

Coevals and Aesthetic Preferences. Generation Z

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Generation Z refers to those born between 1997-2012, after the Millennials. The Digital Generation¹ will soon emerge as the primary group of consumers and creators generating visual content in the media and the art spheres. What are the characteristics and peculiarities of the factors determining the aesthetic trends of this generation and why is Generation Z considered a bearer of radical change?

Any attempts at predictions in this text focus mainly on two factors. The first is related to characteristics of the mental development in adolescence, since not a few studies have indicated the influence of interests during teenage years on later periods of life². The second factor is the technological environment in which Generation Z was born and developed due to the two-way influence between technological progress and art expressed in mass neuro-integration³. In his *Art and Cognitive Evolution*, Merlin Donald defines culture as a distributed cognitive system in which worldviews and mental models are constructed and shared by members of society. Artists are usually at the forefront of this process and exercise enormous influence on society. Technology determines the kinds of cognitive networks that artists construct, in part by limiting the ideas and images that can be fulfilled. Moreover, technology may actually change the qualities of the distributed cognitive system and the nature of cognitive processing.⁴

¹ Another name for Generation Z

² A study by The Times found that we tend to prefer the music we liked in our early teenage years. The age at which girls are most likely to form tastes that persist into adulthood is 13, while for boys it is 14: James Gillespie Sunday March 25 2018, 12.01am GMT, The Sunday Times

³ Refers to the neural cross-modal unification of multiple sources of experience into a single abstract perceptual model - Marilyn Donald - *Art and Cognitive Evolution*

⁴ Donald, M. (2006). *Art and Cognitive Evolution*. In M. Turner, *The Artful Mind* (p. 3-20). OXFORD.

Both factors have dynamic immanent characteristics that have influenced the realms of the arts, but for the first time in the history of mankind technology takes an unprecedented supremacy in the system described.

General Profile of Generation Z

Generation Z includes anyone born after 1996. Generation Z-ers grew up with the new technologies, the internet and social media, which often stereotypes them as being tech-addicts, anti-social or "social justice fighters", yet statistically they will be the most educated generation⁵. For reference, the preceding Generation Y (Millennials 1981 - 1996), is the one which introduced technology and digital solutions, and its technical literacy fundamentally changed its way of life and work.

The typical Generation Z profile describes a self-governed person who shows concern for others, seeks a diverse community, is cooperative and social, values flexibility, authenticity and non-hierarchical leadership, and has a pragmatic attitude to dealing with problems⁶.

Generation Z considers itself as being much more tolerant of differences and open to new opportunities than any other generation. The majority supports social movements such as Black Lives Matter, LGBT+ and feminism. On average, Generation Z kids received their first smartphones shortly before their twelfth birthday. Communication and socializing are mostly done through social media and texting. The majority of the generation prefers receiving digital content online. Generation Z will soon become the most pivotal generation for marketing, commerce and consumption in general.

⁵ [What We Know About Gen Z So Far | Pew Research Center](#)

⁶ Since 2017, Roberta Katz, along with her co-authors, Sarah Ogilvy, Jane Shaw and Linda Woodhead have been conducting a multi-year CASBS research project on Generation Z - <https://news.stanford.edu/2022/01/03/know-gen-z/>

Generation Z differs from previous generations mainly in that they were the first consumers to have grown up entirely in the digital age and this inevitably reflects on the perceptions and formation of aesthetic taste. This feature has a two-way influence – just as the medium shapes the perceiver, so do the consumer's expectations determine the trends in mass culture.

Here, it is of particular importance to discuss the impact of modern technologies on visual culture, which are mostly characterized by algorithms based on artificial intelligence. These algorithms aggregate trends based on a database and offer increasingly accessible, simplified and quick means of generating the desired content. Undoubtedly, artificial intelligence algorithms are increasingly and quite imperceptibly starting to pinpoint the sensory incentives coming to consumers and common man. Any incoming information and its memory storage are decisive for the results of creativity and inventiveness.

