

# Generation Alpha: Marketing or Science?<sup>1</sup>

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Received: September 17, 2016; received in revised form: March 8, 2017;  
accepted: March 9, 2017

## **Abstract:**

**Introduction:** The transition from the limited information environment to the extended information world has fundamentally transformed the communication and information-gathering processes. The new learning spheres (non-formal and informal learning, i.e. lifelong learning) require rethinking learning strategies.

**Purpose:** The generation logic and knowledge of different generations can help making the learning process more effective and efficient. It also helps, if we know which generation exists and which one is a “fictitious generation”. According to theory of Mannheim and the model of Prensky, we can describe Generation X, Y and Z, but now the name of the next generation is being established.

**Methods:** With the help of traditional desk research, such as literature search, data mining and web search, this article covers the origin of Generation Alpha (Alfa), the possible characteristics attributed to this age group, and tries to discern if this concept is meaningful in terms of the generation paradigm.

**Conclusions:** Overall, it is apparent that while the existence of X, Y, and Z generations is demonstrable, the naming and characterizing the Alfa generation is important for marketing purposes, scientifically there is no evidence for “Generation Alpha”.

**Key words:** generations, GenAlfa, Alpha generation.

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<sup>1</sup> This article is supported by Bolyai Research Fellowship

## **1 Introduction**

According to Mannheim, an age group can be considered a generation if they share some immanent attributes, generational consciousness or communal characteristics. For this to happen, three requirements must be met: shared experiences, actual cohesion, common attitudes and forms of behaviour (Mannheim, 1969). Mannheim draws parallels between generations and social classes (one cannot enter a social class at will, he/she is born into it, and cannot leave it until his/her status changes). Of course, this does not mean that every single person in a generation will show the same characteristics, only that there is an observable generational pattern.

## **2 The logic of generations**

According to the model made by Strauss and Howe (1991), a generation change takes place in our society around every 20 years, with some signs of cyclicity. Marc Prensky added the relation to the information society and technology to the age group dimension as an important factor. It is his digital immigrants-digital natives model (Prensky, 2001) that Székely combines with the Strauss-Howe model (Székely, 2014):

- *Generation X* (digital immigrants, McDonald's generation): The main body of today's labour market, born in the late 60's and in the 70's, this age group came in contact with the tools of information technology and the digital world at a relatively young age. They witnessed computer technology turning into IT, and then into information society. The Internet is more or less present in their lives. In Western countries, they grew up under the influence of electronic media. In Hungary, they still grew up under the Socialism, but its milder, abating phase, and they were the so-called Ratkó-grandchildren.
- *Generation Y* (digital natives): Born in the 80's and 90's, the members of this age group experienced the Internet in their early childhood, they are confident in using digital tools and navigating the web, the digital world is their natural habitat, their digital self is consciously formed. They are characterized by strong media consumption, they are fast to adapt to technological changes. This age group is the generation of information society: they started using ICT tools as young children with ease. "Generation Y in Hungary basically closed the gap that was usually present between us and the Western world. Gen Ys grew up from children to youngsters mostly after the regime change, they met computers and the Internet - if not at home, at least in schools" (Székely, 2014). Their social interactions take place in the real and the digital world at the same time, they are more mobile than previous age groups, due to mobile phones and the Internet. Generation Y is different from previous generations in many ways, they are attracted to group activities, shared space, they are

performance-oriented, confident, they mostly identify with the value system of their parents, and they are highly educated (school and good performance is important for the majority of this age group). They process information faster, preferring image and sound over text, they also prefer random references (hypertext). They strive to immediately and often satisfy their desires, favour games over “serious” work, and instead of an inconvenient but necessary ally, treat technology as a friend (Prensky, 2001). Members of this generation follow global trends, they are among the first to learn to use new technologies, often changing the course of education. They feel at home in the digital world much more than the older “digital immigrants”.

