their dangerous, precious mission.<sup>1069</sup> Unfortunately, the COVID-19 outbreak and a new security law passed in June 2020 that makes illegal any act which is perceived to undercut the authority of the central government eliminated the mass protests in Hong Kong.<sup>1070</sup> The one country, two systems facade is still being maintained, but it is evident that the people of Hong Kong are subject to the whims of Beijing. Nonetheless, these protests serve as another testament to the strides for change which Gen Z’s international peers are capable of striving for. Let us hope that they will one day be able to achieve it in full.

Another activist of the Gen Z cohort strove for change in the neighboring Canadian province of Ontario. Rayne Fisher-Quann leveraged social media networks like Instagram and banded together tens of thousands of students across a hundred Ontarian schools in September 2018 to protest a proposed repeal to a modernized sex-ed curriculum.<sup>1071</sup> The newly empowered Ontario Progressive Conservative Party’s leader Doug Ford opted to revert back to the previous curriculum, which was last updated in 1998 and failed to address topics vital to the safe development of youth in the modern era; such topics included consent, same-sex relationships, and online safety regarding sexting.<sup>1072</sup> In addition to fighting for a sex education curriculum that wasn’t older than they were, these students began to protest on behalf of the Indigenous

community as well. The rewrites to school curriculums similarly undid efforts by the prior Liberal Party's administration to more thoughtfully address Indigenous history by including such individuals in course-planning. Native student Indygo Arscott<sup>1073</sup> joined with Fisher-Quann to advocate for a public education which unflinchingly addresses the painful legacies interwoven with Indigenous-Canadian history, such as Canada's first prime minister Sir. John A. MacDonald<sup>1074</sup> being responsible for the introduction of Indian residential schools—hotbeds for deculturalization, abuse, and over 6,000 deaths in the 165 years of their operation.<sup>1075</sup> The revelation which thrust Arscott into action would be comparable to discovering, in America, that a prominent national leader was culpable for the subjugation, removal, and deaths of thousands of Native Americans. Say, President Andrew Jackson and his Trail of Tears.

The dual-protest organized by Fisher-Quann and Arscott achieved explicit concessions from the Ontario government on the part of sex education. In March 2019, the Ministry of Education announced that the modernized sex-ed curriculum would remain with minor adjustments to when certain concepts—like gender identity—would be introduced in the school system.<sup>1076</sup> Those same announcements, however, included intentions to raise average class sizes for funding eligibility from 22 to 28.<sup>1077</sup> In addition to degrading the quality of student learning, that deficit-reduction measure would result in the loss of over ten thousand teaching jobs by the 2023-2024 school year according to the Financial Accountability Office for the province.<sup>1078</sup> Further, the Progressive Conservatives promised a ban on unauthorized or non-emergency cell phone use and a pullback on funding for the arts.<sup>1079</sup> Students, along with some teachers and parents, were outraged. Reassured by the victory Fisher-Quann and her fellow participants achieved, activists began the Students Say No movement and planned a walkout for April 4, 2019.<sup>1080</sup> Reportedly, 600 schools and more than 100,000 students participated.<sup>1081</sup> Again, their

activism was heeded by policy officials. In late 2019, the Ford Government offered a reduction of class size to 25 in negotiations with the teacher's union;<sup>1082</sup> in March of 2020, the provincial government reduced further to a 23-student average class size.<sup>1083</sup> These successful social actions were from members of the global Gen Z cohort, so they're yet another testament to the ways in which today's young activists can seek and secure change in their world. It's worth noting, too, that these Ontarian students are fairly related to our outlined Gen Z social generation. They showcase digital native and diversity traits—seen in their deft coordination through online social platforms and in their pursuit for inclusive curriculums on Indigenous and LGBTQ+ individuals—which are aligned with observed characteristics in America's specific strain of Gen Z. As such, they speak to the notion that domestic Zers will passionately rally for causes that are rooted to the generational experience, just as we have seen them do in the March for Our Lives movement.

Often, in that generational experience, there is a potent intersectionality of other identities which distinguishes unit-level consciousness from its finer forms. Race is one such identity which bifurcates the common generational experience into more distinctive sections. In a comparatively diverse and accepting America, one that is decades removed from blatant race-based discrimination and de jure inequalities, Gen Z has undergone a reckoning which revealed the extent to which systemic racism is firmly rooted in the land of the free and activated their duty to actualize desperately needed change so that we may inch toward that promise of a more perfect union. That reckoning began in 2013 with the acquittal of the man who shot and killed Trayvon Martin, an unarmed black teenager who was walking the midnight streets of his neighborhood after buying snacks from a local convenience store. Three self-described “radical Black organizers”—Opal Tometi, Alicia Garza, and Patrisse Cullors<sup>1084</sup>—started Black Lives

Matter, a political movement which garnered widespread recognition in subsequent years when a string of black individuals were needlessly killed in incidents typically involving white police officers; among these: Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Sandra Bland, Freddie Gray, Walter Scott, Alton Sterling, and Philando Castile.<sup>1085</sup> Of course, that list has regrettably grown longer with the names of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. Cultivated in circumstances of violence—and violence clearly directed toward them—black youth were passionately on the frontlines of many of the protests these killings sparked. In Garner’s death place in New York City and in the Ferguson Riots, a response to the shooting of unarmed 18-year-old Michael Brown, Millennial and Zer activists were particularly visible.<sup>1086</sup> In the wake of the back-to-back killings of Anton Sterling and Philando Castile after Independence Day in 2016 and inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement, a group of black Zer girls began to organize a youth activist demonstration in Chicago.<sup>1087</sup> Under the banner of #BLMChiYouth on social media, the girls—Maxine Wint, Sophia Byrd, Natalie Braye, and Eva Lewis—planned for a peaceful sit-in at Millennium Park and a subsequent march down Michigan Avenue, which the group had secured through their professional and amicable communication with city officers.<sup>1088</sup> On the day, over a 1,000 diverse Chicago youth joined them to protest targeted gun violence in solidarity with Black Lives Matter.<sup>1089</sup> These Gen Zer activists contributed to a movement which has revealed that the scars of segregation and redlining are continuously acquiring neighboring wounds inflicted by structural racism. Further, by their participation, Zers helped sustain a legacy of black liberation groups like those composing the Black Lives Matter movement in raising awareness and advocating for the removal of powerful entities that buttress systemic oppression of historically marginalized identities.<sup>1090</sup> For black Zers especially and hopefully for most non-black Zers, steeled by a pragmatic lens and armed with the mobilization capabilities of the

internet, campaigns like #blacklivesmatter will likely be a staple of their social change endeavors.

Another Gen Zer who has taken up activist causes is Amandla Stenberg. She became a prominent contributor to the Black Lives Matter movement when she played the main character in the film adaptation of *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas, a 2017 novel drawing on the particular tragedies of police brutality in the few years prior. The book has remained on the *New York Times* Bestseller List for young adult fiction for every week since its release.<sup>1091</sup> Beyond this, Stenberg has partnered with No Kid Hungry, an organization with the intention to end food insecurity and hunger for America's children.<sup>1092</sup> 11 million children, preventably, belong to food insecure households wherein access to safe and nutritious foods are uncertain or limited; the negative effects of this food insecurity, which is linked with childhood poverty, include poorer physical and mental health, impeded academic performance, and malnutrition.<sup>1093</sup> No Kid Hungry bases much of its advocacy in efforts to expand governmental nourishment policies like Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and summer meals programs as well as to raise awareness among families around the nation that these beneficial policies are available to them.<sup>1094</sup> For this latter goal, they recognize the power influential cultural figures can hold. Stenberg, in particular, is a Gen Zer who has leveraged her use of social media to digitally advocate for No Kid Hungry's initiatives. She writes, "other youth activists and I are using social media to be a voice for the children just a few years behind us, to educate young adults around the country about hunger, and to show our peers how they can help kids who may be struggling."<sup>1095</sup> Again, a Zer embodies key generational traits like digital nativism and civic-mindedness in her pursuit to alter some features of the social order marking her youth.



If it isn't already evident, a running theme here is that young women are very prominent among the Zers striving for deep change. This is not by design of myself, but by the will of these members of Generation Z to diagnose and defeat the ills rendering our society weak and unjust. As Eva Lewis, the Black Lives Matter activist, said: they're the ones "stepping up to the plate" that is the social process.<sup>1096</sup>

The water crisis in Flint, Michigan is a study in government ineptitude, environmental injustice, and systemic racism. The city prospered from a General Motors-driven expansion in industry during the 20th century, but the prosperity largely evaporated along with the auto jobs; in a city with a majority black population, close to 39% of residents are beneath the poverty line.<sup>1097</sup> The child poverty rate in 2017 was even higher at 60%.<sup>1098</sup> Crippled by debt, governor-appointed city officials sought ways to reduce spending. They turned to the water supply. In 2014, as they worked on implementing a permanent switch from purchasing Detroit's treated water to an in-the-works pipeline connecting to Lake Huron under the recently incorporated Karegnondi Water Authority,<sup>1099</sup> the city temporarily drew municipal water from the Flint River.<sup>1100</sup> The water from that river, a dumping ground for waste and therefore more corrosive than the previous supply, was improperly treated by the city. In the short-term, inadequate chlorine treatment likely contributed to an outbreak of Legionnaires' disease<sup>1101</sup>—a pneumonia caused by a bacterial pathogen<sup>1102</sup>—which killed 12 people and sickened dozens more.<sup>1103</sup> Officials knew about the outbreak and chose not to inform the public; involuntary manslaughter charges brought against these individuals were dropped in 2019.<sup>1104</sup> In the long-term, failure to reduce the corrosivity of the Flint River's water chemistry resulted in the increased corrosion of lead pipelines throughout residential areas; in an independent study by Virginia Tech,<sup>1105</sup> 40% of sampled homes were at lead parts per billion (ppb) levels which signaled high contamination

risks and nearly 17% of sampled homes exceeded the 15 ppb action threshold established by the EPA's Lead and Copper Rule.<sup>1106</sup> The CDC affirms that there is no such thing as safe levels for lead exposure in children under six years of age, who could suffer from severe intellectual and behavioral development impairments if afflicted by lead poisoning.<sup>1107</sup> Reports have confirmed elevated childhood lead exposure during the Flint Water Crisis, for lead amounts in blood levels increased from 2.4% to 4.9%<sup>1108</sup> and lead amounts in sewage biosolids increased 14%.<sup>1109</sup> The lingering effects are clear: the number of young students who qualify for special education has increased from 13.1% the school year before the switch to 20.5% in the 2018-2019 school year.<sup>1110</sup> In defiance of the Safe Water Drinking Act and federally-mandated public notification rules, Michigan Department of Environmental Quality officials carried out inadequate and misleading tests<sup>1111</sup> that enabled them to routinely declare the falsehood that the water was sufficiently safe.<sup>1112</sup> The crisis was particularly difficult for black households, for they were disproportionately at-risk for lead service lines and the incidence of elevated blood levels among black children were higher than among other ethnicities;<sup>1113</sup> as the Michigan Civil Rights Commission concluded, a deep history of systemic racism manifested itself in this crisis.<sup>1114</sup> As affirmed by the Flint Water Advisory Task Force, a state-appointed committee charged with reviewing the causes of the crisis, the citizens were failed by all levels of government.<sup>1115</sup> They were well aware of it. And they sought change. The youngest citizens among them, too.

Mari Copeny, also known as Little Miss Flint, was a central activist figure who emerged during her water crisis. She was only eight-years-old when she wrote a letter to then-President Barack Obama asking for a meeting; against the odds, he personally responded to her letter and promised a visit to Flint in May 2016.<sup>1116</sup> Despite media stunts that saw him take miniscule sips of filtered Flint water, the president's visit helped put additional pressures on Congress for a

federally-funded response and prevented the struggling city from waning entirely out of the nation's attention even after, seemingly, the origin of the crisis had ended. After eighteen months of the river serving as Flint's water source and soon after revelations that certain schools exceeded the 15-ppb threshold for lead levels, the city returned to the Detroit water system.<sup>1117</sup> Still, the high amounts of lead lingered in the water system, and the high amount of distrust propelled more citizens into action. In 2016, advocates fought for and achieved a door-to-door delivery system of bottled waters so that households without proper filtration systems could have safe access to drinking water.<sup>1118</sup> When Governor Rick Snyder discontinued the state's sponsorship of free bottled water because lead levels were within standards, Little Miss Flint raised over \$50,000 and passed out 135,000 water bottles within the first month of her campaign.<sup>1119</sup> In total, she's helped raise \$280,000 for Flint citizens, which has allowed for the distribution of over a million bottles of water to the community.<sup>1120</sup> She's additionally been a part of initiatives to get school supplies, books, and positive hand-written letters from around the nation to Flint children.<sup>1121</sup> Gen Zers a bit older than her have engaged in activism of their own. Among others, students from Central Michigan University started Pack Your Back to provide backpacks and other supplies<sup>1122</sup> and Penn State Behrend student Seun Babalola helped raise 3,000 water bottles.<sup>1123</sup> Every relief effort, no matter how small, has been crucial for the families impacted to this day by the crisis. Thankfully, the worst is behind them. In December 2016, months after Mari Copeny's letter, one of former President Obama's final actions was signing a bill which included at least \$170 million in funding for Flint's water infrastructure.<sup>1124</sup>

The following year, the Natural Resources Defense Council aided residents in securing a settlement which required the replacement of thousands of lead and galvanized pipes throughout the city<sup>1125</sup>—the state was obligated to contribute \$67 million in funding to such endeavors<sup>1126</sup>

and has allocated more than \$350 million to these repairs and other related aid.<sup>1127</sup> Evidence has already emerged that these initiatives to upgrade water service lines—coupled with heightened use of corrosion-inhibiting treatments—are reducing the concentrations of lead in biosolids throughout the city and thus restricting childhood lead exposure.<sup>1128</sup> Much progress has been made, but the battle is still intensely under way. The decision by unelected city managers to save money resulted in untold costs and damages to the lives of so many in Flint, but the dedicated actions of vocal citizens—like Zer Mari Copeny—have helped the community start the process of restoration. Social change in manmade times of crises is not just possible, it is essential. With indications that water safety violations exist in systems which serve more than 70 million citizens<sup>1129</sup> and reports from American Water Works Association that water infrastructure across the nation will need extensive revitalization over the coming decades,<sup>1130</sup> the need for such social change is not gone and not just limited to a single city.

These examples demonstrate the particular power Gen Z has when it comes to social change; as youth endowed with the instantaneous connectivity of online networks, they have perhaps the greatest opportunity of any prior generation to spark significant societal transformation. They're not ignoring this opportunity. In girls' education, in gun violence, in systemic racism, in child hunger, in safe drinking water, Generation Z is a veritable change-making force. In climate change, a devoted unit of Gen Z is hoping more than anything to be so as well. Many already are.

### **Climate Activism by Gen Z**

To open this section, I'll highlight the history-making endeavors of a young climate activist whose name most will already recognize: Greta Thunberg. While not a member of Gen

Z's identity as outlined in Part III, she is of the global cohort which faces an undeniable crisis and existential threat in climate change. She's helped spur millions around the world—including those who *are* in Gen Z—to action. For this reason, she's essential in understanding the relationship Gen Z activists have with the climate movement and the potential they have within it.

An unimposing Swedish girl with a self-described superpower<sup>1131</sup>—Asperger's syndrome, an autism spectrum disorder related to impaired social interaction skills<sup>1132</sup>—Greta Thunberg drew inspiration from the March for Our Lives activists and set up a one-woman strike outside her nation's parliament.<sup>1133</sup> She skipped school to do so. But she was a truant with a cause. After an abnormally hot summer season brought on a string of Arctic wildfires,<sup>1134</sup> Greta felt compelled to use the upcoming Swedish elections as a chance to bring attention to the climate crisis and the need for her nation to do more to reduce its carbon footprint.<sup>1135</sup> So with a hand-written sign saying “school strike for climate,” she began her lonely call for committed climate action in August of 2018 with a rebellious, silent strike. And after a week, one became two. And then two into ten. And ten into thousands. The journey which would see her receive two Nobel Peace Prize nominations in 2019 and 2020, speak at numerous international climate summits, and become *Time*'s 2019 Person of the Year had begun. *Time* offered in their special edition of Greta an incisive, sprawling portrait of her young life, reserved demeanor, and massive impact. In an abridgement reminiscent of matter-of-fact pointedness, they write this of her story: “... a quiet and mostly friendless teenager woke up, put on her blue hoodie, and sat by herself for hours in an act of singular defiance. Fourteen months later, she had become the voice of millions, a symbol of a rising global rebellion.”<sup>1136</sup>

Emboldened by the traction her strikes received, Greta revised her original plan to end her daily strikes after the Swedish election and announced that each Friday she would renew her protest until the warnings from the IPCC were truly respected in the form of governmental climate action. Fridays For Future—perhaps more recognizable as #fridaysforfuture—was born. Their intention is the same as Greta’s: to force policymakers to serve the interest of science-informed citizens.<sup>1137</sup> The grassroots organization is one among many—such as Australia’s School Strike 4 Climate and US Youth Climate Strike—that have carved out their place in the climate movement via promotion of mostly youth-centered strikes. As the movement swept throughout the world’s youth, Greta became their ambassador to world leaders.

The United Nations Climate Action Summit 2019, which took place on September 23, was framed by a week of international strikes known as Global Week for Future.<sup>1138</sup> Three days before the Summit and coinciding with weekly strikes on Friday, four million participants—principally youth—peacefully clamored for action in what is the largest climate demonstration in history, seconded by the protests which fell a week later and is discussed in the Part IV’s introduction.<sup>1139</sup> The fervor surrounding this week was in part precipitated by the fact that Greta would meet and speak with leaders from around the world at the Summit. Ever true to her cause, she sailed across the Atlantic for New York on a carbon-neutral sailboat;<sup>1140</sup> she did so again<sup>1141</sup> on unforgiving November seas for the COP25 conference held in December, which unexpectedly was relocated to Madrid from Santiago, Chile.<sup>1142</sup> She did so not to spur a return to seafaring—which can emit far less carbon than air travel—but to draw attention to the impossibility of sustainability in today’s circumstances, thereby illuminating the need to change such circumstances.<sup>1143</sup> Dependent upon the expertise and kindness of several good Samaritan sailors,

she made it to both conferences safely. At the Summit, she delivered the following remarks to some of the most influential figures in the world:

This is all wrong. I shouldn't be up here. I should be back in school on the other side of the ocean. Yet you all come to us young people for hope. How dare you! You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words. And yet I'm one of the lucky ones. People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction, and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you!...

