

Targeting the Millennial Generation

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From a critical analysis of Howe and Strauss (2000; 2003) theory of recurrent cycles of generations in History, we intend to extract useful Advertising principles that can be applied when aiming at Millennials as consumers. Noting that the notion of “generational trait” resembles the empirically validated concept of “cohort effect”, we find Howe and Strauss ideas to be very compelling, and useful, when it comes to find guidelines that allow for an understanding of generational variations on consumer behaviour.

I. Perspectives on generational psychological traits

The term “Cohort Effect” is used in the field of Social and Human Sciences to describe the influence of being born and raised in a time and situation which are shared by other members of a group. By sharing these temporal and spatial elements, the members of one group of people have similar experiences which make that set of people unique in respect to any other group (Santrock, 1998). For example, the Challenger Space Shuttle explosion, the movie ET or the first Gulf War are happenings with which Generation X (born 1965-1980) has particularly sharpen emotional links, whereas the Vietnam War (in the U.S.) or Humberto Delgado’s run for Presidency (in Portugal), have marked the previous generation.

The relation between individual development of a person and his/her surrounding environment has been the focus of many well-known and influential psychological theories, like Urie Bronfenbrenner’s “Ecological Theory” of Development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), or the theory of Lev Vygotsky (1978) on Socio-Cultural factors and their role on development. In practice, any psychological theory that stresses the role of social, cultural, historical, economical or sociological factors in the development of the individual can be chosen as a theoretical rationale to ground ideas regarding the influence that belonging to a certain generation has on many aspects of the person’s typical sensitivity, judgment and behaviour.

A few notes of caution must be made, though, when analysing the many acclaimed authors (e.g. Goldstein, 1991; Modelski & Thompson, 1996; Howe & Strauss, 2000) that have suggested interpretations of social and psychological phenomena under the light of generational theories:

1. First, and foremost, the majority of these works was done in the United States, and although many episodes that authors like Howe and Strauss refer to do have a very direct correspondent in much of the “Western World”, there are many other places where the models cannot be applied: for example, what sense does it make to talk about Millennials in Darfur’s Sudan?
2. These ideas share many characteristics of “crystal ball gazing”: the main utility and the greatest impact of these theories is their claimed ability to make the future foreseeable, using historical knowledge and a cyclic conception of History, in order to make predictions of what cycles lay in front of us, and in the near future. This cyclic understanding of History is not new, and it is not that different, at least in methodological terms, to the one followed by Marx and Engels (1867, as cited by Howe & Strauss, 2000; 1990) in writing “Das Kapital”. What is indeed interesting is that, contrary to “Das Kapital”, the ideas of authors like Howe and Strauss are popular among the conservative America Right (see, for example, Riemer & Cuomo, 1997).

After these cautionary words, the rest of this paper will be focused on presenting the Generational Theory of Howe and Strauss (2000), which is, despite of what’s been said, a curious and provocative framework that deserves to be understood, if only to be able to denounce it’s limitations and fragilities. This intends to be an exercise of academic freedom, and pure intellectual exploration of challenging and interesting ideas, that are not necessarily subscribed by the authors of this paper. We present several practical orientations that are useful for Advertisers wanting to target Millennials, after exposing the theory behind them.

II. Meet the Millennials

In 2000, Howe and Strauss published “*Millennials Rising*”. This work was the result of a careful research about the psychological characteristics of the generation currently coming of age, whose first cohorts were the year 2000 high school graduates. They try to demonstrate that today's college students are recasting the image of youth from

pessimistic and socially unengaged to optimistic and socially compromised. They also say Millennials are held to “higher standards” than those that adults apply to themselves. They suggest that this new generation is a lot less violent, tolerate less “vulgar” behaviour, and that they do not appreciate the sexually charged culture that older people are producing for them (Howe & Strauss, 2000).

Albeit we can easily consider this theory as too simplistic and lacking in solid and irrefutable empirical grounds, Howe and Strauss’ ideas were given much attention, both in the media and in certain academic circles. These authors take into account the evolution of American society in the last generations, but go back to as early as 16th Century Europe in the search for “cyclic patterns” in the succession of generational psychological characteristics. They also claim that these patterns are to a larger extent seen also in other “westernized” societies (as found in Europe and Japan, for example). In Tables 1 to 3, we summarize the main ideas behind Howe and Strauss (2000) theory of generational and historical cycles. Table 1 presents the “four turnings” that, according to these authors, keep repeating in succession since 16th Century Europe (in this table we go back only to the beginning of the current cycle, in the 1940s). On Table 2, each of the four generations typified by Howe and Strauss (2000) is presented. Finally, Table 3 joins the data contained on the first two tables, in order to explain how historical and generational cycles relate to each other. The logic behind these authors theory manifests itself clearly at this point, and a compelling and elegant conception of History and generational succession appears.