- *Generation Z* (Facebook generation): They are those who were born at and after the turn of the millennium. They lost their “computer-virginity” in the Web 2.0, met social media in its full, they do not know what life without the Internet is. Their primary communication channel is not e-mail anymore, but social media. They not only consume information but generate and share also. This generation does not know life without wireless network, mobile phones and the Web. The most important cultural difference between them and the previous generations is that they not only consume digital content, they also generate it, on sites like YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and torrent sites (and if we think this is only an irrelevant pastime, we should remember the snowstorm in March, 2013, when traditional media failed to help, and social media took over as primary information source). They use devices on a skill level, they are typically multitasking: writing blogs, listening to music, following email and social network messages at the same time; their decision-making speed increases. Gen Zeds do not simply pick up these tools and contents, but use them in their everyday life and change them to their own tastes; they are practically not limited by location. Generation Z’s social environment is radically different from previous generations, thus making their learning, socialization and pastime totally different, too (Tóbi, 2013). This difference is mainly not sub-cultural (shown in clothing, use of language), it can be seen instead in methods of information gathering and communication strategy. They consume content on several different channels at once (multitasking), their combined consumption exceeds the “physical” limits of a single person, and most of them show no awareness of the legal and institutional environment of their everyday internet usage (e.g. downloading, file sharing). Moreover, changes in the world not only affect the rational part of their psyche, but their emotions as well. Many of them relieve this emotional tension without any cathartic experience. This “emotional incontinence” brings with itself the expectation of “others tidying us up” (at least in an emotional sense) (Tari, 2011; Csobánka, 2016). Thus, we live out our emotions through them (for example on a blog, through thousands of comments, but also in some identity situations,

relationship aspects and the world of work. As of Hungary, the differences between the Western world and our Central European region have disappeared altogether, in the generational sense, bringing some kind of global youth culture with itself, as innovations appear only a couple months late on the domestic market.

### **3 Generation Alpha**

The alphabet ends with Z, but the generational change probably does not. Therefore, the question about the name of the next generation arises. In 2005, Mark McCrindle, an Australian demographer, and his team conducted a national survey, which resulted in “Generation Alpha” being the most popular choice. The name was explained referring to other science disciplines, where after “exhausting” the Roman alphabet and Arabic numerals, the Greek alphabet was used.

After getting the name straight, let us look at the contents. As a quick reminder: according to Mannheim, an age group can be considered a generation if there are common characteristics differentiating them from previous ones. So, what are the common attributes of these “Alphas”, what makes this generation different from the digitally integrated Generation Z?

There is surprisingly little to know about them. Most articles on Generation Alpha only concern themselves with the name and its platitudinous origins, perhaps contemplating a few possible attributes that the age group of those born after 2010 would possess. These articles appear mostly on Australian news sites, on McCrindle’s own website, or in online marketing journals. Since there is virtually no academic source to dissect, let us analyse some of these sites in order to get a clearer picture about “Gen A”.

Starting with the “purest source”, Mark McCrindle’s website (<http://mccrindle.com.au/>), it is not surprising that several blog posts can be found about the topic here. Not many of these contain any scientific explanation, though. The most informative article is a Q&A, made with McCrindle by the New York Times. In this article, an entire paragraph explains the information gathering method used regarding the Alphas (who, we must not forget, are still 6 years old at most). According to the author, this method is basically prognosis, forecasts. They draw conclusions like an increased screen time, shorter attention span and digital literacy. These digital skills, however, are not that different from the ones observed in Gen Z, or even Gen Y (Tari, 2010; Tari, 2011). McCrindle mentioned, that Instagram and the iPad launched in 2010, the year of the “generation change”, and the word of the year was “App”. With this, he tries to accentuate that growing up in this world of smartphones, touchscreens and

constant Internet connection, the primary medium of youngsters will be glass, the touchscreen. This phenomenon is already well known in youth research (Nagy, 2013a). It is also mentioned, that physical and psychological maturity is starting earlier, while the adult life stage (marriage, children and career) is pushed back, caused mainly by the increasing time spent in education. This is also old news (Nagy, 2013b), since in the generational change narrative, researches showed similar results since the 80's, regarding the length of adolescence (Zinnecker, 1993; Gábor, 1996).

A strong resemblance to Generation Z is also apparent. Those born around the turn of the millennium have not experienced the world without Internet either, the majority of them used smart devices at a very young age, while YouTube and Instagram have more influence on them than television. Their learning habits also changed, which would require new teaching methods, since they are used to rapid information gathering, and multitasking is a basic skill for them.

#### **4 The criticism of Generation Alpha paradigm**

The borders between Generations X and Z are already blurred, because it is hard to connect “overthrowing” an age group to a specific date. Even the Strauss-Howe model refers to the 20-year lifespan of a generation as a crude estimation, thus stating that every child born after 2010 is to be considered an “Alpha” is only as binding as the categories seen in the graph below (generations, by birth year). It is apparent, that Generation Y and Z are overlapping by almost a decade, so children born between 1995 and 2004 could belong to both generations (SIC!). Based on these facts, it is not impossible to imagine that Gen Zed will last way longer, making the catchy Generation Alpha title redundant.