You are failing us. But the young people are starting to understand your betrayal. The eyes of all future generations are upon you. And if you choose to fail us, I say: We will never forgive you. We will not let you get away with this. Right here, right now is where we draw the line. The world is waking up. And change is coming, whether you like it or not.<sup>1144</sup>

Her words caught the contempt and mockery of some, including world leaders. President Trump derisively commented that she was a happy young girl hopeful for a bright future,<sup>1145</sup> later, he speculated on her anger management problem after finding she overtook him for Person of the Year, and at the 2020 World Economic Forum<sup>1146</sup> he preceded a promise to join the latest initiative to restore a trillion trees to global forests<sup>1147</sup> by denouncing the “perennial prophets of doom and their predictions of the apocalypse.”<sup>1148</sup> President Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil called Greta the Portuguese word for brat, *pirralha*, after she raised concerns that Indigenous persons were

being killed in their efforts to prevent deforestation of the Amazon.<sup>1149</sup> She responded with the snark of a digital native: she updated her Twitter bio to merely “Pirralha.”<sup>1150</sup> Her intent to shame rather than spread hope at these conferences has also been criticized by a handful of predominantly right-wing media commentators and pundits.<sup>1151</sup>

For most, however, her chastisement of world leaders with her trademark blunt, impassioned style was a source of strength and empowerment. She captured the consciousness of young people—including American Gen Zers—who know that one does not go unscathed by refusing to point the finger at those who scathe them. She, and those who rally with her, portray the message that there is no ignorance on the part of policymakers anymore. Their righteous anger may be heeded or denied, but it will undoubtedly be heard. Time and time again until change comes or the end does.

Inaction, climate activists believe, is willful destruction of the planet. A destruction today’s generation and the generations of tomorrow will suffer through as they toil to mend it. Greta, when she made that fateful choice to go on strike without the support of even her parents, inaugurated a new wave in the climate movement.<sup>1152</sup> One where the youth are the torchbearers, shining their light at those in power to force them to see the perils facing the planet. Greta, however, is not the entirety of the climate movement. She wasn’t the first to call for action to avoid the destructive path we’re on. A robust climate movement preceded her. She and today’s youth strengthened it, no doubt, but it’s additionally important to highlight the foundations of the movement.

Intergovernmental bodies were a part of these early discussions. The World Climate Conference, the first major scientific gathering regarding humanity’s impact on climate, was organized by the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) in 1979; the need for recognition



and prevention of man-made changes in the climate was firmly identified.<sup>1153</sup> The World Climate Programme was established to foster further research into Earth's climate system with the intention that such knowledge would help inform policies.<sup>1154</sup> It took a while before that happened. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, established by the United Nations Environment Programme and WMO in 1988, was another step in the right direction of connecting policymakers to evidence of climate change.<sup>1155</sup> Dozens of international agreements emerged as a result of the scientific understandings these global organizations have facilitated, and these agreements have helped kickstart and continue climate change mitigation efforts. Such agreements include: the Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer in 1987 (which successfully directed the phase-out the chlorofluorocarbons responsible for the Ozone Hole),<sup>1156</sup> the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in 1992,<sup>1157</sup> the Kyoto Protocol in 1997,<sup>1158</sup> the Copenhagen Accord during the 15th annual Conference of Parties (COP15) in 2009,<sup>1159</sup> and the Paris Agreement in 2015.<sup>1160</sup> But as discussed in Part III Chapter 3, these treaties are rarely legally binding; as such, governments rarely fulfill their commitments, and these commitments are insufficient for mitigating climate change to its ideal degree. The United States government, in particular, has made a habit of not bothering with the pretense of internationally-cooperative commitments; this is evidenced by President Bush failing to submit the Kyoto Protocol to the Senate for approval<sup>1161</sup> and by President Trump's withdrawal from the Paris Agreement effective November of 2020.<sup>1162</sup>

Amidst the strengthening evidence from the scientific community and the valuable but inadequate responses from nations, citizens began to take note of the volatility of their future. In 1989, *Time* announced Earth as Planet of the Year and stuffed the issue full of experts and commentators who were grappling with the reality of a destabilizing climate.<sup>1163</sup> Former Vice

President Al Gore was featured in that issue and the magazine's recent 30-year anniversary report *2050: The Fight For Earth*.<sup>1164</sup> As an undergrad, he was convinced of climate change's threat by his teacher Roger Revelle, the renowned scientist who helped showcase in the 1950s that the carbon sink of the ocean was not capable of absorbing all the additional emissions of CO<sub>2</sub> entering the atmosphere because of the gas' chemistry.<sup>1165</sup> Throughout his time as a legislator and public servant, he advocated for climate policies on the national and international stage, attending some of the crucial conferences previously listed. He heightened his informational campaigns after his failed presidential run, sponsoring the concert series Live Earth in 2007<sup>1166</sup> and making the documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* with Davis Guggenheim in 2006.<sup>1167</sup> As he said in his acceptance speech of the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize, for which he won alongside the IPCC for helping to raise awareness of climate change, "There is an African proverb that says, 'If you want to go quickly, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.' We need to go far, quickly."<sup>1168</sup> Gore is a figure who, at the least, has strived to get more people together in the climate movement.

Another influential environmentalist who has helped build the climate movement is Bill McKibben. He joined the fray in 1989 with his book *The End of Nature*, a book which detailed the titular consequence of unbridled temperature rise.<sup>1169</sup> After it became clear that mere information alone was not spurring the necessary change he knew the world needed, McKibben partnered with the students he taught at Middlebury College to create StepItUp, an umbrella organization which helped to coordinate local demonstrations with grassroots environmental activists;<sup>1170</sup> their coordination leading up to their one-time national day of action in 2007 helped spur over 1,000 rallies.<sup>1171</sup> With the success he realized youth activists over the internet could create, he founded with those same students an organization which would go far beyond a single

day of demonstrations: 350.org. The grassroots climate group is named after the parts per million of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere which scientists believe is safe.<sup>1172</sup> For the record, the climbing Keeling Curve exceeded 419 CO<sub>2</sub> ppm in the summer of 2021.<sup>1173</sup> The organization helped organize the 5,200 events which welcomed COP15 in 2009,<sup>1174</sup> and McKibben was a prominent figure in the lengthy battle over the Keystone XL Pipeline, which presently and at least for the duration of the Biden administration will not be moving forward.<sup>1175</sup> McKibben was also one of many organizers from across the movement who helped organize the People's Climate March in 2014, which brought 400,000 people into the streets of New York City on the eve of the U.N. Climate Summit that year.<sup>1176</sup> The coalition of organizations became known as the "Peoples Climate Movement" for a time, dedicated to expressing all the core principles of environmentalism in relation to climate change.<sup>1177</sup> Superseded by Gen Zer-led strike organizations, the accomplishment of the People's Climate Strike in progressing the movement is nonetheless noteworthy.

Perhaps most significantly, McKibben played a major role in the fossil fuel divestment branch of the climate movement, wherein advocates demand institutions and individuals alike rid their investment portfolios of fossil fuel companies. In his 2012 Do the Math campaign, McKibben argued that the potential gigatons of carbon emissions in fossil fuel reserves companies already had access to—2,795—was five times the remaining budget of carbon dioxide emissions in scenarios under the 2°C threshold.<sup>1178</sup> To prevent fossil fuel companies from using up the entirety of these energy stores, activists clamored for institutions including faith-based groups, governments, and universities to pull financial support. It was a tactic drawn from anti-Apartheid protests, wherein divestment from South Africa delivered a loud and clear message.<sup>1179</sup> Young college students were at the forefront of this campaign, calling upon their

universities to fulfill their creeds and mission statements to protect and cultivate the brightest futures for their students by permanently divesting from nonrenewables.<sup>1180</sup> Since the movement started, more than 1,497 institutions have committed to divestment.<sup>1181</sup> Recently, McKibben continued to raise awareness for the climate crisis when he wrote a speculative fiction piece from the perspective of a 2050 wherein we mitigated climate change to acceptable levels but still faced a reality of hundreds of millions of climate refugees and scorching heat waves.<sup>1182</sup> More recently, the realization that these best-case futures are not the ones with him leading the movement but with younger faces scowling from behind placards and toiling at laboratory workstations has gradually washed over him. He wrote in May 2020: “I began consciously backing off, not in my work but in my willingness to dominate the space. I stepped down as board chair at 350.org, and really devoted myself to introducing people to new leaders from dozens of groups.”<sup>1183</sup> His wisdom is validated by the rise of Greta, a voice for a generation who will bear much more of the crisis than McKibben, now in his 60s, will. But he was a crucial part in paving the way for leaders like Greta to step in and ignite greater activism. His place in the history of the climate movement is well established.

Other older activists have played a similar role in setting the stage for and motivating the action today’s Gen Z youth are taking. Bona fide Hollywood star Leonardo DiCaprio is an outspoken environmentalist who has utilized the influence and resources he’s acquired to propel the movement. Like McKibben, DiCaprio spends time with organizations that foster and promote on-the-ground projects—he launched the Leonardo DiCaprio Foundation in 1998 and serves on the board of many nature-protection groups like World Wildlife Fund.<sup>1184</sup> He’s also produced awareness-raising documentaries like *The 11th Hour* in 2007, *Before the Flood* in 2016, and *Ice on Fire* in 2019 to help inform the greater public of the plight they face, and he devoted the

finale of his Academy Award acceptance speech to confirming the reality of climate change and the necessity of cooperation to combat that climate change. Lester Brown, a leading environmental scientist and advocate, has also made important contributions in his creation of the Worldwide Institute in 1974 and Earth Policy Institute in 2001, which ended with his retirement in 2015.<sup>1185</sup> As pioneer research organizations, the institutes worked to gain insight about the avenues for sustainability in a world where burgeoning populations and destabilized weather patterns are exacerbating food scarcity and swallowing up habitats. Jane Goodall, the legendary primatologist who began her study of chimps in Gombe Stream Chimpanzee Reserve over 60 years ago,<sup>1186</sup> has additionally taken action to help secure a kind future for ourselves and our primate relatives.<sup>1187</sup> Her Jane Goodall Institute manages projects specifically targeted at protecting habitats to ensure, beyond saving the wildlife within them, that such crucial carbon wells can continue to be nature's allies in our fight against climate change.

Her work, which was never originally concentrated on the climate, unveils the united front environmentalists have formed in the midst of the climate crisis. A variety of environmental organizations not expressly born out of the climate movement still provide opportunities for activists, including Gen Zers, to seek climate justice.

Founded by famed preservationist John Muir, the Sierra Club has sought the protection of Earth's natural beauty for more than a century.<sup>1188</sup> As one of the oldest and largest—nearly 4 million members—environmental groups in the United States, their intense focus on climate action as a necessity for preservation has squarely positioned them as influential players in the climate fight.<sup>1189</sup> Greenpeace is a similarly powerful environmental organization with priorities and agendas encompassing a large range of environment-related matters, and recently climate change has moved to the forefront of those matters.<sup>1190</sup> It carries out its advocacy by helping to

inform and motivate the millions of citizens within their network of influence. Signatories on a letter to President Obama and Chinese Premier Hu Jintao in 2011<sup>1191</sup> calling for significant and immediate reductions in carbon emissions included the organizations Friends of the Earth<sup>1192</sup> and Rainforest Action Network.<sup>1193</sup> These groups strive to address the various indirect and direct causes and effects of climate change, working for a just and healthy relationship within human society as much as between human society and nature. Also among the signatures was the Executive Director of Eco-Cycle, a non-profit recycler organization which outlines opportunities for activists to engage in carbon farming—growing plants which help take carbon dioxide out the air efficiently—as an approach to curbing climate change in one’s own small way.<sup>1194</sup> World Wildlife Fund has affirmed the disconcerting risk that climate change poses to biodiversity across nature systems around the world, and they’ve undertaken initiatives like Climate Crowd to help humans and wildlife alike adapt to their changing environments.<sup>1195</sup> Center for Biological Diversity is comprised of activists engaged in grassroots campaigning and litigation on behalf of the world’s irreplaceable array of creatures, and in their Climate Law Institute they work to leverage existing environmental laws and advocate for new ones which help expedite the transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy sources.<sup>1196</sup>

Some notable climate-focused organizations are available to Zers as well. Gaining international recognition for their potent nonviolent messaging and demonstrations, Extinction Rebellion<sup>1197</sup> works to pressure governments into declaring a climate and ecological emergency while also pushing for legislation on developing Citizen’s Assemblies so that concerned individuals have more direct power in influencing policies which gravely impact their lives.<sup>1198</sup> The Climate Mobilization, founded in 2014, was an early iteration to the new flock of climate organizations which have sprung up in recent years; they are dedicated to spreading the truth

about the climate emergency, calling for a WWII-scale mobilization to reform the economy into a sustainable version of itself, and seeking a complete return to pre-industrial levels of surface temperature.<sup>1199</sup> The Climate Reality Project, of which Former Vice President Gore is the founder and chairman, facilitates leadership training for those who want to take on more substantial activist efforts.<sup>1200</sup> The trainings emphasize best practices for organizing, how to network within communities and across social media, and the science behind climate change and climate solutions.<sup>1201</sup>

In each of these organizations, Zers have an opportunity to participate in the climate movement. But many organizations that focus specifically on answering the call to action set forth by the climate emergency are those created for and led by youth specifically. And in today's digital climes, it is these groups at the forefront of the movement, connecting and mobilizing passionate young Zers together in the common pursuit of social change to combat climate change.

Zero Hour is a prominent youth-led organization committed to all the familiar policy demands of the American government: specific taxes for major emitters, forego new investments in fossil fuel developments by 2030, and full independence from fossil fuels by 2040.<sup>1202</sup> Co-founded by Jamie Margolin, a queer Colombian immigrant of Jewish heritage, Zero Hour is particularly dedicated to seeing climate justice through because of the disproportionate effect vulnerable and marginalized communities face; as a result, the demands they strike for include recognition of First Nations treaties and a standardized climate justice curriculum which takes into account the unique perspectives of persons of color and Indigenous individuals.<sup>1203</sup> Born out of an ethical responsibility to mollify the unearned suffering impoverished communities most especially face as a result of climate change, Zero Hour's modus operandi is to inform

citizens from these communities that preparation is required and activism is crucial. In this way, the organization is dedicated to small-scale but meaningful efforts for change. And as such, Zero Hour is situated in the larger Environmental Justice Movement which seeks, in their terminology, to equalize the poisoning of people by ending altogether the poisoning of people.<sup>1204</sup> Groups like Strike With Us similarly affirm the need to address the disproportionate injustices of climate disasters on disenfranchised communities, but instead of unfolding communal educational campaigns, they work to channel the urgency that those educated on the climate crisis likely feel into headline-grabbing events to force green-policy adoption.<sup>1205</sup>

Roots & Shoots, an offshoot of the Jane Goodall Institute, is another youth-focused organization which aims to invite children and adolescents into local environmental projects in their community. Much of Roots & Shoots is centered around climate movement activities like volunteerism and education that community members themselves set-up and publish onto the website.<sup>1206</sup> Power Shift Network—founded as Energy Action in 2004—is an organization which mobilizes the innate activist spirits of youth to pursue clean-energy alternatives to the dirty energy fueling our 21st century lifestyles.<sup>1207</sup> Every few years, the organization hosts convergences. These gatherings of youth activists are intended to bolster the capabilities of youth to work change by equipping them with complete understanding of the extent of the climate emergency as well as the fundamental organizing and reasoning skills necessary to confront that emergency; the 2021 Power Shift Convergence will address environmental racism and its part in exacerbating climate change’s impacts in the United States.<sup>1208</sup> The DC Environmental Film Festival youth competition hints at the range of opportunities for young Zer climate activists to harness their creative talents to raise awareness and motivate action.<sup>1209</sup> Alliance for Climate Education is an education-as-activism group. Driven by the recognition that formal climate



education is nonexistent or insufficient, Alliance for Climate Education creates online videos and on-the-ground community networks to help Youth Fellows inform their peers.<sup>1210</sup>

One of the most influential youth activist groups in the movement is an organization named Sunrise. A self-described army of young people, the collective is a vigorous advocate for policy reform. The work of the Sunrise Movement is particularly inextricable from the Green New Deal, a proposed legislation package endorsed by longtime Democratic Senator Ed Markey and then-freshman Representative from New York's 14th District Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.<sup>1211</sup> As a resolution submitted to the House of Representatives, the Green New Deal's passage would serve as an admittance of an onus by the federal government to enact policies which comply with the items listed within the resolution but would not in itself result in the legislation or enactment of such policies. The essence of the Green New Deal, as described by its proponents, is to curtail climate change's gravest impacts and create millions of jobs via a 10-year mobilization of the national economy wherein energy production is achieved entirely through renewable sources and wide-scale investment is devoted to "public transit, sustainable (regenerative) agriculture, conservation and restoration of critical infrastructure, including ecosystems."<sup>1212</sup> The Sunrise Movement launched a tour to introduce swathes of the public to the resolution in the hopes that an unbreakable momentum would develop behind it; their efforts also include peaceful but stubborn sit-ins of the congressional offices of certain public officials, including former Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R) and Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi (D), often resulting in the arrest of hundreds of youth.<sup>1213</sup> A viral exchange between schoolchildren with the Sunrise Movement and California Senator Dianne Feinstein (D), who planned to propose a version of the resolution which she believed would have a stronger likelihood of passing, brought the Green New Deal to the forefront of public discussions and linked the youth-based

organization with it.<sup>1214</sup> The Green New Deal is far from passage and the policies described within are even further from implementation, but more than 100 members of congress have expressed support for the deal.<sup>1215</sup> Further, former Vice President Gore contends that the fervor granted to the Green New Deal by principally young activists has helped to pressure Democratic presidential candidates in outlining specific and meaningful plans to begin a true effort against the climate crisis.<sup>1216</sup> Indeed, during the 2020 campaign, Democratic nominee Biden committed to initiating endeavors to reach net-zero emissions and launch the transition to a fully clean energy economy by 2050 by investing more than \$1.7 trillion into a green future.<sup>1217</sup> The work of Zers in the Sunrise Movement is seeding change.

Clearly, there are a plethora of pathways for Gen Z youth to engage in their social process by advocating for climate mitigation. Greta may be the standard-bearer, but she's not alone in being a courageous trailblazer for the climate movement. Below I spotlight just a few of the thousands of Gen Zers committed to climate activism, each in their own ways. Notably, there is an enormous diversity to these voices of social change.