To date, artificial intelligence has automated the aesthetic choices, "recommended" and made selections of what reaches us as mass consumption of items and content, and now also in some areas of aesthetic production. In the future, it will play an increasing role in the professional spheres involved with culture. Part of this work focuses on quantifying the content and the visual conception of millions of artifacts. Models have been created that predict which of these will gain more popularity and which of their characteristics contribute to this, using large arrays of shared content across social networks and data on the behaviour of people on these networks. Previously considered information, as well as what comes close to it by kind, are statistically offered more often than algorithms based on the information we shared and the time we spent on it. These statistical factors limit the database that reaches us and consequently narrow the spectrum of our aesthetic perceptions⁷.

⁷ Manovich, L. (2017, September-October). *Automating Aesthetics: Artificial Intelligence and Image Culture*. Retrieved August 20, 2018, from manovich.net: <http://www.manovich.net>

One of the meanings of "statistics" is that it is a synopsis of the characteristics of an array of information. Any summary, by default, will omit some details because it is shorter than the original. Therefore, if we use a statistical approach to generalize a collection of cultural artifacts or a dataset of cultural behaviour (e.g., sharing, liking, or commenting on specific images over the social networks), to find patterns, or suggest relationships, this will not be valid for everything that is available in the dataset.

Manovich says that in science, dealing with a statistical model that does not always work, as is the case described, is a problem because the paradigm assumes that such a model must accurately capture the characteristics of the phenomenon. It should not be assumed that a cultural variance, an atypical product, is a deviation from the mean. Nor that most works in a given genre media follow one or more patterns. Manovich believes that cultural diversity can be studied without assuming that it was brought about by the variations of certain types or structures. To assume the existence of cultural patterns is to assume that we are imposing at least some limitations on data analysis. However, nothing can be compared without statistics, unless we are dealing with extreme minimalism or serialism, where the authors do everything uniformly and handle only one variable. We can define cultural analyses as the quantitative study of cultural patterns at various scales. While we strive to find recurring patterns in cultural data, we must always remember that they only reflect some of the aspects of artifacts and their perception (Manovich, 2017). The ultimate goal of cultural analyses should be understanding and revealing in detail the diversity of contemporary professional and consumer generated cultural artifacts created globally – i.e., to focus on the difference between multiple artifacts, not only on what they share⁸.

⁸ Manovich, L. (2017, September-October). *Automating Aesthetics: Artificial Intelligence and Image Culture*. Retrieved August 20, 2018, from manovich.net: <http://www.manovich.net>

In Jennifer Drake and Ellen Winner's study of perceptual and cognitive characteristics associated with drawing⁹, the authors examined the case of two artistically gifted children and the features of their drawing skills. Yani and Grace – both three years old, drew in radically different artistic styles due to the cultural differences of their native countries. Grace painted with the realism inherent in Western culture, and Yani painted with the typical stylization of the classical Chinese water technique, and both were classified as gifted. This suggests that the potential does not determine the end result so much as it determines the possibility of the outcome, and that the environmental factors predict the specifics of the artifacts. Both children have an amazing mimetic ability, which is due to the ability to perceive the style of the art they were exposed to in their environment, and then demonstrated the skill to generate paintings in that style. These children did not copy specific drawings, but were able to derive the style from the visual stimuli they had been exposed to. Thereby, the domain - the set of stimuli that make up the macrosystem¹⁰, in which the individual develops - exerts an extremely strong influence over the direction of realization of the creative power and work - "At the core of artistic talent is the ability to master the representational conventions of culture, regardless whether the convention is the Western-style realism in Grace's case or the Chinese-style illusionistic brush style in Yani's"¹¹.

Thus, the contemporary digital devices used in the creative toolkit of Generation Z stimulate creativity in two ways:

- By introducing new themes and conceptualizations;

⁹ Jennifer E. Drake and Ellen Winner, Precocious realists: perceptual and cognitive characteristics associated with drawing - *Phil. Trans. R. Soc. B* (2009) 364, 1449–1458 doi:10.1098/rstb.2008.0295

¹⁰ A term used by Uri Bronfenbrenner in his bioecological model of human development (Bronfenbrenner and Evans, 2000) to describe the range of cultural values, norms, laws, customs and other social influences that guide a child's development.