Table 1. Stages in History, according to Howe and Strauss (2000)

“High” (1945-1960)	A era between a Crisis and an Awakening, as seen between World War II and the 60s.
“Awakening” (e.g. 1960-1980)	Young adults become preoccupied with “philosophical” values and are driven towards a ethical and moral aspects dictated by their inner moral zeal
“Unraveling” (e.g. 1980-present)	A time of paradigm shifting, between an Awakening and a Crisis, like present day (characterizes the time in which Generation X came of age, and entered the work force)
“Crisis” (e.g. now-2020)	Era of social upheaval, and turmoil.

Table 2. Generational Archetypes, according to Howe and Strauss (2000)

<p>“Artists” (e.g. born 1925-1942)</p>	<p>Subtle, have a hard time making decisions, emotionally-drive, often having to deal with feelings of repression and inner conflict. They grow up as over-protected children in a “Crisis”, come of age as the sensitive young adults of a “High”, turn into indecisive leaders during an “Awakening”, and become elder in the midst of an “Unraveling”. The Silent Generation (1925-1942) is an example of a generation of this type.</p>
<p>“Prophets” (e.g. born 1946-1964)</p>	<p>Values-driven, high moral standards, self-focused, and willing to do great sacrifices to defend what they believe in. They grow up in the favourable environment of a “High”, enter adult life as the young crusaders of an “Awakening”, live midlife as moralistic reference figures during an “Unraveling”, and are the elderly leaders during a Crisis. The Boomers (born 1946-1964) are an example of a Prophet generation</p>
<p>“Nomads” (e.g. born 1965-1980)</p>	<p>Cynical about institutions, adventurous. They grow up as the underprotected children of an “Awakening”, come of age as the alienated young adults of an “Unraveling”, become the pragmatic, midlife leaders of a “Crisis” and age into tough, post-crisis elders during a “High”. Generation X (born 1965-1980) and the Lost Generation (born 1880-1900) are examples of Nomad generations.</p>
<p>“Heroes” (e.g. born 1980-2000; includes “Millennials”)</p>	<p>Conventional, powerful, with a great faith in social institutions, and a profound trust in authority. They grow up protected in the midst of an “Unraveling”, become adults and enter the work force as the “Heroic”, team-working youth of a “Crisis”, become energetic and over-confident lifers during a “High” and turn into powerful elders who are under fire in the next “Awakening”. Examples of this generation are the veterans who fought in World War II (born 1901-1924). The current Millennials are expected to become the next generation of this kind, according with these authors.</p>

Table 3. Characteristics of the four-step historical cycle, according to Howe and Strauss (2000)

STEP (or “TURNING”):	FIRST	SECOND	THIRD	FOURTH
	(“High”)	(“Awakening”)	(“Unraveling”)	(“Crisis”)
Repeating since 16 th Century	(1945-1960)	(1960-1980)	(1980-present)	<u>(NOW!)</u>
GENERATION ENTERING				
<i>Elderhood</i>	<i>Nomad</i>	<i>Hero</i>	<i>Artist</i>	<i>Prophet</i>
<i>Midlife</i>	<i>Hero</i>	<i>Artist</i>	<i>Prophet</i>	<i>Nomad</i>
Millenials: Young adulthood	<i>Artist</i>	<i>Prophet</i>	<i>Nomad</i>	<u>Hero (Millenials)</u>
<i>Childhood</i>	<i>Prophet</i>	<i>Nomad</i>	<i>Hero</i>	<i>Artist</i>
Families:	Strong	weakening	weak	strengthening
Child nurture:	Loosening	underprotective	tightening	overprotective
Gap between gender roles:	Maximum	Narrowing	minimum	widening
Ideals:	Settled	discovered	debated	championed
Institutions:	Reinforced	attacked	eroded	Founded
Culture:	Innocent	passionate	cynical	practical
Social structure:	Unified	splintering	Diversified	gravitating
World view:	Simple	complicating	Complex	Simplifying
Social priority:	maximum community	rising individualism	maximum individualism	Rising community
Social motivator:	Shame	conscience	Guilt	honor
Sense of greatest need:	do what Works	fix inner world	do what feels right	fix outer world
Vision of future:	Brightening	euphoric	Darkening	urgent
Wars:	Restorative	controversial	Inconclusive	total

III. General Psychological Characteristics of Millennials

Within a generation, individuals vary widely, but one can expect to find some identifying traits of a particular generation (Santrock, 1998). Those traits are the result of the unique experiences and environment of that specific group of people. “Cohort Effects” appear when people have been exposed to similar economical, psychological, and socio-cultural influences at about same age.

Howe and Strauss (2003) list seven traits of the Millennial Generation that they considered not being shared by the other preceding three generations. These characteristics are presented in Table 4

Table 4. The seven traits of the Millennial Generation (Howe & Strauss, 2003)

1. “Special”	Because since the early 1980s there has been a great concern about youth issues, and the media has been giving a lot of attention for matters relating to the younger generations: Millennials perceive this global concern about them
2. Sheltered	this is the first generation of “baby on board” signs and special “baby car seats”
3. Confident	Millennials believe that they will better off than their parents when they get to the same age
4. Team-Oriented	Millennials display strongly group-driven behaviour and are very prone to participate in group activities
5. Conventional	This is a generation that tends to conform to parental values
6. Pressured	Their live is fully “scheduled” – they have play times, they practice sports, have music lessons, and yet have to answer to lots of mail and instant messaging
7. Achieving	As early as on the first years on high school, kids of this generation have already thought seriously about future degrees, jobs and salaries.