Kallan Benson works with Parachutes for our Planet, which draws attention to the climate crisis through collaborative decoration of wheels of cloth.<sup>1218</sup> Marlow Baines is a co-youth director for Earth Guardians, an organization which helps cultivate leadership and civic engagement qualities in climate-concerned youth.<sup>1219</sup> She's a pivotal part of that organization's Rising Youth for Sustainable Earth (RYSE) council<sup>1220</sup> comprised mostly of young adult women, and she helped advocate for the successful passage of the Oil and Gas Conservation Act<sup>1221</sup> to meaningfully regulate the utilization of these natural resources in her home state of Colorado. She helped organize state-level demonstrations during the wave of youth strikes in 2019. A group of Utahn teens helped secure the passage of a resolution<sup>1222</sup> wherein the state

acknowledged climate change and the need for better environmental stewardship, advancing the possibility of such state-level policies being proposed and enacted.<sup>1223</sup> Vic Barrett was a fellow for the Alliance for Climate Education and speaker for Earth Guardians at numerous conferences including COP21 when the Paris Agreement was drafted.<sup>1224</sup> He was spurred to action because he personally felt the touch of the climate crisis; the powerful Hurricane Sandy struck his community in 2012. Isha Clarke was one of the students who confronted California Sen. Dianne Feinstein, and she has spoken at Climate One events, which aim to facilitate discourse about climate solutions in addition to the climate emergency.<sup>1225</sup> She worked with Youth Vs. Apocalypse to call for equitable environmental policies at multiple levels of government.<sup>1226</sup> Tokata Iron Eyes of the Standing Rock Sioux tribe, also a part of Earth Guardian's RYSE council, has routinely resisted commercial efforts which degrade and disrupt the natural ecosystems she's grown up around.<sup>1227</sup> Jerome Foster II serves as an editor-in-chief of the youth-curated environmental news outlet The Climate Reporter.<sup>1228</sup> Alexandria Villaseñor has assisted FridaysForFuture in organizational endeavors and is the founder of Earth Uprising, another youth organization dedicated to spearheading climate action.<sup>1229</sup> Xiuhtezcatl, a Coloradan reared in Aztec tradition, advocates through his climate-centered hip hop music as much as he does in his role as co-youth director of Earth Guardians.<sup>1230</sup> He spoke at U.N.'s High-Level Event on Climate Change in 2015 at 15 years of age, eloquently calling upon world leaders to stand with his generation in safeguarding the future of the planet as many before and after him have done.<sup>1231</sup>

A particularly unique example of Gen Z's climate change activism is in the constitutional climate lawsuit *Juliana v. United States*. The lawsuit, with 21 youth plaintiffs who were all younger than 19-years-old when it was filed in 2015, is built upon the notion that a safe

environment and climate is a fundamental human right.<sup>1232</sup> Further, they've sued the federal government because they feel the executive branch has failed to uphold their constitutional rights to life, liberty, and property by failing to protect natural resources in the public trust. The youth are represented by Julia Olson and others of her non-profit law firm Our Children's Trust, which for the past decade has served the public interest by representing young individuals in their "legal efforts to secure their binding and enforceable legal rights to a healthy atmosphere and stable climate, based on the best available science."<sup>1233</sup> The plaintiff youths of the case compose the organization Youth v. Gov, which has traced and celebrated the 5-year journey of the lawsuit and all the media engagement it has spawned. The namesake is Kelsey Juliana, a Sierra Student Coalition alumni and lifelong activist who is the oldest of her fellow Zers.<sup>1234</sup> Xiuhtezcatl and Vic Barret are also plaintiffs. So too is Levi Draheim, 8-years-old at the time of filing, who joined out of the worry that the dunes of his home Satellite Beach in Florida will succumb to the ever-heightening waves.<sup>1235</sup> Hawai'ian native Journey Zephier,<sup>1236</sup> 10-year-olds (at the time of filing) Hazel<sup>1237</sup> and Sahara<sup>1238</sup> of Oregon, and Plant for the Planet activist Isaac Vergun<sup>1239</sup> are also among those seeking to receive judicial vindication that their government is failing them.

The lawsuit resulted from a small but significant class of court cases which demonstrated the viability of affirming youth citizens' rights to a livable planet. In Washington in 2014, a group of children filed a petition for rulemaking to the state Department of Ecology; their petition was initially refused consideration without justification, but their appeal was accepted by King County's Superior Court, thereby remanding the petition back to the Department of Ecology for genuine review.<sup>1240</sup> That ruling conveyed the legal basis youth have in the courts to pursue, if not judicial orders forcing the executive and legislative branches to create policies which ensure protection of the right to livable environments, judicial recognition of such a right.

Early in the proceedings for *Juliana v. United States*, this standard was upheld; although the government and the fossil fuel industry motioned to dismiss the lawsuit, U.S. Magistrate Judge Thomas Coffin and U.S. District Court Judge Ann Aiken recommended and upheld denials of these attempts to dismiss.<sup>1241</sup> In early 2020, the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals recognized the essence of the lawsuit—that the federal government was violating constitutional rights of the plaintiff in their willful reluctance to preclude actions known to contribute to climate change—but also that the judicial branch was not endowed with the powers to meaningfully redress such infringements because the vast policy changes required are prerogatives vested in the executive and legislative branches.<sup>1242</sup> The “Juliana 21” were not ready to give up, however. Aided by amicus briefs—informal recommendations made by “friends of the court”—from dozens of U.S. Congresspersons, activists, and constitutional law experts, Chief Legal Counsel Julia Olson is appealing for a reevaluation of that ruling.<sup>1243</sup> As the case continues to unfold, whatever success it does or does not bring stands as a testament to the activist efforts Gen Zers are taking part in to stimulate social change.

The lawsuit, along with the scores of activist organizations and youth Zer advocates listed throughout this section, showcases how desperately this generation wants to transform their world so that they might be able to save it. They are deeply involved in the social process. These activists know that, for a historical circumstance like the climate crisis, they have to be. They are the last Vanguards.

## **Part IV Conclusion**

Several claims were substantiated in Part IV. Activism seeks to yield social change, and it often succeeds in doing so. A small but resolute contingent of the population is capable of engaging in society-altering activist efforts; various means are available for activists to pursue social change, including protests, knowledge-sharing, and lobbying elected officials. Through activism, social generations function as forces of social change. The first reason for this is because the mechanism of generation succession applies to social movements, incrementally evolving the movement's mission to align with the worldviews and desires of the rising cohort. The churn of social movements mirrors the churn of society, and often so because it is the former that churns the latter. The second reason is the tendency of activists to take up causes related to the unique historical circumstances of their formative years which imparted in them a distinct generational identity. Anti-war activism was the response by a generation coming of age in a needless war. Climate activism is the response of a generation coming of age in a crisis of planetary well-being.

Additionally, youth activism is an essential component of securing change in the social order. Age effects surrounding youth predispose them to more passionate displays of activism, and generational effects direct that passion to causes related to their parameter of experience. Although youth activism endows social movements with a degree of creativity and innovation, there are limitations to the participation pathways available to young people and thus limitations to the extent of social change they might produce. Nonetheless, youth have historically been at the forefront of successful campaigns of societal transformation. They vanguard change in their own parameter of experience, and such change is programmed as the baseline parameter of experience for subsequent youth. Gen Z are exclusively youth at the moment, so they are primed

to spearhead change in the climate movement. In other movements, such as the response to the generational imprint of violence embodied in March for Our Lives, the generation has demonstrated the capacity to spur social change.

Digital activism has emerged as a mode whereby activists can perform and facilitate social change activities. Online networks such as social media, along with other functions of the internet, serve to reinforce traditional activism. For instance, building awareness of a cause—which can then be cultivated into actionable civic engagement—can be accomplished efficiently and substantially through sharing an informational graphic on some social media platform. As digital natives, Gen Z are best positioned to employ digital activism in the pursuit of social change. Indeed, Zers have already tapped into their digital deftness to do just that. As evidenced by the global strikes that Zer youth activists organized principally through online technologies, digital activism has become an essential part of the climate movement.

In recent years, improved scientific understanding of the direness of climate change has elevated the urgency of climate activists. Gen Zers, coming of age in the midst of newly defined deadlines for climate action, are now at the heart of the movement. As youth activists with an unmatched digital prowess, members of this emergent generation are distinctly positioned to propel climate activism, and an array of youth-centric organizations and youth-led endeavors certify that they do. This deep involvement in climate change activism constitutes participation within the historical currents of their time, affirming the existence of a generational consciousness for Gen Z. Further, Gen Z as a distinct force in the social process is clear in their attempts to work social change in these particular historical conditions.

Their greatest participation in the social process is their pursuit for mitigation responses to climate change, and this will likely forever be intertwined with the ultimate perception of Gen

Z's character and mark on the world. Such pursuits will be the legacy this generation holds in the galleries of history. Whether that legacy is one of a valiant effort to temper the throes of climate change or a successful revision of human civilization to cease, undo, and adapt to our exacerbation of Earth's systems is yet unclear. At present, despite the formidable mobilization Gen Z has initiated with fellow youth activists around the world, there has been little progress for the climate movement's demands of sufficiently comprehensive governmental action on climate justice. Their push for genuine social change in this area has not produced actual social change. For now.

How can we, drawing on theoretical and empirical understandings of generations, make Gen Z's efforts for a future least plagued by climate crisis ramifications more effective? How can we ensure that older citizens act as allies and co-agents of change to activist Gen Zers spearheading the climate movement? In other words, how can other generations help Gen Z to best realize their generational consciousness in action and affect the social process? Part V will examine intergenerational cooperation to suggest possible answers to these questions.



## **Part V: Intergenerational Harmony in Social Change Organizations**

Gen Z can secure positive change in the climate emergency, but not alone. The man-made crisis was set in motion by generations of pollution, and it cannot be undone simply from one vanguard generation unit within an emergent social generation. But these young Gen Z activists, joined by leagues of climate activists from other generations and around the world, can help lead humanity in a grand unified effort to bring to a halt harmful anthropogenic climate change. So long as, in America, these activists are not divided, distracted, or deterred by their generational differences.

This belief draws from the culmination of the research shared in the prior Parts of this paper. We know that generations, themselves reflections of the social process, have the capacity to drive social change. We know that activism is a way in which generational members can manifest their identities, engage with the intellectual currents of their time, and directly participate in the social process. We know that youth are emotionally and psychosocially positioned to experiment with the social order in ways that sow change, and that the youth of today are invested in undoing elements of the social order that cripple the climate's stability. We know that these youth are Gen Z, a bona fide social generation influenced by the historical circumstances it inherited—including fulcrums—and the major imprint phenomena it faced during key formative years which, mind you, are ongoing. We know that the climate crisis is one such imprint, and a branch of Gen Z dedicated to participating in the social process by mitigating this crisis represents a distinct generation unit. Still, we know that this unit largely shares the generational consciousness—comprised of common experiences and characteristics and

perceptions and mindsets and attitudes and values—of the social generation Gen Z. Because of this, members of that Gen Z unit are in ways dissimilar from fellow climate activists who have emerged from other parameters of experience and thus harbor different generational consciousnesses. We know, too, that generational differences can crop up in workplaces and other social environments. These differences, whether perceived or actual, can spark tension or perhaps conflict.<sup>1244</sup> Strife can impede productivity and obstruct the successful fulfillment of a social change organization’s mission just as it can do so to typical for-profit business organizations.<sup>1245</sup>

Taking into account all that information, the possibility of even minor preventable discord between Gen Z and other generations within the climate movement is grounds for concern. The Herculean mission of combatting anthropogenic climate change does not need any additional barriers. Intergenerational interactions must be “transmitive” rather than “resistive,”<sup>1246</sup> meaning that they should be fertile ground for the transfer of knowledge, skills, and tactics across generational lines; they must be opportunities for strengthening the movement rather than hindering it. Therefore, in this Part V, I begin to articulate how to best foster harmonious collaboration between Gen Z climate activists and those of prior generations so that the common goal they possess can be better reached. More finely, I seek to illuminate how climate activist organizations can leverage the generational distinctions and commonalities of their vanguards to facilitate productive and effective activism efforts.

In Chapter 1, I trace the potential areas for conflict in activist groups between Gen Z and the Millennial, Gen X, and Baby Boomer generations based on their established profiles. The need for intergenerational cooperation is stressed. In Chapter 2, I posit a framework for strategies which can achieve intergenerational cooperation. These include conflict resolution, generational

awareness initiatives, and formation of communities of practice. Adoption of these strategies will, ideally, strengthen the efforts of climate activists by rooting out needless intergenerational strife.

Importantly, I'm including age-group dynamics of youth and adults in this discussion of intergenerational cooperation. This is because interpersonal conflict between the young Gen Z and the older generations can emerge from the familiar disdain those who have exited youth hold for those who are presently in their youth. This latent prejudice for fresh-faced rascals has been a facet of human societies since before the ancients; often misattributed as a statement Plato attributed to Socrates, essayist Kenneth John Freeman channeled the real attitudes of elder Hellens of that day when he wrote:

Children began to be the tyrants, not the slaves, of their households. They no longer rose from their seats when an elder entered the room; they contradicted their parents, chattered before company, gobbled up the dainties at table, and committed various offences against Hellenic tastes, such as crossing their legs. They tyrannised over the paidagogoi and schoolmasters.<sup>1247</sup>

Though these tensions stem from the developmental age effects of maturing youth and thus don't constitute generational differences in the sense that we have come to define them in this paper, they still represent real areas of possible conflict and strife that may inhibit the cooperation of youth Zers and members of previous generations within the climate movement. For this reason, in the interest of maximizing the potential Gen Z has to spur social change in the climate response, I examine the importance of building partnerships between youths and adults

in Chapter 1 and how to authentically cultivate those partnerships in activist organizations in Chapter 2.

It is worth noting that modes of activism which are not outright associated with organizations or which can be accomplished with individual efforts, such as donation, are still important routes available to Gen Z to influence the social process. However, as noted in Part IV, activist organizations compound someone's impact on a social movement because of the expanded access to resources and support. Organizations are networks of activists, making them more powerful than any one singular activist. Additionally, recall the notion of only a few highly dedicated activists being responsible for much of the great strides in social change. It is likely that the most dedicated climate activists are going to be those that band together with other activists and pursue change as a part of a broader coalition. As such, focus is given to intergenerational harmony within organizations under the assumption that better social change groups translate to more effective social change.

## **Chapter 1: Potential Disharmony for Gen Z**

Section 1 depicts some of the key differences between Generation Z and its predecessor generations, and how these differences might manifest in the realm of social change organizations. The call for measures to promote intergenerational cooperation that prevent these differences from stirring strife (or that mitigate such strife if it already exists) is supported by research affirming the presence of potentially troublesome differences in multigenerational activist groups.

Section 2 contextualizes the impediments that Gen Z activists, as youth, face in society by noting how adults of older generations can foster better avenues of participation. While it's

true that youth Zers are the paramount Vanguards for social change in the climate crisis, their chances for success are improved when adult allies help to facilitate their efforts rather than dismiss them. In this way, youth-adult partnerships are a component of meaningful intergenerational cooperation.

### **Generational Strife**

Some of the distinct characteristics attributed to Generation Z might not only contrast with but could conflict with those attributed to previous generations, resulting in not just a difference but a divide between Gen Z climate activists and climate activists of other generations. For instance, as discussed in Part III, Gen Z has been portrayed as pragmatic whereas, in Part II, researchers tended to attribute unrealistic optimism or expectations with Millennials and idealism with Boomers. These attitudinal distinctions among Gen Z and its predecessors could crop in multigenerational activist networks, but the exact consequences they would produce for these activists have not yet been the subject of any scholarly studies. Empirical research would undoubtedly help reveal the effects, if any, that unreconciled intergenerational differences have on activist group efficacy and thus demonstrate the need for harmonious intergenerational relationships. Still, we can speculate some of the ways Gen Z's unique character might conflict with the generational personas of other activists in the climate movement.

Carrying on with the example of Gen Z's pragmatism in lieu of Millennials' optimism or Boomers' idealism, these differences might inform the type of activist endeavors that the youngest generation opts for as opposed to those these older generations might prefer. Guided by realism, they may put more stock in evaluating the effectiveness of certain activities. They might

stray from traditional activities that they deem ineffective to instead favor routes that have been proven to garner a lot of awareness for the movement, such as well-organized climate strikes and throwing support behind elected officials who advocate for and advance climate legislation. Activists from older generations may be concerned about some forms of protest—like the school strikes that can slice off a full day of education per week—that clear-eyed and impassioned Zers take, as some commentators have already expressed concerns over.<sup>1248</sup> Further, like Greta’s biting admonishment to world leaders at COP24 and COP25, this trait signals that Zers are less inclined to soften their message of doom and gloom because they feel that it’s an accurate description of the future they’ve been given unless they secure change. This tone, while it matches the urgency of the crisis they face, may contrast with the inclinations of activists of prior generations to coat their appeals for change with a sense of hopeful positivity. Zer activists might not be devoid of that faithfulness, but they push on with a dreadful awareness that there is no other option and that the rest of the world must learn this too. So we can see how activists of different generations may share a common vision for the united action that needs to be taken, but the rhetoric they employ in order to spread this vision may be starkly distinct.

Gen Z’s financial conscientiousness could also guide their activist behaviors in the climate movement. They could be especially intent on utilizing low-cost strategies that efficiently attract attention, such as sit-ins in lawmakers’ offices that win headlines in mainstream media outlets. For Zers generally engaged in the movement, their thin wallets and generational persona might motivate them to do inexpensive modes of contribution like volunteering and petition-signing whereas those of older generations may be more inclined, and able, to donate. Further, their financial conscientiousness may steer prudent Zers to innovate fundraising tactics. Wary of dependence on any single income source, they might be concerned

with getting involved in diversified funding strategies like grant proposals, donation requests, and merchandising as their way to support the organizations fighting for the climate cause. Invisibly shaped by the legacy of the Occupy Wall Street movement<sup>1249</sup> and the foregrounded role of income inequality in presidential campaigns like that of Sen. Bernie Sanders,<sup>1250</sup> Zers are well aware that financial means of protest are often the most potent, evident in the fossil fuel divestment campaigns that soared on college campuses. These viewpoints of Gen Z diverge from but don't necessarily oppose established generational characteristics for prior generations, but these differences could result in mismatched priorities which then fester into tensions.

