Afterword

The Challenge of Generational Research

We are social scientists, demographers, actually. We specialize in understanding trends with respect to age groups situated in a particular time context. Some may call us generational researchers, but that has been a challenging identity for us given that there is inconsistency in the quality of generational research available, and frankly, the whole study of generations has received a questionable reputation because of it. We know that you’re reading this book to learn more about Generation Z. So, we want to be sure to point out factors to consider when seeking legitimate information about this generation. Because of our commitment to quality research and accurate writing, we took all of these factors very seriously, offering a book that is more than just trendy but that provides rigorous, robust, and thoughtful reporting from a large number of studies, including our own. While we ground our work in credible research, we share our findings in a way that is interesting and easy to read, integrating examples, stories, and humor through a narrative writing style.

Self-Proclaimed Expertise

Some individuals and firms appear to have laid claim to being experts in Generation Z but have never actually conducted research. Simply putting together a summary of other people’s work does not make one a researcher. As scholars who have tirelessly designed instruments, engaged in data collection, analyzed findings, and coded thousands and thousands of responses, we are intimately familiar with this generation in ways that someone who only consolidated findings from other people’s research is not. When reading articles, blogs, and books and/or hearing a speaker on Generation Z, it is important to consider their experience in researching Generation Z. We are surprised to find so many people who are presenting on other people’s research findings, even our own, and calling themselves experts. Although we have been researching this generation for years, we tread lightly with the term, expert, to even describe ourselves.

Tacking on Generation Z to Millennial Research

Some generational researchers who have dedicated their lives to studying Millennials appear to have “tacked on” Generation Z to their repertoire. Some have moved toward studying this next generation and have engaged in research that helps widen their portfolio. However, when looking more closely at their websites, speaking engagements, and past publications, some of these individuals are nearly entirely focused on Millennials. They may post a blog or one report on their site to justify their expertise in understanding Generation Z, but their main area of content knowledge is around Millennials. Many are dipping their toes in this Generation Z water in what looks like for many, a trendy add-on and not an intentional expansion of research and services, making it hard for those Millennial researchers who truly have done work in studying Generation Z seem legitimate.

And in reading some reports from these firms and individuals specializing in Millennials, we have found that there is “clumping” happening in which the claim is that both generations are doing this or that. Although it may be true that there are similarities in research findings between
Millennials and those in Generation Z, it is hard to believe, especially given what we know about Generation Z, that these two generations are lock step in their experiences and views. We have found that it is important to look deeper into research firms and individuals who study both Millennials and Generation Z. There are some great people studying and writing about both generations. But, we have learned to be wary of those who have a heavily disproportionate lean toward Millennial studies and writing and seem to have simply given a nod to Generation Z.

**Who Gets to Be the Voice?**

As much as we can appreciate the eager members of Generation Z who have “owned” this identity and are writing and speaking on their perspectives and experiences, it is misleading to use one person’s own lens or story to represent an entire generation, a diverse one at that. One story by one person is not comprehensive data. You must have many stories before they can become representative data of the larger group.

In our book, we used the stories from thousands of those in Generation Z. First, by using their words as qualitative data, we were able to interpret themes among their responses. The stories were the data. Second, we used the themes from both our qualitative and quantitative findings, as well as findings from other research to create macro themes, or themes that appear to hold true across multiple studies. This helped us ensure that our themes were sound and not just representative of an obscure finding from one study. Once we uncovered the macro-themes, we then selected quotes from our study participants to highlight in the book to bring these themes to life.

**A Numbers Issue**

It is challenging to study a population that represents millions of people with a study that only surveys 100 of them. Getting a nationally representative sample to reflect a generation of this magnitude is tough. We were fortunate to have access to a dataset of more than 150,000 first-year Generation Z college students during the fall of 2014. That dataset was huge and allowed us to make some pretty strong conclusions. But, there are few datasets that have as large of a number of participants. Even large-scale studies when disaggregated to this age group don’t provide a high enough number specific to Generation Z to be conclusive on their own. For example, a study of 1000 people, when only looking at the narrow age range of Generation Z, may only yield 52 participants.