In the next section of this paper, this “psychological profile” of Millennials will be used to derive some principles that may be useful for the Advertiser that intends to target this generation.

IV. How Can Advertisers Get to Millennials?

Millennial are a “wired” generation. They not only feel comfortable using the Internet but also have not known a world where using this medium was not an option. Furthermore, with the emergence of Web 2.0 tools, the psychological traits of Millennials described in Table 4 (like feeling “special”, being team-oriented and achieving) manifest themselves in a new concept that has recently emerged in Marketing and Communication: that of a “*producer*”. A “producer” is a consumer that has started to create, reinvent, share, rate and label products. In this sense, the consumer has become, also, a producer. For instance, the blogosphere has surpassed the hundred billion web logs worldwide, and the easiness of the new software tools enables practically anyone who desires it to publish materials online. This is a unique

combination between technology and psychological characteristics of a generation, and it is expected that this singular mixture will continue to influence the media and the market in the years to come (Mosmuller, 2007).

Tips on how to reach the Millennial Generation as an advertising target can be derived from Howe and Strauss theory, and the psychological traits exposed in Table 4:

1. Millennials retain close parental bounds, even after living autonomously. They are likely to consult with their parents on significant decisions. Marketing targeted to this generation should consider parental influence when substantial expense is at stake.
2. When deciding which message to pass, it must be taken into account that parents of Millennials will likely “supervise” it: parents of this generation are very keen to show up on the social environments where Millennials meet the advertisements aimed at them. Even if the message seems suitable for the Millennials, the advertiser must think of its impact on the parents.
3. Millennials are more likely to be influenced for messages reinforcing family, religion and community ties, than older people (e.g. Gen-X) counterparts.
4. Millennials have almost no “Generation Gap”. Brands that appeal to “rebellion” do not have a fertile ground with this generation.
5. Intelligence is respected by Millennials. Advertisements celebrating “success by sheer luck” do not speak to this generation. They are under pressure to achieve (c.f. Table 4), and that are confident on their capability to do so.
6. The previous generation (Gen-X) was ultra-individualistic. Millennials are much more prone to messages like “leave no one behind” than to “me against the world”.
7. “Trash-talk”, and advertising messages based on ordinary language are not appreciated by this public.
8. According to Howe and Strauss, Millennials are less influenced by race, gender or ethnicity factors, but seem to be increasingly prone to form social bounds based on economic class.

Given the fact that Howe and Strauss developed their ideas based on Anglo-American History, what do these authors have to say about the emergence of “Millennial-like” traits in the youth of other places in the World (e.g. Portugal)?

According to this theory, Advertisers must follow the previous rules when the following social indicators appear, denoting the coming to age of a generation with Millennial traits (Howe and Strauss, 2003):

1. A strong attention to children safety and education.
2. A reversal on long-standing negative psychosocial trends among teenagers (violence, professional and vocational disorientation, pessimism, cynicism and distrust of institutions).
3. Generalized use of peer-to-peer communication technologies.
4. Closing on the relations of teens with their parents.

V. Conclusions

In this paper, we presented a view of Millennials derived from the theories of Howe and Strauss (2000; 2003) about the cyclic nature of History and the repeating patterns of psychological traits throughout intervals of four generations.

From this theory, we derived some practical orientations that can be useful to Advertisers aiming at Millennial Generation, considering the psychology of a typical member of this group of cohorts.

We can easily dismiss Howe and Strauss ideas as yielding a too deterministic and therefore simplistic view of History. Their theory is based on extensive research of historical factual data, but has been criticized for being arbitrarily selective: it is relatively easy to pick facts from a given period in time, whether recent or remote, to support a pre-conceived idea of that epoch in terms of “historical cycle”.

Even so, we could also think of what would be the utility of studying history, if the knowledge of the past could not influence our comprehension of the present and our expectations about the future. Neil Howe and William Strauss had the courage to come up with a theory that has predictive power, and therefore can be tested against reality now, and in the future.

In the case of Advertising, generational traits theories like the one proposed by Howe and Strauss, make it possible for professionals on this sector to have some guidelines to understand the consumer behaviour, systems of values and social references of emerging generations, like Millennials, that are now coming to age. Although the authors conceal that not every Countries see the emergence of a generation archetype at

the same time, they do give directions on how to recognize when a certain generation is on the verge of emergence, and that makes the theory potential very useful.

If correct, even if only partially and imperfectly, an understanding of Howe and Strauss's ideas can give the Advertising professional a true competitive advantage by letting him/her understand better the psychological factors associated with each generation, and prepare strategies to encompass the changes in consumer psychology over time and over geographically different markets.

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