The digital native attribute affirms that Zers will tend to be the most comfortable, adept, and insistent digital activists. While the Millennial parameter of experience would harmonize with Zers on this front, older generations might remain wary of such activism because it is perceived to be less impactful. Further, Gen Z's tendency to organize through social media—rather than through, say, email lists or community newsletters—could potentially alienate some older activists who would otherwise get involved. Again, in these ways, the generational identity of Zer climate activists sufficiently differs from those of prior generations in a way that could spark unproductive discord. For instance, the notion that Gen Z is actually less inclined to prefer face-to-face interaction was dispelled in Part III, but the *perception* of this circumstance nonetheless persists. Older activists misguidedly believing that Zers' communication style is exclusively or predominantly digital could itself be troublesome.

Additionally, the mental health struggles and elevated stress associated with Generation Z might manifest in unpredictable ways. Perhaps the greater support required for these individuals staring down a crisis which legitimately poses a threat to their livelihoods and, for some, their lives could result in strained intergenerational relationships. The emotional and economic capital

required to give competent care might be viewed by some unfamiliar with the distinct influences Zers faced in their formative years as needless efforts because they're not direct investments into mitigating climate change. The misunderstanding and subsequent conflict would arise from yet another intergenerational difference in this case. Similarly, Gen Zers—attuned to diversity because of their parameter of experience and aware of the pronounced impacts of climate change on marginalized and low-income communities—might be hesitant to join activist groups taking after corporate hierarchies that are led by a board of individuals who do not reflect the reality of the America they know. Their push for inclusion of important, unheard voices may come across as a bit of a rebuke to the well-versed, long-time leaders of some of these organizations who subscribe to a different generational view of diversity. And they'd be right. But the rebuke is at the system, not them. These differing viewpoints could, if left unattended to, spawn agitation among generations. And of course, the question of work ethic circulates; will Gen Z be perceived as workaholics like Boomers, independents like Xers, or trophy-kid workers like Millennials? Even though Zers have been noted as highly determined, we know from Part II that the perception of differences can matter more than the reality for intergenerational strife.

These are just some of the possible ways that the differences between Gen Z and other generations could manifest to challenge intergenerational harmony. The possibility alone, for a movement as consequential as the climate movement, warrants a push for intergenerational cooperation strategies that facilitate the greatest effectiveness. But the likelihood that these speculations of differences between Gen Z and predecessor generations could manifest in disruptive ways is reinforced by research showcasing, among prior generations, that unproductive tensions can brew within social change organizations and impede their social change objectives.



The Building Movement Project drew on the precedents of researchers studying generational differences in commercial business workplaces and applied them to non-profit activist organizations, employing a methodology comprised of cross-sectional surveys and qualitative focus group interviews.<sup>1251</sup> The patterns of generational differences that cropped up in traditional workplaces were also visible within these types of organizations. Because of the methodology, some of these differences can be attributed to age effects. For instance, Millennials placed a great deal of emphasis on leadership development compared to older generations who had already accumulated plenty of leadership skills and likely inhabited leadership roles. Differences not so easily explained by age effects emerged as well, however. Belief in the collective mission was significantly more important for Boomers and Xers than for Millennials, who instead placed utmost importance on the belief that their work was contributing to the completion of that mission.<sup>1252</sup> For Millennials, this is congruent with their attitudes on meaningful work and task-oriented nature that distinguished their generational profile as described in Part II. Additionally, Boomers and Xers rated teamwork and collaboration lower on their ranking of important features of a good workplace than did Millennials.<sup>1253</sup> While this isn't indicative of a lack of teamwork or collaboration within these organizations, it appears to affirm that teamwork-mindedness is a significant facet of Millennials' generational consciousness. Again, this is explored in Part II. These differences aren't those that would outright spur intergenerational conflict, but they affirm for these activists that among these generations, delineations exist.

Their study revealed, as most studies on generational differences within traditional workplaces did, that a great deal of similarities were present between activists of different generations. All generations valued strong relationships with their co-workers and with their

direct supervisors especially, and they all viewed the opportunities to provide input and participate in decision-making as important.<sup>1254</sup> These speak to commonalities in community-building and work expectations, which reveal that the foundations of intergenerational cooperation are already woven into these organizations.

Another report, from Building Movement Project director Frances Kunreuther and in association with the Annie E. Casey Foundation and Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund, similarly hints at intergenerational differences persisting even in social change organization settings.<sup>1255</sup> It should be noted that, like the previous report, these findings are not drawn from climate activist groups but could reasonably be applied to them. In their study, Boomers expressed frustration at younger generations not “paying their dues” as they toil their way up the ladder like Boomers did.<sup>1256</sup> This is consistent with the Baby Boomer Generation’s identity, particularly with their characteristic attitudes on work ethic and what constitutes hard work. Further, as a result of their generational parameter of experience, wherein they lived through and often participated in the social movements of the 1960s and early 70s, Boomers tended to feel that they had most earned their place as societal agents of change. Such a belief is not necessarily incorrect, but one can imagine how this sentiment might rub younger activists who dedicate themselves to civic engagement the wrong way. Further in keeping with the generational profiles established in Part II, Gen Xers contrasted with their older counterparts in these organizations because they placed a lot of importance on work-life balance (note that Millennials were not a part of this study).<sup>1257</sup> The studies of generational differences in traditional work settings often detailed a similar manifestation of this aspect of Gen X; though cautiously, we can consider that many of the relevant generational effects discovered in the research discussed in Part II can apply to activist organizations.

Unsurprisingly, the report also found generational similarities. Members of these generations were equally committed to their causes and organizations;<sup>1258</sup> an earlier study by Kunreuther produced similar findings in the comparable commitment, energy, and sense-of-justice levels for activists of different generations.<sup>1259</sup> Among organization leaders from different generations, there was a unified sense of desire to help communities and a common intention to contribute to the organization for the long-haul. These leaders also held similar but not exact viewpoints on organizational structure. Because they're social change groups, they tend to favor fairly democratic processes and inclusive practices. Gen X-led organizations, however, tended to have flatter hierarchies whereas organizations helmed by Boomers were more likely to have vertical corporate structures.<sup>1260</sup> Kunreuther noted the importance of intergenerational dialogue in soothing any strife that may arise from generational differences—such as Boomers believing younger generations may not be as committed because of their adamant calls for flexibility—and centering on commonalities. Indeed, intergenerational cooperation strategies may be crucial in attending to issues and fortifying strengths so that the longevity and efficacy of an organization can be secured.

Common intergenerational differences that impede productivity in traditional work settings likely appear in activist organizations and impede their progress toward social change. Preferences in communication and information-sharing styles have emerged as major areas of difficulty in intergenerational relations.<sup>1261</sup> Andrea Bencsik, Tímea Juhasz, and Gabriella Horvath-Csikos<sup>1262</sup> echo this notion, affirming that the chief work-related source of conflict among multigenerational teams was communication; in addition, their cross-sectional design yielded that another source of conflict was the perceived problems in other generations' ways of thinking. Other scholars have, like Dill, noted knowledge-sharing as another area ripe for

conflict.<sup>1263</sup> Since the attitudes on the types of information that necessitate knowledge-sharing are incongruous among generations, which influences the motivation and willingness to knowledge-share, this tends to be another area of generational divide that can challenge multigenerational teams.<sup>1264</sup> As generational conflict is manifested differently across different industries, the exact ways these common issues might affect social change organizations cannot easily be predicted, but nothing suggests that such organizations are not susceptible to them cropping up.

A way to frame how Gen Z's distinctions with previous generations could negatively affect intergenerational interactions is offered by ethnography. Drawing on generational theory detailed in Part I, generations can be thought of as subcultures in the grand national consciousness. As such, much of the confusion and frustration members of one generation have toward individuals of another can be interpreted as a form of ethnocentrism. A longstanding sociological and anthropological concept, ethnocentrism captures the notion that an individual judges foreign cultures based on the standard of their own culture as if it were the norm and thus perceives those cultures as strange or inferior.<sup>1265</sup> Similar to the ethnocentric views of Americans who devour deep-fried Oreos in the States but turn away roasted grasshoppers when visiting some East Asian countries, generations operating from their parameter of experience and their Habitus are indulging in a form of ethnocentrism when they grade, for instance, communication habits of other generations based on their own identity's rubric. Intergenerational strife, then, is rooted in cross-cultural misunderstanding. Intergenerational cooperation, then, is crucially tied to cultural understanding. Generational differences can often feel irreconcilable—like differing perspectives on the acceptability of smartphones simply being out on the desk in a boardroom meeting—but don't reach the heights of ethically-charged dilemmas like the controversial

practice of consuming dogs in some cultures.<sup>1266</sup> Part of strengthening generational relationships within the climate movement, then, might come from a refined variant of cultural relativism—which affirms that outsiders to a culture cannot reasonably pass judgement on it based on their own cultural mindset.<sup>1267</sup> Applied to generations: an outsider to a generational identity cannot reasonably pass judgement on that identity based on their own generational consciousness. Thus, cultural relativism is a possible framework for reducing the generational “ethnocentrism” which can inhibit the intergenerational cooperation necessary for an organization to put out best-case activism for their cause.

The benefits for having a well-functioning multigenerational team are rather intuitive. Mutual help, increased motivation, and better ideas stem from the harmonious interaction of generationally diverse perspectives within the team.<sup>1268</sup> For mass movements to be successful, these assets are critical. The strength of a movement, in its longevity and success outlook, is largely dependent on the strength of its intergenerational networks.<sup>1269</sup> Impaired or hostile communication between those with distinct mindsets in general can fracture a movement; this breakdown in communication and divergence of visions was evident in the militant wing of the SDS, leading to the group’s full dissolution as discussed in Part IV. As a foreign example of intergenerational differences in mindset resulting in a fractured movement, the Basque nationalism movement serves well. A unit of the emergent generation in the mid-20th century backed their elders’ radical ideas of independence with firepower and violence, forming the ETA.<sup>1270</sup> Because of their militancy, the separatist group divided the movement and earned the contempt of the public; after years of ceasefire, the ETA officially disbanded in 2018 without its mission of independence from Spain and France achieved.<sup>1271</sup> The entire movement has since adjusted their ambitions, no longer seeing independence as a possibility because the way in

which some pursued that independence soured much of the population to their cause for good.<sup>1272</sup> Indeed, intergenerational networks and cooperation are invaluable components of the continuation, development, and eventual success of a movement. Hank Johnston<sup>1273</sup> additionally points to the failure of the Tiananmen Square movement for democracy in the 1980s, partly rooted in the absence of a well-defined intergenerational coalition. On the other hand, Johnston notes the success of the South Korean push for direct elections and expanded liberties was born out of a student activist's death but compelled by citizens of many cohorts from around the nation who banded together to demand change.

Obviously, due to the niche of activist movements framed in the context of genuine generational theory, not much research exists on authentic intergenerational comparisons within social change organizations and hardly any pertains to Gen Z and climate organizations in particular. So let this be a call for more specific research into the generational differences between Gen Z activists and activists of older generations within social change organizations, including those of the climate movement. Ideally, such research will go beyond mere cross-sectional designs if possible. In lieu of this research, however, I have demonstrated that generational differences apparent in business-oriented social structures can apply to and do exist in activist group structures. Further, it's clear that Generation Z's profile offers enough distinctions from previous generations that many differences can potentially manifest within these structures in ways that impede collaboration and thus degrade effectiveness. Intergenerational cooperation, additionally, has been connected to successful movements. For these reasons, the necessity for climate activists to uphold strong intergenerational networks within the movement and to utilize strategies that facilitate these cooperative networks is clear.

## Youth-Adult Strife

Just as achieving harmony between the distinct yet overlapping generational consciousnesses present in a movement can strengthen Gen Z activists' pursuit of their goals, youth-adult partnerships (Y-APs) are integral to expanding the change-making power of this generation and the climate movement as a whole. Because youth is entangled with the Gen Z experience, Y-APs necessarily represent a facet of intergenerational cooperation. These age-based partnerships are essential for climate activist groups to incorporate for two primary reasons. First, youths have limited participation pathways despite the importance of youth activism, meaning Gen Z's contributory ability as vanguards is limited; in Y-APs, these pathways tend to be expanded and youth can more successfully conduct their activism. Second, as a result of Y-APs and the cooperation they bring, organizations are more effective in working toward their mission.

Part IV showcased the value of youth activism in yielding successful social change. Also acknowledged in that section is the way youth are often barred from opportunities to engage with civil society. The difficulty that youth who want to participate in society face largely originates from a systemic societal bias toward the perspectives, attitudes, and dominance of adults known as adultism. Leader of a youth development non-profit, John Bell, offers a deeper portrait of the phenomenon: "The word adultism refers to behaviors and attitudes based on the assumption that adults are better than young people, and entitled to act upon young people without their agreement."<sup>1274</sup> The crux of this bias, for Bell, is the disrespectful perspective that youth should not be considered seriously and should be kept in check by the authority of adults. This bias, of course, is understandable and often necessary for obvious reasons. Still developing in a variety of capacities, children and youth require a distinct form of treatment in order to accommodate and

nurture their growth. Well-intentioned compulsory education is adultist because it constitutes a decision made by adults on behalf of young people without their consent, but few would argue that bringing kids into educational settings disenfranchises them (and none could do so effectively). Parents disciplining their child with a time-out or a taste of soap as a means of socializing them to proper situational decorum is adultist because it suggests young people are incapable of and unpermitted to challenge behavioral norms. Still, learning about such norms is undeniably beneficial for the child. These scenarios are not inherently awful or damaging because they're adultist, but they fit the bill nonetheless.

Adultism becomes harmful when it manifests in discriminatory ways that demonize, delegitimize, or ostracize youths.<sup>1275</sup> For instance, despite the obvious stake they have in the matter, teenage minors have the right to choose their custodial parent in divorce cases in only a few states;<sup>1276</sup> while many states permit judges to take child preferences into consideration, this opportunity to share their perspective only extends insofar as the judge deems that perspective worth hearing.<sup>1277</sup> Adultism is particularly prevalent in the double-standard expectations for social interactions, too. Verbal mistreatment unto adults by youths is generally more frowned upon than the reverse. Though nuanced, this principle is evident in the way teachers are seen as instilling discipline into their classroom with they raise their voices whereas students are seen as disruptive or threatening when they do the same.<sup>1278</sup> Further along those lines, youth often lack the privilege to protest what they see as wrongful disciplinary action against them or to seek out what they believe to be more accurate academic recognition without fear of added repercussions.<sup>1279</sup>

In additional ways, youth voice, or the expression of their perspectives, is limited or overlooked by ingrained adultist beliefs. Accomplished interdisciplinary scholar Henry Giroux's



claims of a War on Youth<sup>1280</sup>—wherein repressive surveillance and rampant mistrust has led to increased criminalization of America’s young, evident in elevated school-related arrests often disproportionately affecting black students—illustrate how adultism is woven into institutional structures with dire consequences for youth.<sup>1281</sup> Gayle Kimball<sup>1282</sup> suggests that there is a telling lack of scholarly research devoted to social movements that is inclusive of the youth who contributed to those movements. Moreover, the rare cases wherein large-scale organizations openly welcome youth and researchers do acknowledge their presence, youth involvement is often discredited and devalued as “spontaneous emotional outbursts” rather than determined interest in change.<sup>1283</sup> Additional research has delved into the effects that adultist attitudes have for youth’s place in society, alerting them to the apparent message that they cannot and should not influence the social process.<sup>1284</sup>

These adultist mindsets pervading society have led to the restriction of youth engagement pathways because youth are seen as too incapable, too immature, or too ignorant. Confronted with the idea that they can’t develop their own meaningful opinion, youth might begin to stop sharing those meaningful opinions. And if they yearn to share them, adultism still offers difficulties. Right as youth may be, some adults will turn their ears away because the voice reaching for them does not belong to another adult. In this way, adults are not only important in encouraging youth to speak but also in carrying their words to those who will not listen. Indeed, adultist perspectives might even be harbored by the leaders of social change organizations who could envision youth as incapable at worst and inconsequential at best, further closing off opportunities for youth to access impactful vanguardist roles.

Of course, we know that youth activists are capable and consequential in social movements, and Generation Z has upheld this historical trend. It’s imperative, then, that the

climate movement stands as a bastion of youth involvement free from the fetters of adultism. As researcher Jessica K. Taft notes, youth should be the “protagonists”<sup>1285</sup> for their own pursuit of rights and well-being, but adults need not be their antagonists. In direct and substantial ways, adultist tendencies should be avoided so that Zer youth are able to secure the deepest inclusion in engagement activities and deliver their fullest contributions to the common cause. To reap the most out of the distinct benefits of youth activism and truly replace adultism with intergenerational cooperation, however, activist organizations must be sensitive to the ways that they can still curtail active youth participation even when they’ve made room for youth to participate.

Shira Eve Epstein noted how even in well-intentioned efforts to bolster the civic awareness of young people, adultist tendencies to underestimate youth potential often emerge.<sup>1286</sup> She evaluated the contradictory effect a middle school teacher, hoping to spur greater civic engagement in her students, created when she underestimated the civic knowledge those students had of their community and the issues pertaining to them. The maximum engagement gains those in that class could have received was stunted as a result of their teacher’s pre-judgement. The key takeaway from her study is that when adults disbelieve the capacity youth have to know and to act, thereby limiting the room they have to exercise this capacity, adults effectively curtail youth engagement. It’s as Adora Svitak, the prodigious child author, noted in her TedTalk: youth will sink to whatever low expectations are set for them.<sup>1287</sup> When, in Epstein’s study, the teacher revised her expectations of the youths’ understanding and interest in their local civic matters, their opportunity for engagement widened and thus so did their engagement.<sup>1288</sup> This research exemplifies how adult support for youth—in terms of making

available opportunities for involvement but also in perceiving youth as capable of and ready for such involvement—can represent a passageway for youth participation.

In settings of supposed involvement, *meaningful* engagement is hindered by a clear or latent lack of attentive support from adults.<sup>1289</sup> The editors of *Youth Engagement: The Civic-Political Lives of Children and Youth*—Jessica K. Taft and Sandi Kawecka Nenga—affirm that viewing youth as an inferior sort of activist or as citizens-to-be instead of citizens in their own right contracts the possibilities they have to take up active roles in society. Such viewpoints, also, are death knells for intergenerational cooperation. When adults—members of older generations—grant greater degrees of agency to youth activists, youth activism delivers greater degrees of social change. The climate movement, in need of the highest potential for youth activism for the highest chance of success, must make sure that its Zer activists can exercise such agency and truly pursue the change they hope to make.

