

**BBDO KNOWS**

**GET CRISIS SMART**

*Covid-19*

*A Generational View*

*COVID-19 – A Generational View*

Generational differences have been the subject of debate for decades. Previous research has tended to scrutinize each generation in isolation, or pit one against the other. But the pandemic has created a unifying context for us all. Every age group has been impacted, which has prompted us to take a cross-generational view of recent global events. This article looks at the impact that the pandemic and its accompanying lockdowns have had and will continue to have on different generations. In particular, we consider the ways in which the experience has united us all, versus the ways its impact has been felt differently.

**UNITED BY THE NEED FOR CONTROL**

No matter our life experience or age, this was the first pandemic for all of us. Worry in the face of the unknown was the dominant feeling as we embarked on lockdown.

Consistently, the level of concern about friends and family contracting the virus was higher than concern for oneself. Interestingly, Gen Z - the generation least at risk - started off with the highest level of worry about contracting the virus.<sup>1</sup>

Our immediate response to the external disruption was to seek control, which came in many shapes and forms, but the need appeared to be universal. All generations found control in information - at least half across all age groups said they were reading news more.<sup>2</sup> The majority delayed big purchases - and the younger, the more likely this behaviour was - 86% of Gen Z said they were delaying.<sup>3</sup> It comes as no surprise as younger people were the first to feel the financial impact of the pandemic, with higher rates of furloughs and redundancies touching those at the very beginning of their careers. According to OECD youth unemployment (15-24) was at nearly 18% in April 2020, and it had increased at double the rate of that of older age groups.<sup>4</sup>

**Broadcast TV became more inter-generational than ever - as it offered unity, escapism and comfort at the same time.**

“Gen Z acquires a TV habit”, reads a title of a recent WARC article reflecting on the fact that home confinement has had a strong impact on people’s media habits.<sup>5</sup> While all age groups flocked to TV for comfort and escapism, the increase was steepest for the youngest who typically tended to consume most of their video online before the pandemic. Meanwhile, baby boomers were forced to undergo rapid digital acceleration, acquiring new digital habits that will likely outlive the pandemic.

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<sup>1</sup> GWI, March 2020, UK and US [LINK](#)

<sup>2</sup> GWI, March 2020, UK and US [LINK](#)

<sup>3</sup> GWI, March 2020, UK and US [LINK](#)

<sup>4</sup> OECD, [LINK](#)

<sup>5</sup> WARC, [LINK](#)

**UNITED BY THE NEED FOR CONNECTION**

Lockdown rules made no exceptions for any of us, regardless of demographics or any other factors – we were all confined to our homes. The experience felt particularly restrictive to the younger generations who tend to be out and about more. 41% of Millennials and Gen Z found it hardest to give up social interaction, followed by freedom and the ability to leave the house.<sup>6</sup>

Needless to say, technology came to the rescue as we connected via apps and social platforms, but we also saw an increase in good old phone calls across all age groups. The most significant impact on the youngest, Gen Z, came in the form of increased connection to their family – as much as half said they were spending more time socialising as a household.<sup>7</sup>

The pandemic, with its sense of “we’re all in this together”, brought communities closer together; this has been particularly pronounced for the youth. According to Deloitte, “the pandemic has increased empathy and eagerness to make a positive impact” among Gen Z and Millennials.<sup>8</sup> Three quarters of them claimed that “the pandemic had made them more sympathetic towards the needs of different people around the world.”<sup>9</sup>

**UNITED BY THE NEED FOR PROGRESS**

Lockdown living meant that we all missed out on life events, big and small – from cancelled holidays to postponed weddings, we all were forced to give up plans. Younger generations were impacted the most in terms of life progression, leaving them grieving for missed graduations, birthday parties, exams and other life milestones on the way to adulthood. Nearly a third of millennials said they had delayed a major life event (e.g. a wedding, moving house or job) as a result of the pandemic.<sup>10</sup>

We found relief in trying new things, learning new skills and establishing new routines to give us a sense of much needed control and progression. Younger generations were twice more likely to try new activities as a result of the pandemic.<sup>11</sup> Having less set routines and, likely, more time on their hands, a quarter of Gen Z used the time for self-improvement and experimentation – already an important focus for them pre-pandemic. Younger generations were even more likely to experiment with purchases. BCG research found

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<sup>6</sup> Source: Kantar, April 2020, Global, [LINK](#)

<sup>7</sup> GWI Wave 5, June 2020, Global [LINK](#)

<sup>8</sup> The Deloitte Global Millennial Survey 2020, [LINK](#)

<sup>9</sup> The Deloitte Global Millennial Survey 2020, [LINK](#)

<sup>10</sup> GWI Wave 5, June 2020, Global [LINK](#)

<sup>11</sup> Foresight Factory, June 2020, UK data

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that 69% of younger consumers had purchased a new product for the first time during COVID-19, compared to 43% for older generations.<sup>12</sup>

**CONVERGING BEHAVIOUR, DIVERGING PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT**

Never before have tweens and their grandparents had more similar lifestyles than during lockdown – all stayed in, all shopped online, all socialised on Zoom, but also all watched TV more than ever.

“Across the globe, consumers have hunkered down and figured out how to fulfil their needs—from socializing to eating to having fun — through a mix of traditional approaches and new, technology-enabled methods. Suddenly, spending time with family and cooking meals at home are sharing the spotlight with video and delivery apps.”<sup>13</sup>

Our behaviours converged due to circumstance but our psychological impact varied enormously. Younger people saw the disruption hinder their progress and even cause them to retreat in terms of life progression. Older generations were more likely to have the disruption increase pressure on them, either by way of responsibilities or through a perception of greater risk.

Future generational research will look back at the pandemic as the event which both united our behaviours and highlighted the divide in the psychological impact we experienced. Every generation has had to unlearn behaviours and every generation has experienced a shift, meaning their relationships and rituals are being reconsidered, offering brands a renewed opportunity to connect.

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<sup>12</sup> BCG, How Marketers Can Win with Gen Z and Millennials Post-COVID-19, [Link](#)

<sup>13</sup> BCG, How Marketers Can Win with Gen Z and Millennials Post-COVID-19, [Link](#)

**ABOUT BBDO KNOWS**

BBDO KNOWS is a planning resource for the BBDO network.

BBDO KNOWS offers thinking, strategy, insights and inspiration on key categories, key themes and consumer segments.

If you are interested in learning more about the way BBDO thinks please contact **Melanie Norris, Managing Director**, [norrism@bbdoknows.com](mailto:norrism@bbdoknows.com).

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