¹¹ Jennifer E. Drake and Ellen Winner, Precocious realists: perceptual and cognitive characteristics associated with drawing - *Phil. Trans. R. Soc. B* (2009) 364, p. 451

- Through direct sensory stimulus, evoking high levels of interest - due to its novelty or unexpectedness, owed to the exponential development of technologies and the short time for the senses to get used to them;

The paradox occurs when the new themes and concepts in the aesthetic paradigm of Generation Z, imply extraverted social behaviour, and the use of technological devices requires an introverted attitude toward acquiring new skills. Perhaps some positive correlations can be found between this ambivalence and the typification of the Generation Z profile.

Why is the adolescence of Generation Z such an important process for the development of the aesthetic paradigm?

In his volume, *Youth: Its Education, Regimen and Hygiene*, Hall coined the term "storm and stress" to describe the emotional and physical volatility of adolescence. He regarded the teenage years not as a steady process of development, but as a more dramatic, unpredictable series of 'outgrowths' which the young person must tackle. In 1969, Daniel Offer wrote a seminal book entitled *The Psychological World of the Teenager*, in which he challenged Hall's conclusions on adolescence. Offer disagreed with the idea that the teenage years were necessarily a period of mood swings, and argued that these findings have always been reported in studies of teenagers with behavioural and emotional problems. He, in turn, conducted a number of studies on children who did not experience such problems and found that although some young people experience emotional upheaval or exhibit disruptive behaviour, this certainly was not the norm.

Further support for Daniel Offer's theory came from Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, who suggested that while some adolescents exhibit mood disturbances and engage in high levels of risky behaviour, this was not the case with all cultures (Arnett, 1999). Arnett found that the "storm and stress" of adolescence was more typical of industrialized cultures, whereas those living in traditional cultures were much less likely to find adolescence so disturbing. However, he argues that as young people come into greater contact with the cultural experiences of industrialized nations

(through geographical or cultural migration), they are also more likely to experience “storm and stress” too.

To date, we can consider Generation Z to be almost globally homogenized, despite national differences, as the exchange of social and aesthetic experiences occurs almost instantaneously through the social platforms. Current trends¹² reach the individual at a speed comparable to that of light, and it is only a matter of minutes for a person to update his information on the changes and attitudes in society. This implies not only an unprecedentedly dynamic visual environment, but also accelerated experiential processes where teenagers receive and share experiences. If we apply what Arnett argued in 1999 for industrialized cultures to 2022, we should not be surprised by the statistics on stress levels and the depression proneness among young people. I would point to one of the reasons for the rise in these statistics - the volatile nature of the cultural environment in which teenagers develop. The human neural system develops at an evolutionarily slow pace, and as it is confronted with the revolutionary development of technology, this creates a mental strain associated with the neurological changes during puberty and sensory overstimulation.

The main neural features of the brain during puberty that could influence aesthetic preferences and tendencies are myelination¹³, which leads to faster transmission of information in the frontal cortex, and synaptic pruning¹⁴ in the prefrontal cortex. This means that the adolescent brain becomes extremely time efficient at processing large arrays of information, and not

¹² A term in economics denoting the direction of movement of market quotations. To date, it has gained global popularity with the meaning: a prevailing trend or tendency, movement.

¹³ Axons in the frontal cortex continue to be covered by a layer of myelin. This adipose tissue accelerates the transmission of electrical impulses (Yakovlev and Lecours, 1967).

¹⁴ During infancy and childhood, the number of synapses in the prefrontal cortex increases rapidly (Huttenlocher, 1994). However, during puberty there is a rapid decline in these synapses, so that by adulthood the brain has 41% fewer synapses than a newborn child (Abitz et al., 2007). The rapid growth of synapses is thought to lead to an excess of connections in the brain. Synaptic pruning occurs during the first year of life and then again at puberty and is thought to result in greater efficiency in the transmission of information in the brain (Blakemore and Choudhury, 2006).

surprisingly, informational messages on social platforms reflect this ability, becoming increasingly brief and multiply by number per unit time.