The necessity for social change leaders to make conscious efforts for Y-APs is further supplemented by the two paradoxes youth face as a result of adultist society, deemed by Hank Johnston<sup>1290</sup> to be the desire-disappointment paradox and the persistent public exclusion paradox. The first paradox signifies the disappointment aspiring change-makers experience when they've been discredited, silenced, derided, ignored, or shut down in their pursuit.<sup>1291</sup> As a result, their desire to attempt further social change with the same intensity—or at all—shrivels. Dissolving this desire-disappointment paradigm will help foster impactful youth engagement, so climate groups must be cognizant of that responsibility. Disappointment, after all, will inevitably arise from the reluctance of national governments to recognize and act on the climate crisis. Zers, within climate activist groups, should not also have to worry about the disappointment of older activists neglecting their activist potential. The second paradox, persistent public exclusion,

encapsulates the reality youth face in an adultist society. Whether rightly or wrongly so in certain instances, youth will rarely have the opportunity to form the types of egalitarian, inclusive, and impactful partnerships with adults that social change organizations can offer. In so many other spheres of their life, youth are treated as lesser. Their voice is considered background noise. It is critical to generate meaningful collaboration within activist organizations so that youth can be sure that their ideas are worthwhile, their contributions matter, and their presence is valued.

Further complicating the effect of adultism on youth activism is the fact that many avenues of authentic civic engagement are dependent upon adult approval. For instance, as discussed in Part IV, youth councils are a prominent way to inject youth voice into municipalities and organizations, but by definition they need to be formally established at the behest of adult leaders. Youth summits, on the other hand, demand that adults actually attend and listen to their perspectives while participatory budgeting—which privileges youth to allocate a portion of the structure’s budget to some desired outcome—necessitates trust and proactivity on the part of adults working with the youth within that structure.<sup>1292</sup> Additionally, the trend to lower voting ages for local elections as a method of granting more political power to youth is dependent on not only adult citizens advocating on behalf of that change but adult leaders putting forth and passing motions to make that change come to fruition. It is worth mentioning that some studies have indicated that long-term civic participation is increased when voting ages are lowered and that 16- and 17-year-olds are no less developmentally prepared to cast ballots than 18-year-olds.<sup>1293</sup>

So, the benefits of youth activism explored in Part IV are limited by the ways adultist attitudes obstruct meaningful participation or discourage it. Labelled as inept and barred from involvement as a result, youth are unable to prove otherwise and become fixed with the

perception of ineptitude. Even latent adultism can curtail the extent of youth activism, thereby limiting the impact youth might have on the social process. For the climate movement, with its lofty goals, significant and effective inclusion of Gen Z youth is necessary if they're to have the greatest likelihood of securing social change. As such, adults in the movement must be concerned with fostering robust and meaningful participation opportunities for these youth.

Adults in the movement must portray a willingness to listen to the Zers' youth voice and offer a cooperative space wherein that voice is undergirded rather than undercut. By the same token, Zer youth in the movement must be accepting of these opportunities facilitated by adults, and they must recognize that no one generation can bring Atlas back to his feet. How, then, can adultism within climate movement organizations be overcome in favor of intergenerational cooperation that is more conducive to addressing the climate crisis?

Youth-adult partnerships. It's rather intuitive, but it's through adults allying with youth that the emergent generation can best vanguard the change they intend to make in the social process. There are many ways to conceptualize youth-adult partnerships, but they all depend on adult participation to dispel adultist thought patterns and to recognize that contributory power is not exclusive to a specific age bracket. Advocates for Youth, a youth activism network primarily focused on sexual health, envisions a partnership between youth and adults wherein "each party has the opportunity to make suggestions and decisions and in which the contribution of each is recognized and valued."<sup>1294</sup> Shepherd Zeldin, a prolific researcher in youth development and civil society, and his colleagues posed a similar interpretation of youth-adult partnerships: a sustained democratic practice of youth and adults "deliberating and acting together" in order to positively affect communal conditions.<sup>1295</sup> To further cement their understanding of Y-APs, they offer four dimensions integral to effective youth-adult partnerships. These are: authentically

horizontal decision-making, whereby the burden for mulling over, deciding upon, and executing potential courses of action is shared by both qualified youth and adults; natural mentors, wherein youth are able to organically, instead of formally, build a relationship with caring and encouraging adult role models; reciprocal activity, epitomized in mutual co-learning between adults and youth as well as in fair contribution from both of them; and community connectedness, distinguished by a sense of solidarity and belonging with a broader network which encompasses individuals of older or younger generations.<sup>1296</sup> Another substantive interpretation of Y-APs comes from the non-profit youth-oriented organization 4-H: “Y-AP exists where (a) there is mutuality in teaching and learning among youth and adults; (b) each age group sees itself as a resource for the other; and (c) each age group offers what it uniquely can provide.”<sup>1297</sup>

Significantly, these definitions of Y-APs feature prominent notions of reciprocity and mutuality. These partnerships are not so much rooted in ignoring the obvious age-based differences that exist as they are in acknowledging that these differences do not compromise the capacity for adolescents and adults to benefit one another. And, in fact, these differences afford the possibility for them to learn from each other in a healthy partnership. It’s a dynamic reminiscent of mutual mentorship. Though one participant has more experience and takes on the authoritative role, there’s a balance in the relationship where both are equals in willingness to learn and potential to contribute.<sup>1298</sup> Svitak supports this ideal of mutual mentorship, believing that learning should be reciprocal between students and teachers in traditional classrooms.<sup>1299</sup> In a similar fashion, learning should be reciprocal between youth activists and older activists. Each has wisdom to give to, and receive from, the other. This mindset is the foundation for intergenerational cooperation. And these specialized, cooperative contributions from different

age categories are critical for successful activism; youth, with their passion and creativity, and adults, with their expertise and resources, can together advance their activist cause better than if either group stood alone.

Youth-adult partnerships, clearly, seem to be the pathway to broadening youth involvement in an adultist landscape. They also allow adults to showcase to youth that they're "seeing them deeply, hearing them clearly, and taking their values with the same seriousness we [adults] allow our own."<sup>1300</sup> There are youth-adult dynamics, however, that do not make for a true partnership. Tokenism—such as placing a singular young person on an advisory board and deeming them a sufficient representative of youth voice—does not constitute genuine Y-AP, nor does it benefit the organization because youth are not granted a sufficient platform by which they can have influence.<sup>1301</sup> Peripheral presence of youth is not substantial participation by youth. Instead of making cursory efforts for youth inclusion, organizations hoping to make strides in their social change endeavors should commit to building meaningful Y-APs.

Another faux form of youth engagement in social change organizations arises from indifferent adults. Just as overbearing authoritativeness can stifle the contributions youth activists have to offer, adults remaining passive and giving youth free rein under the guise of empowering them is also ineffective for the organization's activist mission. Responsible youth-adult partnerships strike a balance between appropriate accountability and proportional expectation, with guidance from adults that enhances youth engagement rather than cripples or ignores it.<sup>1302</sup> Y-APs do not require organizational leaders to bend to the whims of youth activists; these leaders shouldn't say yes to any strategy youth activists propose simply for the sake of having them involved, but they *should* be willing to thoughtfully hear out the arguments youth bring when they make their suggestions. These partnerships are about giving fair space for youth to

affect the things that affect their lives. Allowing perspectives and agendas to be agreed or disagreed upon on the basis of their merit rather than the age of their proponent is at the heart of successful Y-APs.

To further clarify how youth involvement increases in conjunction with the presence of meaningful Y-AP, Roger Hart's Ladder of Participation model serves well.<sup>1303</sup> Hart's eight "rungs" detail the different degrees to which youth are able to possess participation power in a given setting. The bottom rungs are non-participation, such as obstruction from organizational influence or tokenism, whereas the top rungs indicate youth sharing responsibility over projects or fully initiating them.<sup>1304</sup> Consistent with aforementioned conceptualizations of Y-APs, the top rung in the ladder is shared decision-making between youth and adults. ACT for Youth, a youth development center, presents a similar framework for understanding the depth of responsibility and extent of impact youth can have on an organization at different levels of inclusion.<sup>1305</sup> Their framework has three tiers. The first, centering on projects, entails youth actively participating in action-oriented services that support the cause.<sup>1306</sup> Here, they're recognized as viable participants. The second level is characterized by input and consultation, so adults work with youth to create opportunities for young activists to advise and share opinions with the agenda-setting leaders of an organization. Here, youth are invited in as viable contributors. The highest level, just as in Hart's Ladder, is shared leadership.<sup>1307</sup> In this level of engagement, qualified youth are directly a part of the decision-making process, planning objectives and developing ways to execute them alongside adult activists. Here, they're elevated as Vanguards.

Adam F. C. Fletcher, co-founder and leader of the Freechild Institute, offers a supplemental portrait of the link between youth engagement and types of youth-adult relationships.<sup>1308</sup> His schema covers five dynamics between youth and adults that stem from the



attitudes adults have towards young people, and each successive dynamic is preferable to the last. The first is *apathy*, which registers as complete indifference; in activist organizations, this is apparent if there is an underdeveloped or nonexistent outreach program for youth.<sup>1309</sup> The next is *pity*, which is ultimately a form of adultism wherein adults “do to” youth without consulting their wants or considering their actual capacities. *Sympathy* is a step up. Adults “do for” youth, but this relationship does not allow for youth themselves to be engaged in evaluating problems, imagining solutions, and working toward such solutions.<sup>1310</sup> *Empathy* is when partnership is achieved, and the reciprocal acknowledgement of contribution capacity replaces any overt or nefarious form of adultism. The final dynamic, however, goes beyond this. It is *solidarity*, and it achieves equity. Applied to our focus of supportive infrastructure within social change organizations, this dynamic weds the complex intergenerational differences that give rise to unique benefits and distinct challenges of youth-adult partnerships with the fundamental purpose of the relationship: to secure social change. With the purpose of climate change activism—to save the world—being so grand, striving for these higher forms of Y-APs in order to improve their collective efforts for social progression seems a must for climate advocates.

To wind down this discussion of the necessity for Y-APs in lieu of adultist practices within the climate movement, an evaluation of the benefits that Gen Z, members of adult generations, and activist organizations stand to enjoy as a result of Y-APs seems fitting. Though there has not been extensive research on all the effects of youth-adult partnerships, the consensus of their value is overwhelming. Y-APs relate to a stronger civil society, better policy decisions when implemented in governance settings, and increased social impact for both sides of the partnership.<sup>1311</sup> The engagement which youth-adult partnerships facilitate has direct positive effects for youth cognitive and emotional development, including a bolstered internal sense of

purpose and locus of control, improved problem-solving skills, and a burgeoning capacity for autonomy.<sup>1312</sup> Further, youth's awareness of civic opportunities and their confidence to seize such opportunities are expanded in these partnerships.<sup>1313</sup> Other scholars have noted how instrumental youth-adult partnerships are in seeding the healthy development of well-rounded youth.<sup>1314</sup> Adults within these partnerships also benefited, for in them they were able to channel generativity—passing on knowledge and expertise—to equip the rising cohort with necessary skills.<sup>1315</sup> Additionally, the claims of increased creativity, fresher ideas, renewed commitment, reinvigorated energy, and strengthened optimism signal the mutuality of these relationships.<sup>1316</sup> This depiction of Y-APs' benefits for their participants makes it easy to imagine how their impactfulness can translate into the organization itself and from there ripple out into the broader social movement. And indeed, synergized multigenerational teams do strengthen organizations. Youth involvement at the shared leadership level has been associated with positive changes in productivity and innovation.<sup>1317</sup> From incorporation of Y-APs, some organizations' missions became more clear and the strategies to pursue them more refined.<sup>1318</sup> Youth-adult partnerships have also been essential to cultivating youth voice, which in turn has been essential in fostering community change.<sup>1319</sup>

For these bountiful reasons, Y-APs should likely be incorporated into far more structures than just social change organizations or youth development programs. Society, and emergent generations' capacity to affect the social process in the way their consciousness calls them to do so, will probably be the better for it. But undeniably, in activist movements, “leaders and workers throughout the [organizations] need to create the structures, transform the culture, and modify the purpose of [their] organization to reflect the commitment,” to youth engagement and its positive effects on society.<sup>1320</sup> Youth-adult partnerships are the avenue by which those

refinements can be secured in the multigenerational climate movement. And with them, intergenerational cooperation between Gen Z and older generations can begin to be achieved.

The *what* to do is now clear. In the next chapter, the *how* becomes equally so.

## **Chapter 2: Achieving Harmony with Gen Z**

Knowing intergenerational differences will carry into social change organizations and that they do cause conflict within those organizations in ways harmful to their mission, the need to explicitly and purposefully cultivate healthy intergenerational cooperation within the mass climate movement is well established. Many researchers evaluating generational differences in the workplace have argued the need for HR departments and managers to develop suitable mitigation responses so that strife can be avoided, productivity can be preserved, and employees can be accommodated.<sup>1321</sup> This chapter is an effort in illuminating what those mitigation responses can be, especially in the context of an activist organization instead of a typical workplace. Across three sections, I offer a framework that may secure productive intergenerational harmony in climate activism, thereby reducing the restraints on Gen Z's vanguardism of the social process.

In Section 1, routes to achieve the youth-adult partnerships necessary for substantive intergenerational cooperation between Gen Z and older generations are discussed. Mainly, these include steps to raise awareness about adultism and some suggestions for avoiding those thought patterns and their associated behaviors. Additionally, I look at the ways to implement Y-APs into organizational structures that would highlight Gen Z's youth voice. These are applicable even in youth-based climate organizations, such as the Sunrise Movement, because adult allies often support their efforts from administrative and organizing roles.

Section 2 involves the ways to sooth intergenerational differences that can be problematic for well-functioning activism. Differences cannot be removed, nor should they be, but the strife

they might stir can be reconciled. Fostering open communication and respectful mindsets can help make perceived or real generational differences known in a way that invites accommodation rather than division. Additionally, conflict resolution methodologies can be applied to climate change organizations to ensure that generations amicably work through the tensions their differences cause. Intergenerational harmony is ultimately made easier when emphasis is placed on similarities, such as a common activist mission to mitigate climate change.

Section 3 discusses how the climate movement can be strengthened by strategies which do not ignore but rather leverage intergenerational differences. Strategies such as facilitating communities of practice and encouraging mutual mentorship can help reframe the distinct perspectives and skills each generation carries as strengths; as these intergenerational differences become recognized as sources of beneficial contribution to the movement, relationships between Gen Z and other generations can become more harmonious. In this way, greater intergenerational cooperation can take place.

To clarify, this chapter will not be offering specific strategies to deal with certain traits that generations possess, like Gen Z's heightened mental health concern or Millennials' entitlement or Xers' independence. There are a healthy number of studies that already prescribe managerial adjustments based on exact aspects of a perceived generational identity.<sup>1322</sup> The generational profiles constructed in previous Parts of this paper can give an idea of where some tensions may emerge, but no individual is entirely their generational identity nor solely influenced by their generational identity. To best utilize strategies for intergenerational harmony, an accurate inventory of the actual generational effects the organization faces should be taken. Solving problems that don't exist wastes resources and energy that could fuel climate action.

However, allowing problems to fester unaddressed, generating conflict and fracturing cooperation, does so to a higher degree.

It is imperative in the climate movement to resolve harmful intergenerational disharmony and build up intergenerational cooperation. Climate activism organizations, then, must accept the hard work of reviewing and assessing their multigenerational team to pinpoint where harmony exists, where it is at risk, and how to adapt the following strategies to their particular structure to ensure that harmony persists among Gen Z—as youth and as a generational entity—and the other generations.

### **Incorporating Youth-Adult Partnerships**

Fostering more egalitarian, cooperative partnerships between Gen Z youth and adult climate activists requires a pointed effort to dismantle adultist attitudes within the organizations that make up a large chunk of the movement. To spur a culture supportive of Y-APs, the intentional deconstruction of internalized adultist mindsets is necessary in both adults and youth, for young people might often concede that adults know what's best for them and that they are limited in agency.<sup>1323</sup> Such concessions, of course, fit into a self-fulfilling cycle that maintains adultism. The first step in breaking that cycle, after educating youth and adult activists on how adultism stunts essential youth involvement, is becoming attuned to when adultist bias seeps through in others as well as ourselves. The more overt forms of adultism, like complete ostracization of youth in an organization, are incompatible with Y-APs and so are easily resolved if organizations have a true dedication to bringing youth-adult partnerships together.

The latent forms of adultism, however, which challenge the egalitarianism central to ideal Y-APs, are more difficult to detect and deter. They are phrases and behaviors that are

comparable to the 21st century understanding of microaggressions, subtle and often unintentional actions that communicate a derogatory perception of the targeted individual or group.<sup>1324</sup> What may be, in the messenger's eyes, a compliment (e.g., "You're so well-spoken") or an innocent curiosity (e.g., "No, where are you really from?) or a jest (e.g., "I don't want to make you get all catty again") is received as an identity-based microaggression. John Bell<sup>1325</sup> offers a list of common phrases that can be considered as microaggressions targeting young people. While most aren't likely to pop up in climate change organizations—"It's only puppy love"—a few of them are likely to emerge in such settings and reinforce adultist mindsets that make it difficult for Y-APs to take hold: "You're so smart for only fifteen," or "You give better advice than a lot of adults!"<sup>1326</sup> These remarks underestimate or patronize youth, and their good intentions to encourage youth is undercut because they reaffirm biases in favor of adults. Raising awareness about, and subsequently weeding out, these types of covert adultist sentiments is important to making the most out of Y-APs. One way to become more conscious of expressions of adultism, like adultist microaggressions, is to engage in self-reflective questioning. John Bell<sup>1327</sup> suggests a handful of "mirror questions" that can shine a light on implicit biases; some of these questions include: "would I make this decision for an adult," or "is the tone of voice I would speak to an adult-coworker with."<sup>1328</sup>

Another strategy that can gradually uncoil adultism from organizational structures is one Taft<sup>1329</sup> identified in the Peru child-worker movement between the youth activists and their adult allies. To put themselves on equal footing, the youth were encouraged to refer to the adults by their first name. First-name basis, regardless of age, can eliminate the notion that youth are automatically subordinate to adults and that adults should be addressed accordingly. Of course, if youth wish to refer to adult activists with the mister/miss titles as a demonstration of earned

respect, they should by all means be able to do so. But to mitigate structural adultism, adults should become comfortable with inviting youth to speak to them as equals, including first names. Youth-adult partnerships will feel more like partnerships that way.