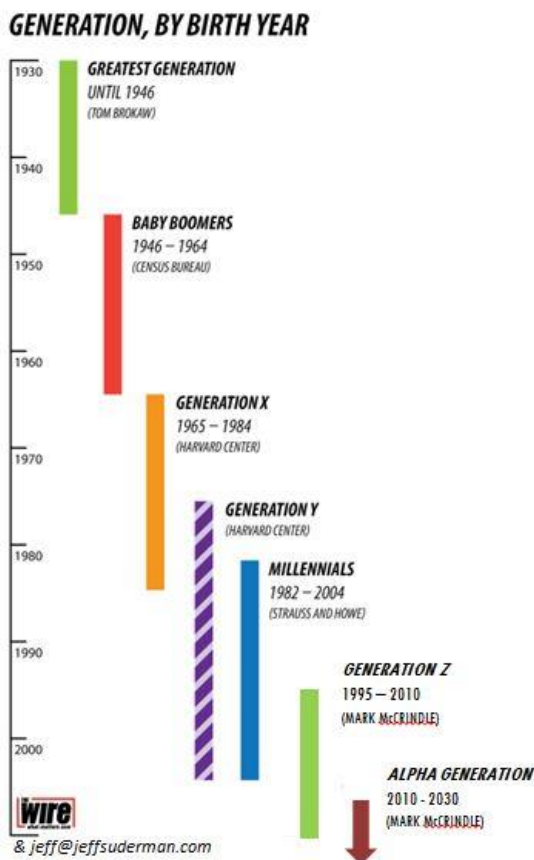


Figure 1. Generations, by birth year (Suderman, 2016).

This catchy, but empty name became the favourite of tabloids nonetheless: numerous articles, similar in content and style, were published during the past few years. The Business Insider, for example, published two writings (basically repeating the same ideas, word by word) about Generation Alpha, only six months apart (Sterbenz, 2014a; Sterbenz 2014b). They are exploring the background of the name itself, but impart very little scientifically accurate information. The most interesting statement is about demographic change, naming China and India as the “gravitational centre” of the future, at least in terms of social matters.

An article from Dan Schawbel, a bestselling author, researcher and FORBES columnist, found on his own website (Schwabel, 2014) provides us with little more insight. In this writing, he tries to predict 5 attributes that Gen Alpha

children will possess growing up, which are very similar to those written about Gen Zed.

- They will be the more entrepreneurial generation.
- They will be the most tech savvy and not know a world without social networking.
- They will primarily shop online and have less human contact than previous generations.
- They will be extremely coddled and influenced by their Gen X and Y parents.
- They will be more self-sufficient, better educated and prepared for big challenges.

Advertising Age (AdAge) published similar “observations”, but with a different style. The author of the article, published in January 2016, chose a more cynical approach, by stating 13 conclusions drawn from observing a young Alpha (possibly his own child). These are, of course, not entirely serious “facts”, but some of them could (if they persist at an older age) shape the general characteristics of this generation.

Scientifically it can be criticised at least in three ways. They hate sharing economy (shouting “Mine!”, “All mine”, and not sharing anything), they do not care about privacy and rules, they break free of any boundaries and they live in the moment. However, the question if these conclusions, drawn by watching a single, 6-year old or younger child, are generational characteristics, or simply attributed to young age arises.

- Even if we accept the Strauss-Howe model, we should not use it mechanically. It is certainly not true, that if someone was born in December, 2009, he/she belongs to one generation, but if in January 2010, belongs to another. Trends and characteristics can obviously be found, based on previous generations, but these are to be interpreted on a large social group, certainly not on a single person. In our case, people try to come up with generational characteristics and attributes without large amounts of data.
- In this light, it is still not known if the growing age group will show generation features based on Mannheim’s interpretation, and if these attributes are any different than the previous generation. Ergo, we cannot tell if there is a substantial change compared to Generation Z, or even if this age group can be considered a generation at all.
- In the last few years, there was no narrative that would start of any scientific interpretation pointing beyond generations X (digital immigrants), Y (digital natives) and Z (content creator). Some ideas are close to coming through and promise the possibility of a new generational interpretation (VR-glasses, self-driving cars, touchscreens, voice recognition), and some

of them are pure sci-fi (surrogate robots controlled by people at home, as in the movie *Surrogates*). But no one of these are realities re-shaping the social space.

## 5 Conclusions

Overall it is apparent that naming and characterizing the new generation is important mostly for marketing purposes, which would be relevant only after many years, when we have more information about “Generation Alpha”, which is literally in its infancy right now. Based on current facts, Gen Alpha is basically just “Z 2.0”, which is not that different from its predecessors, only carries forward their “legacy”.

Several innovations can become society shaping breakthroughs, thus being core elements in a new generational interpretation (if such a thing becomes reality). But without the knowledge of their existence, and if any, their attributes, naming a generation is not unlike naming an undiscovered star about ourselves: nothing but the vanity and displacement activity of a scientist.

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