

GENERATION

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We are a generation whose time has come. Until this point, though, we were a generation with little direction, with no rallying point, no Vietnam. Thus, the people who want to define us now have a hard time doing so. We are an enigma. We make their jobs difficult. Do we care?

"We live small lives on the periphery; we are marginalized and there's a great deal in which we choose not to participate. We want silence and we have that silence now."

— Douglas Coupland, *Generation X*

So what's all this screaming? Our parents? Hardly. The Baby Boomers? Get a grip.

What you hear is the voice of a generation that author Douglas Coupland aptly titled *Generation X*. It's a voice of adults 18 to 29 years old who are 46 million strong, a voice suddenly everyone wants to hear. "You can't ignore the people of our generation," says Jake Perkins, a Virginia Tech senior. "America should be ready."

Yet it isn't. Our generation finally has come of age. But then they've known we were growing up and into *Their World* long before we did. And they should have known what we were going to be all about. We had no Vietnam War to mobilize us. We had no Depression to make us cautious spenders. All we had was Ronald Reagan and a pocketful of money that ran out when we ran off.

In 1991 Coupland's *Generation X* hit the bookstores, painting a picture of a burnt-out, anonymous and undirected new generation, the twentysomethings, awash in the main-

stream of the Baby Boomers. Now the same networks, publications and marketers, once preoccupied with *The Big Chill* generation, are stumbling over each other to recognize and define its successors. The college-age culture — once a mere gate-crasher on the cultural scene — suddenly has become America's guest of honor.

"You're going to see a 180-degree turn-around in marketing to college students in the next five years," says Sean Brown, a sophomore at the U. of Missouri. "Alternative is starting to become mainstream. They're trying to attack this drive to be different."

The successors of the Baby Boomers have been called many things: angry, optimistic, complacent, sober, frivolous, idealistic. But for all the hype surrounding the new generation, it has been hard to define.

To begin with, Xers are more racially and ethnically diverse than any generation before it. "Even within young adults, you have a lot of different groups," says B.J. Arnold, a vice president at Fox Broadcasting Co. "It's a function of our society."

But the diversity of *Generation X* goes beyond mere demographics. The perceived single-mindedness of the '60s generation, which rallied around the issue of the Vietnam War, has vanished from today's college-age culture.

"... Growing up, Vietnam was a background color in life, like red or blue or gold — it tinted everything.

And then suddenly one day it just disappeared. Imagine that one morning you woke up and suddenly the color green had vanished."

Every year at Kent State U., students and faculty gather in memory of the slain student war protesters who were shot by National Guard troops in May 1970. But this same campus is divided now over issues of homosexuality and race relations, says senior Mona Yadjik. There is no Vietnam for Xers at Kent State. And something's missing. "That united Kent State and its students," she says. "But we really don't have anything... to unify us."

Today's college students, unfocused on any one national issue, have become a subculture of subcultures, devoting themselves to multiple causes, listening to myriad genres of music and abandoning traditional party alliances. Fragmentation is everywhere.

Brendan Gillen, a junior at the U. of Michigan and music director at campus radio station WCBM, has noticed it in radio.

"For every subtle nuance that comes out in music, there's a whole new faction," Gillen says. "The grunge culture can't like techno, and [techno fans] can't like hip-hop. They create their own personalities."

And the same goes for student activism, says Greg Lewis, a senior at the U. of California, Berkeley. "We're all doing different things," he says. "The issues that motivated activism have expanded far beyond what they were in the sixties."

Considering the exploding number of non-profit interest groups, it is easy to see what he means. The issues have proliferated — and while causes such as animal testing and recycling are serious, they are not likely to inspire mass movements.

What they have inspired, if nothing else, is a frustration, created in part, by the lack of nothing to protest. Rob Nelson, the 29-year-old co-founder of Lead...or Leave, a political watchdog group, is banking on that frustration. Nelson believes issues like the federal deficit will pull young adults of *Generation X* together. "I think that we will be the generation that goes to bat and makes our country a better place for the people after us," he says.

In terms of voter turnout, that seems to be happening. The Roper Organization reports that 75 percent of college students voted in the '92 election, compared to 43 percent of voters 18 to 24, according to *Rock the Vote*.

"... do you really think we enjoy hearing about your brand new million-dollar home when we can barely afford to eat... A home you won in a genetic lottery, I might add, sheerly by dint of your having been born at the right time in history. You'd last about ten minutes if you were my age these days...."