The onus for dispelling adultism within climate organizations is not just on adults, however. Youths play a role in steering attitudes away from adultism and to a more compassionate, empathetic, and equitable mentality from all activists for all activists. Attention should be granted to ensuring that youth have similar strategies to be respectful to fellow youth, especially older adolescents to younger adolescents, for it will help to deconstruct much of the underlying beliefs that make up the harmful expressions of adultism as these youth move toward adulthood themselves. Social change organizations should keep concepts such as adultist microaggressions and tools such as mirror questions in mind if they develop programs, newsletters, or other educational material that draw attention to adultism and its adverse impact on youth-adult relationships.

Another way in which adultism can be surmounted, in practice, within climate change organizations is by making frequent the opportunities for Zer youth to join in dialogue with adults about the serious matters. Whether these discussions are about rebranding the organizational motto or about the societal systems that oppress a life of maximums, to take from Nader's ideology, the key to youth-adult interactions is to avoid forcing the perspectives of one group onto the other. In an adultist world, however, it is more than likely that the opinions youth hold will be overridden by older activists under the pretense of greater experience and insight. The adultist tendency to discredit youth perspectives as lesser than those of adults is at odds with the essence of Y-APs and constricts youth involvement, so organizational culture needs to be adjusted to normalize youth participation in speculating, commenting, and arguing about high-



stakes concerns.<sup>1330</sup> From there, organizational structure adjustments need to follow. Spaces need to be provided so that Gen Z can share their interpretation of the world—their Habitus—with others in a way that isn't sugar coated, ignored, or unequal. These spaces can include messaging boards and chats, video conferences, face-to-face meetings, event debriefs, lunch outings, or any other arenas for youth to speak as fully-fledged activists. It's at the discretion of organizations how they want to accommodate formal and informal settings for intergroup discussion between youth and adults, but their existence is non-negotiable. Further, for Y-APs to be implemented in a significant manner, youth should undoubtedly be a part of those discretionary choices. And in the adultism-free meetings or group interaction settings decided upon, wherein all youth can exchange their unique perspectives, some youth in leadership roles should be co-facilitators in designing agendas and executing those agendas. These youth co-facilitators would be those engaged in one the highest forms of youth-adult partnership discussed in Chapter 1: shared leadership with adults.

Throughout this paper, youth councils have been discussed as a way to spur youth civic engagement and as a form of youth activism. However, the existence of youth councils does not indicate a truly shared leadership that is prominent in meaningful Y-AP dynamics within organizations. Though the research refers to youth councils within government institutions, some studies find that youth themselves have identified youth councils as a place for social control rather than legitimate participation.<sup>1331</sup> This sentiment is compounded by concerns that the method of appointing youth to councils by adults introduces elitism and subjects the council's formation to adultism. There are, however, varying mechanisms for establishing youth councils, and each come with varying effects for the diversity and quality of these councils as well as the level of genuine youth involvement they afford. A step up from appointment-by-adults is an

application and interview process, for councils populated in this way tend to have youth with higher agency.<sup>1332</sup> Ultimately, the applicants are still being judged and accepted by adults who might be operating from an adultist lens or hoping to create a council that aligns with their own perspectives rather than one that displays the true perspectives of youth. Youth councils are small by necessity, so it is critical that the few who serve in these councils are indicative of the larger youth voice in the community. To these ends, a system of democratic representation instead of application-and-appointment might best pave the way for meaningful youth-adult partnership. Foregoing selection by adult leaders in favor of election by a body of youth is an option that allows youth councils to be democratic, representative institutions; it empowers a wider breadth of youth to have real influence and responsibility through their vote, thereby equalizing the youth-adult dynamic.

The benefits do not end there. Indeed, the councils populated by youths who were selected through peer elections were found to be those with the most diversity and most self-efficacy among their council members.<sup>1333</sup> Within climate change organizations, the fact that such elections yield more diversified councils is important because the ramifications of extreme weather events or excessive air and water pollution is not experienced equally across all communities in all regions. Making room for intragenerational variance among the backgrounds of these Zer youth allows for more nuanced, more profound perspectives to emerge that can inform the compassionate and innovative strategies these organizations employ in the fight against climate change. Also, the hope of this mechanism parallels that of any democratic system: those who merit the additional responsibility of youth councils, wherein they can directly partner with those of older generations to more efficiently labor for successful change, will be the ones who receive that responsibility. It is better to allow Gen Z to use that system in these

organizations so that their youth voice can be maximized rather than to withhold their democratic power under the assumption that adults can choose more qualified youth representatives. That assumption, by the way, is consistently unlikely to be true.<sup>1334</sup> A second round of elections by adults, however, could help determine which of the qualified youth-backed nominees would join the council if concerns about merit lingered.

These democratic mechanisms, adopted by some municipalities around the country, transfer well to social change organizations, for a pool of youth members can raise up a few of their own to champion their collective moods among the adult leadership. Even principally youth-led organizations, in order to invite greater participation by a greater breadth of Zers, should consider implementing this democratic process to elevate new youth to work alongside existing leadership. Ultimately, in climate organizations of all kinds, adopting a peer-selection approach for Y-AP structures—like youth councils—that is more likely to elevate Gen Z’s distinct but diversified voice will best aid the organization's efforts to most effectively contribute to the climate mitigation mission. The key strength is that the formation of youth councils itself becomes a way to spur involvement and share power, fulfilling the purpose of Y-APs from the start. For these reasons, climate organizations should establish youth councils that are chosen via elections.

To further fulfill the purpose of Y-APs, these youth councils, once established, should formalize the decision-making responsibilities its council members share with adult organizational leaders. Many frustrated youths have recognized that their place on youth councils is stripped of any real authority, and their role as “advisors” has little to no effect on the agenda that adults create.<sup>1335</sup> Implementing modes of shared decision-making can actualize youth-adult partnerships of the highest “rung” of participation in these organizations. In municipalities where

youth councils are not simply symbolic, these modes are typically manifested through certain budgeting privileges for youth, input on some government hires, and even the ability to propose legislation.<sup>1336</sup> For activist organizations like those in the climate movement, mixed budgeting responsibilities and the mutual opportunity to propose, revise, and vote on objectives are ways that youth councils and adult leadership can embody youth-adult partnerships via shared decision-making. Self-evaluation rubrics for organizations can help determine the authenticity of the partnership dynamics youth and adults should be taking on in these environments, such as the one formulated by Michigan State University.<sup>1337</sup> Further, specific committees comprised of skilled and qualified activists of all ages can be made to plan and prioritize campaigns, decide upon how that campaign will fit in with planned budget allocations, coordinate fundraising opportunities if and when needed, and develop the ways to mobilize participants for the relevant events.<sup>1338</sup> Within the partnerships that will deal with these duties, youths and adults are each responsible for making sure that all ideas are invited and welcomed as well as together deciding which idea should be put into practice through inclusive deliberation.

Kunreuther<sup>1339</sup> offers support for strong Y-AP activities, such as older leadership actively inviting younger members to important external meetings, developing strategy with them prior to it, and debriefing with them afterward about the outcome. These efforts of reaching across the generational aisle to provide experiential training makes the youth feel valued, allows for them to get a taste of important duties, and helps them to build relationships outside of the organization that can be crucial to expanding the scope of activist campaigns. Such approaches intensify youth involvement and strengthen youth-adult partnerships simultaneously, and it develops skills in the youth that enable them to take on greater degrees of joint responsibility with their adult allies. Part of successful Y-APs, then, is ample training opportunities for youth so that they can

occupy positions of real strategic value within the organization while being comfortable and confident in doing so. Additional roles that youths, and not just those within the leadership council, can train for and perform alongside adults include researcher, planner, outreach recruiter, voter/appointer for organization management, lobbyist, and educator.<sup>1340</sup> The same components of Y-APs discussed in Chapter 1, including appreciation for youth voice and adult expertise, must apply to these dynamics as well. In these various ways, sharing, integrating, and refining the unique perspectives formed by the vibrant creativity and practical experience of each age group to inform the organization's activism is the essence of Y-AP.

Another consideration for organizations when implementing substantive Y-APs is clearly defining the expectations associated with them as well as their worth. Routinely, both parties but certainly adults need to be reminded about the purpose of Y-APs and the benefits it produces for the organization as a whole, even if it means the hard work of dismantling ingrained adultism and conceding some responsibilities.<sup>1341</sup> Neither youth nor adult members will bother with Y-APs if they don't clearly see it as a path to successfully reaching their goals within the movement; therefore, initially and continually educating stakeholders of how youth-adult partnerships will rejuvenate existing activist efforts and generate new ones is essential to nourishing enthusiastic participation within these dynamics. Further, it is important to have well-defined roles and responsibilities for each party in a Y-AP.<sup>1342</sup> In keeping with our understanding of Y-APs, exact expectations and accountability measures for the partnership should be established whenever new activists enter into that type of relationship. On this note, not every adult and every youth will be comfortable with these partnerships. These individual-level inclinations are another consideration for organizations looking to incorporate youth councils into decision-making capacities and choosing adult representatives in youth-led

initiatives. Y-APs are most effective when education and training for collaboration development are incorporated, especially when differences in communication styles inject the possibility of confusion or misunderstanding into the infant stages of the relationship.<sup>1343</sup> To note a guiding principle these training efforts on collaboration might provide, the best thing to do is just clarify what is being said—and why—while keeping in mind that honest misinterpretation is the fault of no one. In age-structured and generational interactions—and, truly, all interpersonal communication—this rule of thumb is crucial in nurturing cooperation in place of conflict.

In these ways, Gen Zers and adult activists in the climate movement can narrow the gulf between them to support their mutual effort. Likewise, the generation gaps between Boomers, Xers, and Millennials with Gen Z and with each other can be revolutionized as the pillars of a successful multigenerational climate movement if the strife they cause can be minimized and channeled into something more productive.

### **Soothing Intergenerational Difference**

At the heart of intergenerational harmony is generational intelligence, also known as generational awareness or generational competency.<sup>1344</sup> In essence, someone who is generationally intelligent can recognize and tolerate that other generations have overarching worldviews that in some ways complement and in other ways conflict with their own. Difference is not automatically equated with wrongness. Generational intelligence, wherein confusion and frustration over dissimilarities may not be nonexistent but *are* less intense, is a gateway to intergenerational cooperation. The concept, too, can be viewed as an alternative to the generational ethnocentrism discussed in Chapter 1. The principles which guide multicultural workplaces to minimize ethnocentrism in the interest of more harmonious cooperation can be

applied to the multigenerational organizations of the climate movement, and they serve as a suitable starting point for understanding the ways to prevent and resolve much of the strife intergenerational differences can bring. At their core is intergenerational dialogue.

There are six components to fostering a team with healthy cross-cultural differences according to Dr. Paul White, a psychologist and workplace relationship consultant.<sup>1345</sup> Climate activist organizations hoping to make the most of the potential alliance between Zers, Millennials, Xers, and Boomers should integrate each. They are: (1) acknowledge that differences are present; the way to achieve intergenerational cooperation is not in pretending that there are no cultural barriers—perceived or actual—between two members of different generations who must work together. Only in recognizing the hurdle can we begin to clear it. (2) Work to learn instead of to criticize or project; if there is something another generation tends to do that is odd or seemingly unproductive, resist the urge to immediately correct and instead invite them to provide insight into their way of doing or thinking about things. Immediately framing somebody else's way as an inefficiency isn't helpful, but asking questions to get to the bottom of it can be enlightening and more productive. Their reasoning, though it may be sound, might still be elusive, so it's important to (3) develop understanding gradually if it doesn't come initially; remain open to the possibility that their way, even if different from your own, makes just as much sense. After all, gaining understanding about another's generational consciousness does not mean that one's own generational identity needs to be discarded or changed from what it presently is. You can maintain your Habitus while still understanding why someone else has a different one. This relates to (4) avoiding ethnocentrism. Refrain from automatically believing, especially when learning about another's generational identity, that the approach informed by one's own parameter of experience is the most effective, logical, or worthwhile. The crux of it is

to have an open mind and a suitable degree of self-awareness. (5) Communicate in the way that they prefer to do so. This shouldn't border on belittlement or absurdity; there's no need to infuse emails with Zer slang in some attempt to vibe with them. But taking into account the communication styles that other generations are most comfortable with and making the intentional effort to adapt to those styles goes a long way in fostering strong intergenerational cooperation, as the rest of this section will make abundantly clear. Finally, (6) a lack of knowledge is an indication of something yet to be learned, not stupidity. What may be second-nature for a digital native may not be so for a veteran of the anti-war protests, and vice versa. Cooperation isn't achieved in scoffing disbelief, but in rolling up the sleeves and helping to knowledge-share.

As in deconstructing adultism to facilitate true Y-APs, organizations must adopt this generational intelligence mindset in order to create an environment that can nurture a complex multigenerational team of activists. Also similar to incorporating Y-APs, strengthening intergenerational harmony requires meaningful meeting spaces and plentiful interaction opportunities for the different generations so that they can build up generational intelligence. With a greater awareness and comfort with diversity, separate generations will be more prepared to co-exist and co-operate. If ignorance produces prejudice, then familiarity can sow harmony.

Some businesses, to secure familiarity, often arrange gatherings that promote intergenerational dialogue; these gatherings—such as meetings, orientations, or weekend retreats—are especially important for new additions to a team, for they must acclimate to the organizational culture and the organization must make room for their generationally-informed personalities.<sup>1346</sup> To make them efficient, these socialization affairs should establish without a doubt the demands of and expectations for the newcomers' place in the organization. To make



them effective, however, such gatherings should explicitly address generational differences so that all members can have a more accurate understanding of their multigenerational team. Social change organizations, in allotting times and making spaces for such intergenerational dialogue, can support the development of generational intelligence throughout its ranks. Regardless of age or generational background, each participant should be afforded a chance to contribute their perspective. As in Y-APs and successful cross-cultural teams, this prevents some individuals from being overshadowed, and it allows everyone to make an impact in adjusting the organizational culture to one of generational intelligence.<sup>1347</sup> Additionally, mutual respect and positive feedback should be transferred between each generation.<sup>1348</sup> It's in these discussions that harmful myths or stereotypes about other generations should crumble. For instance, assumptions of Zers as internet-dwellers and Boomers as out-of-touch and Xers as uncaring should be, like adultist assumptions, discarded. Working to overcome pre-determinations of fellow activists is albeit a difficult task, but it's critical in the interest of stronger cooperation and more effective collaboration. Gatherings and conversations which put a focus on building generational intelligence help to kickstart that process.

The Building Movement Project offers an exercise organizations can incorporate in team-building gatherings to raise awareness of generational diversity among their members.<sup>1349</sup> As a self-reflection tool for one's generational consciousness, the core intent is to allow activists to share with others the generational effects that have shaped their personal worldview and identity; from such revelations, the hope is that intergenerational relationships can be built on truth rather than assumption. Their rubric provides key historical events for each decade, and some of these events (e.g., Vietnam War, 9/11 terrorist attacks) are some of the formative imprints identified throughout this paper. Underneath, it offers space for individuals to add other significant events

as well as personal achievements and challenges that marked the applicable decades. Finally, it provides space for participants to share whatever else they feel would be helpful for other generations to know about their parameter of experience. It's evident how tools such as this one may be employed by organizations in order to foreground generational diversity and pinpoint areas where such diversity of Habitus might lead to misunderstanding, tensions, or conflict. Actual generational distinctions within the organization become apparent, allowing organizations to stave off conflict by accommodating some of the more troublesome differences in advance. Thus is the necessity to facilitate meaningful, honest intergenerational dialogue. It lays the groundwork for generational intelligence and, ultimately, intergenerational harmony.

On this note of intergenerational dialogue, organizations should pay a great deal of attention to differences in communication style—including feedback preferences—because it often is a source of strife, as we have already established. Organizations need to expand their communication competencies to include the entire range of preferences their members have, just as the fifth point of the cross-cultural principles suggests. Urick et al.<sup>1350</sup> have connected the conscious efforts of organizational leaders to discover and conform to the communication preferences of the various generations within the workforce to healthier intergenerational relations throughout the team. From whiteboards to workplace apps to text messaging to face-to-face meetings, there should be various avenues for organizational leadership and the membership base to effectively send guidance, concerns, or other essential messages.<sup>1351</sup> If so many communication channels prove too unruly, an organization can establish guidelines that specify the purposes of certain communication means; these guidelines, which should be inclusive of the styles different generations prefer, can ameliorate unnecessary generational frustration while preserving a streamlined communication network. For instance, organizations can explicitly

define the circumstances that call for an email instead of a phone call or text message so that each generation is aware of which communication tools correlate to which communication needs.<sup>1352</sup> Such a system would eliminate the varied expectations different generations might bring, and if the guidelines truly drew from distinct preferences each generation has, it would help mitigate intergenerational strife based on communication styles. An alternative that organizations can consider is an opt-in system, wherein activists themselves convey their preferred communication styles (i.e., whether they respond most quickly when contacted by voicemail or email or text, etc.) so that others who wish to get in touch or need to share a message can utilize the appropriate channel for that specific individual. If a Zer prefers phone calls to video conferences and a Boomer prefers texts to emails, this system allows individuals to break out of the mold of what their generation might tend to prefer and emphasize what means work best for them personally. Again, conflict or misunderstanding stemming from mismatched communication styles or level of technological adeptness are less likely if organizations take efforts to facilitate intergenerational dialogue in which all generations can comfortably participate. Further, effective intergenerational communication does go beyond the mode of that communication. It includes, also, the cultural vernacular that binds a generation together.<sup>1353</sup> This does not require taking up slang or customs of other generations in order to engage in meaningful intergenerational dialogue, but a certain awareness and appreciation for them should be promoted within activist organizations. Intergenerational cooperation, as a result, will be more centered on clarity, common understanding, and shared goals.

In a similar vein, feedback is critical to facilitating more effective collaborations and, by extension, elevated organizational productivity. In some capacity, it should be given to and given by each generation. Expectations surrounding feedback, however, have been speculated to differ

along generational lines by many researchers, as seen in Part II; part of generational intelligence must be understanding nuanced associations each generation may have with feedback from peers and organizational leaders. It's important, though, to determine on an individual level how each person best responds to feedback because these speculations of generational distinctions are not concrete.<sup>1354</sup> So while keeping in mind that Millennials tend to desire feedback more so than Boomers, activists should strive to discover how and to what extent different individuals of different generations want to receive formative feedback. For Gen Z, as the youngest generation in the movement, it is especially imperative for each organization to determine if their Zers tend to have any prominent preference regarding feedback and take it into account. Whatever that may turn out to be, availability and encouragement for Zers to trade perspectives with fellow activists of any generation must be abundant within climate organizations if Gen Z is to make a significant mark on the social process through climate activism.