Curiously, there is a "decline" in performance on facial recognition and emotion recognition tasks during early puberty, a function of the frontal cortex (Carey et al., 1980). Although the ability to identify emotions in photographs of faces returns in late adolescence, there is a significant decline in the ability of young adolescents to read emotions and, presumably, therefore, to understand the situation in which they find themselves (McGivern et al., 2002). Other tasks related to social cognition and the ability to perceive another's point of view appear to be affected during teenage years and, although little research has yet been conducted, these are activities related to the frontal cortex (Blakemore and Choudhury, 2006).

A key change in the development that occurs during adolescence takes the form of a period of identity search. Erikson's theory of psychosocial development (Erikson, 1963) describes life as a series of stages characterized by a crisis that the individual must resolve (Erikson, 1968). During adolescence, the young person enters the stage of *identity development versus role confusion*. Identity formation is vital if the young person is to know who he is, what he values, and what his preferences are. With globalisation and the rapid transmission of information, there are many more options and decision making is more hesitant. This is reflected in a volatile dynamic visual environment and fleeting aesthetic decisions that quickly follow transient trends – an example is the fashion and styling decisions that had been inspired by several decades and put together within a frame of only about a year or so.

During the period of self-identification, the young person may encounter a number of cognitive obstacles. David Elkind published an article in 1967 called "Egocentrism in Adolescence," in which he described the thinking of the teenager as primarily focused on himself. Elkind called this situation of constant search for coeval approval and the anxiety about other people's opinion adolescent egocentrism. The young person's feeling of constantly being the centre of attention

is also the main reason for the rapid mass popularization of trends. If one's appearance and behaviour are in line with the current attitudes of his coevals, the chances of experiencing an embarrassing situation are reduced.

One consequence of adolescent egocentrism is the creation of an *imaginary audience*¹⁵, which usually results in a measurable decline in self-esteem during early adolescence. This decline in self-esteem, however, does not last long and many young people soon find that their self-esteem returns to the levels witnessed during childhood and remains generally stable through adulthood (Simmons and Blyth, 1987). Despite the fleeting nature of this phase, it leaves deep traces on the concepts and themes of the aesthetic paradigm. The difference with Generation Z is that this audience is no longer as imaginative as previously discussed, thanks to the social networks.

Elkind argues that the sheer energy required to maintain this critical audience is exhausting for a young man, and that the need for solitude may be a reaction to being under this constant scrutiny. By removing himself from a social environment, the teenager gives himself time to wind down from this intrusive period of self-check. In the contemporary situation, the time for withdrawal from social pressure is extremely shortened, almost non-existent. The mental tension that builds up from the constant flow of information and communication finds expression in certain characteristics of the generation - self-governance, tolerance, flexibility and high levels of empathy.

During the teenage years, the gender schema theory suggests that the increasing time spent with friends of the same sex has an increasing impact on the specificity and strength of the gender schema that a teenager already has, leading to much more sexually stereotyped behaviour and sexual identification.¹⁶ In terms of trends in cultural products, this leads to the production of

¹⁵ The young man's egocentrism makes him "**over-conscious**" of the opinions of others. The teenager forms the notion that everyone is as interested as he is in the way he looks and behaves - **creating an imaginary audience**.

¹⁶ RACHEL GILLIBRAND VIRGINIA LAM VICTORIA L. O'DONNELL - DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY, © Pearson Education Limited 2016

merchandising¹⁷, which targets sexual differences and is therefore differential. This differentiation between "feminine" and "masculine" products inevitably influences the metacognition of a given society and provides an environment filled with such incentives that support sexually differential thinking in the aesthetic sphere. As previously discussed, at the core of artistic talent is the ability to master the representational conventions of culture. Of course, this has never been a one-way process, or else culture would not tolerate changes and development. Once under control and having mastered the cultural conventions as ground rules, the artistic talent is free to change and assign new meanings to the semiotic system of culture. What is different about Generation Z? In the general profile of the Generation discussed earlier, it was pointed out that it identifies itself as being much more tolerant of differences and open to new possibilities than any generation before it. This also includes sexual discrimination and any merchandising that reinforces gender stereotyping. Consequently, the aesthetic preferences of Generation Z will be geared towards suppressing and eliminating the gender schema in teenage years and any young person wishing to be well accepted among his coevals will adopt the new gender neutral aesthetic.