Try to tell baby busters that they're better off than their parents. Go ahead and show them the VCRs and stereos most cart off to college. But be prepared to hear about an ailing planet, a flailing economy and a volatile world, where Xers wait for their turn to take a stab at polishing off their bent, broken and tarnished silver spoons.

"It's very sobering," says Perkins, who dropped out of Virginia Tech for two years to earn tuition money. "It's harder to get a house; it's harder to get a job; it's harder to earn the same level of money as our parents."

Karen Ritchie, senior vice president at McCann-Erickson Worldwide, an ad agency in Detroit, says an attitude like Perkins' is not the exception among busters — it's the rule. Last fall, Ritchie warned a convention of magazine editors and publishers to stop ignoring the younger generation. "The system hasn't been very good to them so far."

Today's 18 to 29 crowd is largely the victim of bad times. Faced with issues of AIDS, drug addiction and date rape, Xers have been reluctant to "party" as their parents did. "[Our parents] were worried about getting VD. We worry about AIDS," Perkins says. "They talked about smoking pot; for us it's crack. The stakes have been upped."

This is a generation ushered in on "a whole series of unlucky events," Ritchie says. "This was a generation that was born in the height of birth control and abortion-on-demand."

When they grew up, the institution of the family was faltering as divorce rates rose. Confidence in American government had fallen in the wake of Watergate. Now as Xers graduate from school and enter the job market, they confront a sour economy that isn't

making room for their ideas and talents. "You hear the jokes about college people working at McDonald's," Perkins says. "Well, I have many friends doing that. It's no joke. Nowadays a bachelor's degree does not guarantee the middle class life, liberty and pursuit of happiness, the American dream."

"... I envy their upbringings that were so clean, so free of futurelessness. And I want to throttle them for blithely handing over the world to us like so much skid-marked underwear."

For many busters, it's just hard to grab on to a future when it's slicked with so much B.S. "The generations in power have left us with a very uncertain future," Lead...or Leave's Nelson says. "They've in some ways allowed the American Dream to come to an end."

Not that anyone ever said reaching the American Dream would be easy. It's just that the choices to get it have become so complex.



These UCLA students belong to a generation of 46 million voices — too many to be ignored.

"Option paralysis: The tendency, when given unlimited choices, to make none."

For Gillen and his classmates at the U. of Michigan, nothing is simple anymore. Even ordering pizza means more than agonizing over toppings. The owner of Domino's Pizza, popular with many college students, is a staunch supporter of anti-abortion groups, a fact many students consider when they pick up their phones to order. Gillen says.

Even simple consumerism has become complex, he says. "The more you know and the more realizations you have, the harder life gets. You have to question everything. It creates an air of despair."

This sort of attitude worries Ritchie. "That's the one area where the Boomers seem to have it all over Xers," she says. "They knew how to have fun."

"2 + 2 = 5-ism: Caving in to a marketing strategy aimed at oneself after holding out...."

It's not so much that busters are defining themselves by challenging the rules, questioning authority. But what they are starting to question is the way in which producers — of consumer goods, news and politics — are reaching them.

"It seems like right now they've tried to take what used to be alternative and market it," Gillen says of music. "Once you find something interesting, big old fat guys, balding, with cigars, take it away from you."

Such distrust makes it difficult for advertisers, the media and politicians to adapt to the younger generation. Nevertheless, they are giving it the good old college try.

"Now that your generation is spending as much as it is, people are suddenly finding their generation," says Bob Guccione, Jr., editor and publisher of *Spin*, a music magazine.

If the pop culture is beginning to notice *Generation X*, the same goes for politics. Xers were once the poster children for voter apathy. That too has changed. President Clinton used MTV's "Choose or Lose" ques-

tion-and-answer forum, and it paid off. "[Politicians] realize the new generation is coming," Perkins says.

So are Xers ready to take the lead? "Because they're so practical and pragmatic, they're taking pretty good care of themselves," Ritchie says. "They'll probably be OK."

In the meantime, though, the twentysomething generation may be better off not listening to the researchers, those who are telling it what it likes, what it believes, what it wants.

"I think if you watch too much CNN — like my mom's a CNN junkie and she phones me up every time something historical happens, which is what, like once a day? — if you take in too much from this information dense society, things do get pretty Chicken Little. You do think the sky is falling down and it's just not that way. I don't want to sound like a Miss America contestant, but you know the future is not that horrible," Coupland says.

The voices of this generation could have told him that.

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