Generational intelligence as a way to prevent intergenerational difference from inciting conflict relies on intergenerational dialogue as well as accurate representations of those differences within the organization. As a way to resolve the conflict intergenerational differences do incite, generational intelligence relies on much of the same. Through anonymous internal surveys or some other mechanism, organizations can pick the brain of their multigenerational team to determine the actual intergenerational conflicts activists are experiencing or witnessing.<sup>1355</sup> Knowing what tensions are truly roiling within the organization allows the leadership to redirect precious time and resources toward accommodating the specific differences that are genuine threats to intergenerational cooperation. However, as organizational management expert Karen Jehn<sup>1356</sup> argues, such accommodation is not achieved merely by noting that intergenerational conflict exists and naming the specific intergenerational differences

at its core.<sup>1357</sup> Pointed efforts to channel the energies of conflicting parties away from the strife-causing differences and onto the commonalities they can coalesce over is necessary for truly soothing such conflicts. Perhaps the greatest of these commonalities is a shared mission.

Like motivations mean activists who like each other. Emphasizing organizational goals—such as the climate movement’s mission to end the climate crisis, which activists across all generations passionately share—as a clear similarity between generations can diffuse tensions and foster more harmonious cooperation.<sup>1358</sup> Psychologist and eminent researcher in the field of family business dynamics Kenneth Kaye<sup>1359</sup> concurs. Among his suggestions to highlight win-win scenarios instead of competitions that pit members against each other and to eliminate guesswork in favor of mutual clarification, Kaye noted that an important element of conflict resolution is uplifting shared purposes.<sup>1360</sup> Hammering out the specifics of what may otherwise be nebulous shared purposes comes through putting into practice well-rounded communication. Indeed, when businesses have made intentional efforts to facilitate the hallmarks of strong communication, they can boost worker participation as well as alignment with organizational goals;<sup>1361</sup> social change organizations, in clearly defining the exact vision they have for the world, can do the same.

Some important aspects of well-rounded communication include active listening and “I” statements. These hallmarks of well-rounded communication should be applied in regular interactions, but they become truly essential in situations that are more antagonistic or tense. The essence of active listening is to capture the full content and meaning of a speaker’s message.<sup>1362</sup> This is accomplished through various techniques: reflecting understanding in the message through frequent paraphrasing and clarification,<sup>1363</sup> expressing interest by giving verbal and non-verbal backchanneling cues like “mhmm” and nodding,<sup>1364</sup> and inviting elaboration through

substantive questioning.<sup>1365</sup> “I” statements—or as author of the enduring *Parent Effectiveness Training*<sup>1366</sup> Thomas Gordon called them when he originated the concept, “I-messages”—are those where the speaker nests a concern or feeling about something in a message that focuses on their own perception rather than delivers outward blame or judgement.<sup>1367</sup> They help to reduce the defensiveness that may arise when someone shares their grievance, and they center the conversation on moving forward to an enjoyable resolution. So instead of “Why are you always so...,” a communicator can frame their concern as “This is not the first time that I have felt badly after you came home hours late. How can we work through this?” These modes of communication can help indicate the areas where intergenerational differences are posing difficulties for multigenerational efforts, but they additionally provide opportunities to indicate intergenerational similarities.<sup>1368</sup> To resolve or stave off unhelpful conflict that may emerge from incompatibilities in generational personalities, groups should elevate the shared goals and values discovered through this intergenerational dialogue. Clarifying and refocusing everyone on the meat of what they hope to accomplish is key to getting them to brainstorm, evaluate, and implement together the strategies to do so.<sup>1369</sup> The climate movement’s purpose, massive and essential as it is, should provide a fairly strong basis for activists of all generations to regroup around if conflicts begin to emerge.

The conflicts are not easily undone, however. Intergenerational conflict can be particularly difficult to resolve because it constitutes an identity-based conflict, a challenging form of dispute because of how deeply it rails at one’s selfhood.<sup>1370</sup> Essentially, biases favoring the in-group over the out-group are heightened with generational interactions because the surface-level distinctions that are easily identifiable, like age, and the core-level distinctions that are impossible to disentangle, like worldview (*Habitus*), are present. The intergroup conflicts that

emerge from identity are particularly stubborn beasts since they're more susceptible to intensification than other types of conflict, as scholars have long declared.<sup>1371</sup> These complex identity-based conflicts are resolvable, however, and so too are intergenerational conflicts or difficulties that may arise between Zers and other generations in climate activist organizations. Once again, the most prominent and successful approach for ameliorating tensions between different identity groups is redirecting focus onto their similarities, including and mainly their organizational mission. Below, some conflict resolution methodologies that embody this approach are discussed.

Fiol and colleagues<sup>1372</sup> give an incredibly detailed model for resolving what they call *intractable identity conflicts*, such as those generations in climate organizations may find themselves in. The final stage of their model deals with integrating the different subgroups—generations—into alignment with superordinate goals, those that the wider group or overall organization have (e.g., the climate movement's mission to mitigate climate change) and which each subgroup shares as a necessity of being a part of the superordinate entity. To secure an enduring unity around the collective goals, however, organizational leadership must promote mindfulness of out-groups so that negative assumptions can give way to respect while also supporting the continuation of dual identities (i.e., seeing Gen Z as both youth activists, unique to them, and climate activists, shared with other generations) without minimizing either at the risk of weakening commitment.<sup>1373</sup> Their approach to reaching intergroup harmony can be co-opted for use in climate-related activist organizations, just as other strategies centered on consolidating conflicting parties around common overarching goals can be utilized.

The ARIA process is another such strategy. Developed by Jay Rothman, a prominent conflict resolution theorist,<sup>1374</sup> the “A” in the process stands for Antagonism.<sup>1375</sup> The first stage

for mitigating conflict, Antagonism, entails getting to the root of the tensions and discerning the ways that tension is being expressed. The aforementioned exercise from the Building Movement Project and organizational surveys can serve as the first step in the Antagonism stage. Part of this diagnosis effort is determining what type of conflict it is. A resource-based conflict, utilizing this paper's topic of inquiry, would relate to different chapters of a climate organization competing for fund allocation to support grassroots initiatives in their specific locality. An interest-based conflict would reflect a disparity in the goals two individuals or groups have, such as if certain parties in an organization believe there should be more effort in social media outreach to expand climate change awareness whereas another party would rather devote that energy to contacting elected representatives to press for climate action. While the specified intergroup types of conflict are significant, the deepest and most stubborn form is the aforementioned identity-based conflict that can affect intergenerational relations. In the climate movement, this could potentially surface through Gen Z rebuking Boomer activists because of the notion that they have contributed to the direness of climate change and thus they don't deserve to fight on behalf of a planet they've helped destroy. Such generationally-charged, identity-based conflicts are risks to the climate movement's success. The Antagonism level brings whatever type of conflict it is to the fore, ideally in a manner that is emotionally authentic while still professional and respectful.

“R” is for Resonance, wherein both parties articulate the needs, values, and goals that account for their beliefs and actions which contributed to the conflict.<sup>1376</sup> Here, they air grievances. Employing the elements of well-rounded communication, they express how they've felt unaddressed or antagonized by the other group—the other generation. In sharing these gripes, however, revelations about overlapping needs, values, and goals emerge. Common ground becomes visible. From there, the resolution path moves onto the “I” of Invention; with



prominent similarities, likely those based on the identity of the organization at large, now identified, the parties can conceive of mutually acceptable options to jointly progress toward their shared desires.<sup>1377</sup> Generations at odds within the climate movement can recontextualize their misunderstandings by foregrounding the common pursuit to ward off the worst climate future scenarios, devoting their energies not to conflicting with each other but to navigating that pursuit in a satisfactory manner for the both of them. This is the final “A,” Action. The next steps are agreed upon and the responsibilities each party has in implementing them are clear, and they do so together. Out of conflict comes cooperation.

Many additional models of conflict resolution dot the fields of organizational leadership, business management, and interpersonal communication, though often they address resource- and interest-based conflict more so than identity-based conflict. These include the ASPIRe (Actualizing Social and Personal Identity Resources) model,<sup>1378</sup> GRIT (Graduated and Reciprocated Initiatives in Tension reduction),<sup>1379</sup> MACBE (Motivation, Affect, Cognition, Behavior, and Environment)<sup>1380</sup> transformative mediation, first offered up in *The Promise of Mediation* by Robert A. Baruch Bush and Joseph P. Folger.<sup>1381</sup> Each of these can be applied in social change organizations within the climate movement to guide focus from intergenerational differences to the commonalities of their activist mission so that each generation can work together rather than fight amongst each other. In this way, Gen Z’s effort to vanguard social change will not be hindered by the multigenerationality of the movement but instead aided by it.

Ultimately, some instances of identity-based intergenerational conflict will emerge that cannot be resolved in a satisfactory manner for either party; as a result, effectiveness of the organization is not elevated but dragged down. In these cases, individuals removing themselves

from the conflict serves as a measure the involved parties can use to end the harmful dispute. On the part of organizational leadership, disengaging contact between the adversarial groups or permanently terminating either or both party's role in the organization stands as the final way to resolve irreconcilable strife between those of different generations.<sup>1382</sup>

Differences in generational consciousnesses can be a potential source of conflict for climate organizations. However, strife may be prevented through greater awareness and appreciation for these differences, and strife may be resolved through approaches that elevate commonalities over problematic differences. Clearly defining shared organizational goals and working to incorporate each individual of any generation into that specified vision allows multigenerational teams to better work together toward that outcome.<sup>1383</sup>

Not all intergenerational differences inhibit cooperation, though. If leveraged properly, distinctions between generations can be advantageous for the climate movement.

### **Leveraging Intergenerational Difference**

The unique persona that each generation brings to climate activism permits intergenerational cooperation to be a powerful tool, for this allows a wider scope of perspectives and insights to be involved in problem-solving and agenda-setting. Two heads, when competent, are better than one.<sup>1384</sup> Four generations, when harmonious, should also be better than just one. To strengthen the vanguardism they hope to accomplish, Gen Zers within climate organizations must collaborate effectively with other generations. To be able to do so, ample opportunities for these generations to leverage their different worldviews for positive effects—to play to their strengths—must be provided. Outlined in this section are a handful of ways climate activist organizations can facilitate such opportunities.

Kunreuther and his colleagues<sup>1385</sup> composed a framework for the various roles each generation can serve within an organization. Based on the functionality of a constant stream of generation succession, their model supports a hierarchical division of labor wherein each generation has their own responsibilities in context of each other and the organization as a whole. They suggest a linear structure of task specialization (i.e., the oldest generation is at the highest leadership level and youngest is at the entry level) that is not ideal for the generational partnerships within climate organizations argued for throughout this chapter, such as shared leadership dynamics. Nevertheless, they indicate a system which hopes to infuse new ideas into the social change organization while giving each generation a substantive role to play. Adapting their work to today's climate movement, Gen Z would be 'specialized' in learning from prior generations the traditional forms of doing activist work while raising, respectfully, new ways of operation that can better suit the understandings and desires of Gen Z.<sup>1386</sup> Millennials would support Gen Z in their innovation of new ideas and directions, and themselves would use their own generational perspectives and experiences in adulthood to help convey those innovations to older generations which are likely to helm the large environmental organizations. Gen X, likely transitioning into the highest leadership positions, would scaffold on their leadership skills and, ideally, cultivate the contributions of the youngest additions—and true guides—to the climate movement: Gen Z. In the best-case for intergenerational cooperation, Boomers would be shepherding the transfer of formal and informal leadership responsibilities to younger generations while remaining in association with the movement to offer their wisdom and experience to the new torchbearers of change-making.

Chan<sup>1387</sup> also makes the case that harnessing the differences between individuals, including those that are generational, maximizes the potential of collaboration efforts. As

organizations find the common ground between their distinct generational members, so too must they secure intergenerational cooperation by celebrating the special talents that each side of a generation gap has to offer. An extension of generational intelligence, Chan discusses the FROG framework—Forever Recognizing Others’ Greatness—as an embodiment of leveraging distinctions between collaborators.<sup>1388</sup> One simple tactic they offer to develop an organizational culture that foregrounds generational differences as a productive asset is positive gossip; in practice in activist groups, this would entail giving credit where it’s due and recognizing that generationally-informed differences in skill sets can serve as resources for instead of obstacles to collective initiatives. Affirming greatness in other generations strengthens interpersonal ties in a multigenerational team, allowing for intensified focus on the organization’s shared goals, and it can perhaps illuminate the ways to further specialize the activist work so that each individual contributes the greatest of their abilities. For instance, certain tactics of activist outreach might be more conducive to one generation’s mindset than to that of a different generation. Gen Z is likely more inclined to recruit and inform through social media, making digital activism a strength of theirs. Baby Boomers might be more likely to want consistent community events wherein they can shake hands and mingle with familiar faces, preferring traditional activism that may not spread the word as far but entrenches it deeper. The mentality FROG advocates for affirms that both preferences can be successful ways of sending out the message and getting people involved because they allow their respective generation to play to its strength.

Mutual mentoring, first noted in Chapter 1, is built on the mindset of “we both have something to add, so let’s learn from each other.” It is integral to cultivating a cooperative environment that thrives on differences rather than suffers from them. Thorpe<sup>1389</sup> calls for mutual mentoring within multigenerational teams as a way to strengthen collaboration, increase

engagement, and compound capacity. She's not alone in affirming that cross-generational mentorship can spur cooperation and boost productivity in an organization.<sup>1390</sup> Pairing senior stakeholders with younger stakeholders in an organization is particularly effective, as we know from Y-APs. It allows members of different generations to acclimate to the knowledge the other activist already has as well as the ways in which they tend to develop and dispense that knowledge; the difficulties of knowledge transfer in multigenerational organizations that some sources acknowledged, as discussed in Chapter 1, can be combated by such mentorships.<sup>1391</sup> While offering an opportunity to transfer institutional knowledge, facilitate cross-training, and build leadership skills, mutual mentoring between members of different generations further allows each mentor to learn about some of the true generational differences and similarities that exist within their team.

These exposures to intergenerational distinctions, when they occur in a relationship founded on contributing unique perspectives and capacities to a co-activist, are less likely to seed tension and more likely to seed reciprocal understanding. As they continue to cooperate in mutual mentorship, proving that they indeed can work together in a common pursuit, this understanding of another's generational experience can blossom into mature generational intelligence. Generational difference no longer becomes a point of contention, but one of innovation. Thorpe notes that the biggest blockade to reframing multigenerational diversity in this way is the lack of an opportunity to do so through mutual mentorship.<sup>1392</sup> With this in mind, social change organizations should make special considerations for mutual mentoring programs, especially pairing Gen Z with older generations so that they can gain crucial activist skills while sharing their pivotal generational perspectives. Harmonious and effective intergenerational cooperation will follow, and climate movement will be the better for it.

Cultivating a community of practice within the climate movement is another crucial way to strengthen the linkages between activists, including across generational lines. They've been incorporated into everything from college writing centers<sup>1393</sup> to Canadian governance agencies<sup>1394</sup> to insurance companies.<sup>1395</sup> Their usefulness was first popularized by Xerox's knowledge-sharing database Eureka, which streamlined repair technicians' work so much so that the company estimates over \$100 million in service costs have been saved since they established their community of practice in the mid-90s.<sup>1396</sup> Given name by social learning theorist Etienne Wenger-Trayner and anthropologist Jean Lave in *Situated Learning* (1991),<sup>1397</sup> the concept refers to a group of individuals with an interest in a topic who coalesce around some specific goal and, through meaningful collaboration, learn from each other about that topic.<sup>1398</sup> By engaging together in their common domain of interest and in developing a shared repertoire of communal resources to help them engage with that domain, members of a community of practice build ongoing relationships with one another that advance them toward their goal. Communities of practice are not simply groups of people who share the same hobby or line of work. A Facebook group of David Lynch fans may be communal, but it doesn't make for a community of practice without shared learning concentrated on some endeavor. A screenwriting club, however, can be a community of practice if the members consume and create work that they together reflect on, tinker, and refine in their effort to reach a fraction of the writerly heights of Billy Wilder.

The strength of communities of practice is their ability for those within them to troubleshoot alongside others who have likely encountered the same issues, concerns, or struggles. If not, engaging in the community will probably generate a better solution than one could have done on their own. Further, they provide opportunities for mentoring, ideally two-way, to emerge naturally as these interactions can reveal blindspots certain activists may have

that others can start to guide them on improving;<sup>1399</sup> mutual mentorship is a critical component of communities of practice. These communities also don't need to be formal or even explicit to exist. Wenger-Trayner<sup>1400</sup> enjoys the example of impressionist artists who would meet in cafes and trace their breakthroughs or difficulties with the new style they were foregrounding. His example identifies another aspect of communities of practice: the collaboration doesn't need to be constant, nor does the endeavor itself need to be collaborative. The artists did their endeavor—painting in a new artistic style—separately, but every so often they would interact to learn how they might go about that endeavor in better ways.

Communities of practice are not required to be entirely egalitarian networks of pioneer innovators such as the one exemplified by early impressionists. Activists who are not in organizational leadership or who are not able to advocate on a weekly basis can still be in the orbit of these Communities of practice and learn more about the climate crisis and the ways to combat it. For Gen Zers and older activists who cannot dedicate so much of their lives to the movement because of other responsibilities, their more limited involvement with the Community of practice still immerses them into cooperative relationships with their peers and with members of other generations. In higher tiers of participation, of course, the cooperative nature and positive benefits of knowledge-sharing are heightened.<sup>1401</sup> A majority of those in the movement will be in that lower tier of participation in the community of practice, however, so it is important that they be allowed access to the enriching social group and in turn are able to enrich it in the ways they are able to.<sup>1402</sup> Because of that, some of the more traditional ways of incorporating communities of practice into the organizational structure will not fully transfer over to social change organizations that are based mostly on part-time citizen activists instead of full-time staff. These include fashioning collaborative zones, or “neighborhoods,” into

workstations to support joint ideation and knowledge-sharing or erecting vertical display boards in frequent meeting grounds that can be used to showcase some of the good work that's already been done as a form of kudos and inspiration.<sup>1403</sup>

However, the essence of a community of practice permits them to be sustained through virtual spaces and, as Enrique Murillo<sup>1404</sup> contends, they have even been created entirely online.<sup>1405</sup> With activist movements, like more and more businesses in the 21st century, composed of teams that are not physically co-located—especially in wake of the COVID-19 pandemic—this facet of communities of practice is especially noteworthy.<sup>1406</sup> They can help foster productive teamwork when workers, or activists, are spread out across different regions by enlisting online means to maintain their interactions and extend their shared repertoire.<sup>1407</sup> Online forums, social media platforms, discussion boards, networking sites like ResearchGate and LinkedIn, and internal digital communication venues like Slack are some of the ways members can remain committed to communities of practice. Certain activities that apply in face-to-face settings, like seminars about activism best practices or conferences that allow for cross-organizational networking, can also be conducted online to support communities of practice within the climate movement. Additionally, communities of practice tend to be self-organized, but organizational leaders can still play a fundamental role in facilitating these networks by making adequate space available for them and checking in with members to see if there are additional ways to maximize the benefits.<sup>1408</sup> And since these communities of practice can guide the direction of the organization's emphasis on learning and the activist practices which facilitate and manifest that learning, it's important to ensure that Zer youth are a part of the agenda-setting for these communities.