Coeval preference tends to lose its sexual identity over time, and by the age of 16-19, teenagers already demonstrate strong in-group biases based on personality characteristics (Eckes et al., 2005). Under the influence of the social networks, this age is dropping, based on active sociocognitive learning. That is, these new social tendencies are superimposed on the neural connections at an earlier stage of cognitive development and, accordingly, the synaptic connections acquire greater sustainability. The aesthetic choice based on the gender schema continues to exert a strong influence, but in a different, more tolerant and less stereotyped direction.

Teenagers keep rating their own social group more positively than other social groups, and those who most identify themselves with the group tend to show the most preference for group

¹⁷ Merchandising is a set of techniques intended to help sell a product.

members and are more likely to endorse group behaviour (Tarrant et al., 2001). What happens when a social group acquires the character of a mass? Whereas, if just two decades ago, the group averaged between 5 and 50 people, nowadays the Generation Z social group numbers several thousand followers on the social networks and an unlimited number of other influences from the profiles they follow. At first glance, such a diversity of data input and incentives should lead to more utilitarian heuristic thinking and increased creative potential. In reality, however, the brain has a limited capacity, and in the presence of an information array that exceeds our processing capabilities, it will begin to classify information as redundant noise and ignore many information flows. Of course, marketing, advertising and technologies find a way to relieve us by filtering the information and offering us mostly only the information we are interested in.

In a real-world environment with open-end problems, the individual relies on many different heuristics that might not always work. Exposure to random and irrelevant incentives has been shown to increase creativity in a wide range of problem-solving situations (Simonton, 1984)¹⁸ – such is also the long-term impact of massive social groups in a digitized world, despite the work of algorithms in narrowing down the spectrum of incoming information. Perhaps the currently short-term impact of technologies on the creative toolkit of Generation Z is somewhat balanced – the mass media offer unlimited access to new incentives, but they also have a process-controlling function performed by algorithms.

We can conclude that potential correlations can be inferred between creativity and various aspects of the environment, but no causality can be established. Causality is contingent on unobservable influences of the environment, ontogenesis and phylogenesis of the individual. What can be accounted for are the characteristics of the products that are preferred and rated as highly creative by Generation Z. The marketing sector, being most sensitive to changes in the attitudes of its future consumers, has identified several strategies that work successfully with

¹⁸ Simonton, D. K., 1984, *Genius, Creativity and Leadership*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Generation Z. These strategies can provide an insight into the aesthetics that future artists and their audiences will be looking for:

1. The use of humour for positive associations - positive reaction.
2. Continuous communication, aimed at forming a sense of sharedness and emotional connection - a sense of social connection.
3. Rebranding, counting on relaying cognition - using existing ideas in new ways.
4. Psycholinguistic approaches of influence - associative thinking.
5. Educating customers - training the perceiver.
6. Strong social media presence - extraverted attitude.

Thus, the aesthetic tendencies that emerge in Generation Z are determined by several key factors. Leading are the global social networks that form a society of tolerance of those who are different and minorities – that is, a culture in which eclecticism leads the way, as discrimination is not tolerated and any attempt at creativity is welcomed. Furthermore, a tolerant attitude means that a successful product or artifact must be accessible to everyone in order to avoid any form of discrimination – hence the boundaries between mass consumption and works of art are becoming increasingly diffuse by borrowing features from one another. The second major factor is the technologies, which provide an unlimited flow of information, which ultimately imposes a dynamically changing aesthetic paradigm. The result of this brevity of trends is that innovative creative solutions cannot keep up the pace. As we have already ascertained, an unprecedentedly dynamic visual environment creates accelerated processes of exchange of experiences, which necessitates a shortening of informational messages, but also an increase in their number. To maintain that number efficient, Generation Z does not create, but recycles. It recycles products, ideas, trends and entire decades. To sum up, Generation Z has an aesthetic preference for eclectic second use of aesthetics.

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