This concept's relation to intergenerational cooperation within social change organizations is fairly obvious, then. Those of different generations can improve their endeavor—climate activism—by engaging in discussion or activities, such as specific activist efforts, with others who are in their community of practice. Intergenerational cooperation is strengthened because activists learn about each other, build relationships, and collaborate. Communities of practice are even conducive to managing generation succession in activist organizations, for they are a foundation for the dynamic evolution of understandings and purposes some group of individuals have for a domain. They are fluid, changing with the needs that practitioners have. As new individuals enter the community, they continue some practices and tweak others, but learning for all members of the community enhances because fresh insights are unveiled. Thus, implementing communities of practice into areas of the climate activist movement where they are not already is another step in reframing the context of these groups as sites of collaborative learning through collaborative doing. Here, the identity of fellow activists outweighs distinctions between generations, and those distinctions are channeled as opportunities to uncover improved ways of practicing their mutual endeavor. In this model, intergenerational differences contribute to an activist organization more than they cause conflict within them. For intergenerational harmony and for supporting Gen Z's vanguard efforts for climate action, communities of practice can be essential.

In each of these aforementioned ways, the distinctions in value systems and behavioral inclinations between different generations in multigenerational activist efforts can be viewed as strengths ripe for harvest. In leveraging these strengths, generations can fan the flames of the hope and power they hold in their commitment to secure necessary climate action.<sup>1409</sup>

## **Part V Conclusion:**

A house divided against itself cannot stand. A movement divided against itself cannot succeed. Gen Z, if not engaged in a meaningful and cooperative alliance with climate activists of other generations, cannot vanguard the greatest degree of social change necessary to mitigate the climate crisis.

In Chapter 1 of this Part, a brief account of some of the differences between Gen Z and other generations that could manifest in climate activist organizations was offered. These differences are those that could become the house-crumbling divisions for the social change organization; indeed, such organizations are not free from intergenerational conflict. Mental health concerns and digital nativism, for example, are Gen Z characteristics that may clash with the generational consciousness of older generations and produce strife in a multigenerational organization. The need for strategies to promote intergenerational cooperation, which yields more effective activism than when generations are at odds with each other or completely separate from each other, was clearly conveyed.

Further discussed in Chapter 1 was the necessity of intergenerational cooperation in making Gen Z's youth activism most effective. Adultist tendencies and mindsets within social change organizations can create a bias against Gen Z youth that limits their full ability to get involved and, by extension, their ability to affect significant change in society through their climate activism. Youth-adult partnerships, distinguished by mutuality in respect and opportunity for contribution as well as a deconstruction of adultism, are a necessary dimension of intergenerational cooperation between Zers and generational allies. The highest form of Y-APs, shared leadership, facilitates the greatest amount of youth activism as well as intergenerational cooperation, both of which strengthen an organization's pursuit of their goals.

In Chapter 2, specific strategies to promote intergenerational cooperation, including Y-APs, were recommended. The cognitive and generational particularities of Gen Z youth spark intergenerational differences, but these differences are only detrimental if neither group seeks common ground. Moreover, these differences can be strategically leveraged to infuse activist efforts with greater creativity, insight, and expertise.

In summary of Section 1, climate organizations should make efforts to adequately prepare youth and adults to take joint co-lead roles within decision-making processes during meetings, actual activist events, and more. The age-effect perspectives Gen Z as youth and older generations as adults offer should be presented and respected in kind. From there, they should be integrated to give shape to the best direction for the organization. The changed, anti-adultist mindset should be applied here, allowing adults to view youth as assets rather than hindrances. Further, it should lead them to recognize the limits of their own knowledge, facilitating a willingness to take in the offerings youth uniquely provide as well as co-learn with them for the things they still don't readily know. In turn, youth should have the same willingness.

Section 2 examined the principles of cross-cultural, well-rounded communication in intergenerational dialogue that can facilitate the normalization of generational diversity within an organization. With greater awareness and more accurate expectations of other generations, intergroup tensions should be somewhat alleviated. Identity-based conflicts as a result of intergenerational differences are still inevitable, however. After determining the actual intergenerational differences that are problematic within their specific organization, climate groups should undertake conflict resolution approaches that redirect the focus of adversarial generations away from their differences and onto their commonalities. The ultimate commonality to emphasize is the shared mission to end anthropogenic climate change.

Finally, Section 3 explored the options a multigenerational organization has to adjust their structure and culture to support the unique offerings that each generation, through their own distinct perspectives and experiences, is able to contribute to strengthen the activist mission. The hierarchical task specialization model, Forever Recognizing Others' Greatness (FROG), mutual mentoring, and communities of practice were specified as such options.

Intergenerational cooperation, including youth-adult partnerships, puts generations into conversation with each other and allows Gen Z's vision of social change to be nurtured and acted upon. Ultimately, it empowers Gen Z and their generational allies within the climate movement to more effectively advance toward their united dream of a secure climate future. The information detailed in this Part can hopefully empower us to better understand what part we can play in bringing about and protecting that precious intergenerational cooperation.

## Part VI: Concluding Statements

In this final Part, I trace the essential ideas conveyed throughout the paper in a summary. Then, I note some limitations of my research and the remaining questions which future researchers can explore. Finally, I address the significance of this paper in a world still dedicated to climate inaction.

### Full Summary of Paper

In Part I, we explored the sociological underpinnings of *generation*. Guided by Mannheim's conceptualization of *social generation*, the usage of generation throughout this paper was distinct from that of *cohort* and *familial generations*. Individuals of the same cohort and national culture (*generation location*) share a similar parameter of experience within the stream of history; they have a common baseline reality. In other words, they are native to the historical, social, and cultural circumstances they have inherited by virtue of being born at a particular point in time as opposed to a century earlier. As they collectively enter into the formative years of adolescence, significant imprint phenomena—including cultural developments, but mostly in the form of major historical events—can forge a bond between these individuals in terms of mindset and worldview (*Habitus*), which endure over the life course because most attitudes and values become fixed in young adulthood. This group of individuals, as a result, develop a generational consciousness that is distinct from other groups who had different baseline realities and formative imprints. When that group interacts with elements of their social order through the lens of their distinct generational consciousness, they can be considered a *generation as an actuality*

in Mannheim's view; social generations are not monolithic, however, and separate *generation units* can emerge when individuals respond to the same formative circumstance in different ways. Some generation units are so prominent or vocal that their response, despite being one of many, is perceived as *the* perspective of the generation; these units tend to define the legacy of that generation. Through actualizing their generational consciousness in ways both intentional and unintentional, grand and minuscule, a generation acts upon the social process, creating social change or maintaining the status quo. Younger generations, because they are less socialized and routinized by the present configuration of society, are more likely to drive—or *vanguard*—social change. Because new generations emerge with their own consciousness and vanguard change in the image of that consciousness, the ceaseless process of generation succession can be viewed as a driving force of history.

In Part II, we examined the generational consciousnesses that have been associated with the following American cohorts: the WWII Generation, the Silent Generation, Baby Boomers, Gen X, and Millennials. For the latter three generations in particular, a great deal of research has been devoted to analyzing how their distinct identities manifest in practice in daily life. Most of this research is concentrated on the workplace. Supporting the notion that different generations will harbor some distinct attitudes and beliefs as a result of their distinct generational consciousnesses, many researchers located specific intergenerational differences across a variety of industries and social settings. They found, too, a great deal of intergenerational similarities; importantly, this affirms that generations are subgroups of a larger cultural experience rather than entirely independent entities. Across some of the scholarship, however, aspects attributed to the personality of a particular generation were contradictory. Further, the cross-sectional designs employed by many of these studies make it difficult to confidently claim that any such

differences actually arose from generational effects; the differences could have emerged from an age effect—such as the life or career stage of the individuals—or a period effect—such as a major circumstance that adjusts most people’s Habitus for a length of time. Despite their rarity, methodologies that more accurately analyzed generational effects—such as longitudinal and time-lag studies—did assert the existence of both generational similarities and differences between the current generations. The components of generation succession, if muted, are present within American society.

In Part III, we explored the cohort currently coming of age, Gen Z. Examining the potential imprint events that may have forged a shared consciousness between those born after 1996 but before sometime around 2010, I argued that Generation Z is indeed a developing generation in terms of the theoretical understandings of *social generation*. Gen Z was distinguished with a particular baseline parameter of experience, one marked by significant fulcrum events—imprint-level phenomena that occur just before the formative period for a cohort, thereby making them the first to grow up in a configuration of society affected by those phenomena—such as 9/11 and the Internet. Gen Zers are still coming of age, so the following imprint events may not be *all* the formative influences on their emerging generational consciousness, but each served to bind much of the Gen Z cohort together in a common generational identity: digital smart-technology (e.g., smartphones) and social media, the Great Recession, gun violence and terrorism, the 2016 and 2020 elections, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of these influences are directly related to early perceptions of Gen Z’s identity, including their digital nativism, pragmatism, financial conscientiousness, diversity, strained mental health, risk-aversion, and social awareness. A particular imprint event has produced a generation unit which is actualizing these Gen Z characteristics in their efforts to make change in

the social process—the climate crisis. Living in times of a 1°C increase in Global Mean Surface Temperature (GMST) over pre-industrial levels, Gen Zers have experienced in their formative years a whirlwind of devastating weather disasters as well as the hottest decade on record. Accompanying their experiential understanding of a changing climate, Zers witnessed the assertions by national and international panels of experts that the window for preventing human-caused GMST increase to 1.5°C or even 2°C above pre-industrial levels will close by 2030. The severity of adverse climate change effects multiplies with each increase in GMST no matter how minuscule that increase is. Without action, Gen Z will live through and bear children in an ever-intensifying climate crisis. With this truth ingrained in their generational consciousness, a generation unit of Gen Z is engaging with the social process and hoping to vanguard change as climate activists.

In Part IV, activism was portrayed as a vessel by which generations can directly affect social change in a way that aligns with their generational consciousness. Activism *is* a successful way to inspire social change, even when conducted by only a fraction of the country's overall population, such as the climate activist unit of Gen Z. Two important elements of activism were spotlighted: youth activism and digital activism. All Zers are presently youth, and most will be youth over the course of this pivotal decade. The cognitive build of youth predisposes them to activism and makes them effective activists; their heightened emotionalism translates to rousing passion for the cause, their inexperience allows them to innovate out-of-the-box approaches without being discouraged by past failures or held back by inapplicable past successes, and their bold creativity infuses activist endeavors with fresh perspectives. As digital natives, means of digital activism such as social media are within Zers' forte; this form of digital activism is an effective supplement to traditional activism, and it allows for a greater degree of outreach and



mobilization. A long history details the successes of youth activism, and a growing history details the importance of digital activism in securing the success of modern social movements. Gen Zers, outside of the climate crisis, have effectively leveraged both forms of activism in campaigns for gun control reform (e.g., March for Our Lives), environmental quality (e.g., Mari Copeny in the Flint water crisis), and racial justice (e.g., Eva Lewis and her peers). Of their cohort but not their social generation, young activists like Malala and Greta Thunberg have symbolized for Gen Z the capacity they have to affect the social process. The latter activist, of course, has ignited a global climate movement among students that has activated the vanguard spirits of Gen Zers in the United States. Dozens of climate-oriented social change organizations, many youth-led, are populated by the generation unit dedicated to bringing change to the world by way of mitigating the climate crisis. In their activism, these young Zers epitomize generations as a social force.

In Part V, we explored how the climate movement can be strengthened through intergenerational cooperation between these Zer vanguards and adult allies. The effectiveness of Gen Z climate activism may be hindered by intergenerational disharmony, including that which originates from ethnocentrism—challenging their generational identity—and adultism—challenging their youth voice. Intergenerational differences between prior generations do manifest within social change organizations, and the generational personality of Gen Z is distinct enough from each of the existing generations that it is likely intergenerational differences will manifest in the multigenerational climate movement. These differences provide the basis for identity-based strife or conflict between the generations, which inhibits an organization’s pursuit of their goals. Further, as youth, Zers’ engagement with the social process is limited by curtailments to youth involvement imposed by adults of older generations. Measures to nurture

intergenerational harmony within climate organizations will translate to more effective activist efforts for the movement overall. It is imperative to cultivate an environment that is understanding of generational diversity and to create conflict resolution processes that refocus activists on their commonalities if and when such diversity produces strife. For genuine intergenerational cooperation, undoubtedly, communication is key. It is integral to building generational intelligence that breeds not just acceptance of diversity but recognition of such diversity as a point of strength because each distinct belief, value, behavior, and characteristic of a generation contributes to the continuous evolution of climate activism. Unique perspectives combine, mutate, and metamorphosize during intergenerational collaboration to unveil new insights, generate new knowledge, and develop new activist pathways that can bring the distant goals of the climate movement closer to fruition. The mission of the climate movement is the same change Gen Z climate activists hope to vanguard in the social process; it is the mark they yearn to leave. Through older generations working to harmoniously cooperate with Gen Z—and through Gen Z accepting and reciprocating that effort—climate activism can be strengthened and Gen Z’s hope for their future can be realized.

## **Limitations and Further Research**

The greatest limitation of this paper is that I did not design nor execute an original methodology. As a result, some lines of reasoning of mine may not be as supported by empirical evidence as I would hope. This is particularly the case in Part V.

Further, thorough as it may be in some areas, my research is only a portrait of the relevant studies, theories, and information that relate to the topic of inquiry. The complexity of the various interrelated concepts that make up this paper’s focus demanded, at some point, a

limitation of scope. Thus, my contribution is a substantial introduction to each of these concepts, but there are a few notable areas wherein this paper serves as an extension of these topics. This research can be used as a foundation by which deepened understandings of the topics discussed can begin to be cultivated.

In that spirit, there are research fields where additional studies or more intensive studies are necessary to complicate some of the assertions made throughout these previous five Parts. Most pressingly, research on generational differences within workplaces or other multigenerational settings should involve more longitudinal or time-lag methodologies. Greater reasoning for this was explored in Part II. In essence, only reasonable predictions regarding generational effects can come about from cross-sectional designs. To make more reliable the claims about the distinctions between generations and to parse out the contradictory findings that past studies tend to be rife with, greater emphasis on the aforementioned methodologies should be placed. A full departure from cross-sectional designs in the field is unnecessary and undesirable, most principally for their helpfulness in time-lag designs. Still, as Gen Zers enter the workforce and increasingly become the darling of generational research, it's important that studies can more accurately depict the generational effects which are feeding into intergenerational disharmony rather than merely age or period effects. In this way, the tentative Gen Z profile offered in Part III can be recalibrated to more fully represent the actual generational identity that coming-of-age Zers will come to carry in their day-to-day lives.

Additionally, while some research does exist, social change organizations are rarely examined for the generational differences that emerge among their multigenerational network of activists and staff. In keeping with the Mannheimian conceptualization of generations as a social force for change, more researchers should turn to these types of organizations—rather than

merely traditional workplaces—to examine how generational consciousnesses differ while generations pursue some common type of impact on the social process. Including more diversified methodologies and incorporating Gen Z into such studies can also shed more insight on how intergenerational conflict and cooperation actually emerge within these organizations as a new generation begins to join them. Moreover, studies centering on climate, or environmental, social change organizations in particular can elaborate on the premises underlying Part V. The arguments and suggestions offered in this paper, which are intended to apply to climate activism organizations, can be more thoroughly corroborated that way.

As a final note, it is fairly obvious but still worth explicitly stating that there is clear bias on my end. Figures that a rather idealistic, climate-concerned Zer would gravitate toward an understanding of generational theory that suggests emergent generations will be able to positively influence the social process through the power of activism. Though I strived to build out my analysis from the foundation of evidence, logic, and reasoning as all researchers do, the conclusions I have drawn and the ways I articulated my arrival there are nonetheless partially shaped by the implicit biases I carry.

## **Parting Words**

If nothing else, let this paper serve as a call to action. When tides sweep over the sands that once kept them at bay and cracked earth thirsts for a droplet of nourishment and ocean-born storms siege land with unbridled winds, Zers will be there. Suffering. Those of older generations may be, too. For Gen Z and the generations yet to come, it feels inevitable. Their pain will be pocked with the bitter irony that, in truth, it wasn't inevitable. We know the climate crisis is the greatest threat to humanity. We know our threat is manmade. We know how our threat came to be, and

we know how to mitigate that threat. But more than a century of industrialization has created and fortified institutions, systems, and ways of life that function on feeding that threat. More than a millennium of history has taught the lesson that change does not come until it is too late or until the power of the people forces those in power to act. The climate crisis requires nothing less than dedicated efforts of all the world's governments to transition their economies to sustainable, clean, better versions wherein greenhouse gases are removed from the atmosphere rather than emitted into it. Nothing less than the commitment of all world leaders to address the inequities and injustices the climate crisis has already brought and will continue to bring. Nothing less than the spirited empathy of innumerable activists as they heal communities broken, being broken, or to be broken by climate change.

By way of their generational consciousness, Gen Z seems to understand this with the greatest clarity and anguish. They do so, too, with hope. As with all generations, they have a legacy to leave behind. A tale of how they lived and how they vanguarded. In this legacy, undoubtedly, will be the story of a modest but fiery contingent of them who sought to reconstruct the social order in pursuit of a secure climate future. This legacy, potentially, could be the story of how they successfully did so. Or it could be the story of how bitterly their efforts were in vain.

That story is still being written. Instead of holding our breath, we can extend our hand to these Zers. Join their fight. Follow their lead. Serve as generational allies, and help them bear the burden of changing the world. Thus is the power, the responsibility, of intergenerational cooperation. By it, Gen Z can leave their mark and etch into human civilization an unbending vision of their consciousness that will intertwine with the lives of those to come for generations. For this, the world will be better. From this, the world may be saved.

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