Because this generation is so large and getting a massive dataset of this population is like finding a needle in a haystack, the next best approach is to find themes among a variety of smaller studies. Usually, the more studies that say the same thing, the stronger the theme is. So, we have to be a little cautious when we see a study that makes all sorts of assumptions based on a tiny segment of the population (which can also be quite homogenous depending on how they gathered data). The findings of that study when looked at with other studies can be informative, but on their own, they likely lack generalizability.
Data Collection

It is also interesting that very few books and reports of generational research actually include how the data was gathered. For those that do include information, it is often limited and usually only focuses on the overall number of participants and maybe the date range the data was collected. Some might even go so far as to say the how the data was collected such as through phone polling or surveying. But, where did these contacts who were called or surveyed come from? What are the demographics of the participants? The answer is that we don’t usually know. Many reports simply leave out a detailed explanation of the methodology, making it hard to determine if the research is even valid.

In our first book, we dedicated a chapter to our data collection methods for our specific study and provided an overview of other studies that were referenced in the book. We had a lot of critical feedback about the details of our study, which ironically was far more robust than most other generational studies. We welcome the feedback and are the first to admit the limitations in our studies. It is unfortunate, though, that putting in a description of the study draws more criticism than leaving it out entirely. This creates an unlevel playing field in generational research where those who are transparent about their research methods are critiqued (as we all should be), and those who provide little to no information are often not questioned, especially if the findings are presented in a beautifully designed report. In the world of research, not reporting data collection methods perpetuates the notion of generational research as not being credible. But, for everyone else, including information about research methods doesn’t seem to matter. In writing this book, however, we found it was important to only consider those studies in which we had an understanding of the methodology to ensure accurate reporting.

Assumptions

Given there is not a lot of original data on Generation Z, at least not nearly as much as Millennials, we have come across situations where studies not separated out by the Generation Z age range are included in the claims made about Generation Z. For example, using data on voter turnout for 18 to 29 year olds (which is the common way many pollsters cluster the data) to make claims about 18 to 22 year-old Gen Zers is simply inaccurate. Just because data might not be available in the age range needed doesn’t support the notion of speculating using larger non-disaggregated datasets.

In finding supporting studies to include in our first book, we came across the 2014 findings of the CIRP Freshman Survey conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute. Although one could assume that surveying first-year college students would result in a dataset of only 17 and 18 year-olds, not all first-year college students are traditional age students. So, we contacted the Higher Education Research Institute and got a report disaggregated to only those in the Generation Z age range. This still yielded more than 150,000 respondents. But, we could be assured they were all disaggregated specifically to Generation Z. We repeated this process with the 2017 College Senior Survey, requesting a dataset of only those born 1995 and after. And while it is ideal to include data specific to the Generation Z age range, it isn’t always possible. Thus, we have included data from those outside of the birth years of Generation Z to demonstrate rising trends in responses of the youngest demographic surveyed for particular studies. We do,
however, clearly label any instances in which the data we draw from a population not solely specific to Generation Z to ensure clarity and transparency.

**Statistical Significance**

Another important element to consider in generational research, especially as most is quantitative, is that of statistical significance. What this means is that when two numbers look different from each other (say a reported statistic of Millennials and a reported statistic of those in Generation Z), they are not always statistically different. Analysis must be done to determine if the reported difference is really a difference or just a slight nuance. If a researcher doesn’t analyze for this, there could be misleading claims put forth, like “this group does this more than this group.” To ensure accuracy in interpretation, it is important to seek out and read the actual statistical findings. Because those are often not readily available in the books or reports drafted about Generation Z, it is entirely acceptable to contact the author or researcher for a detailed explanation about how the data was derived. We are both happy to provide additional information (beyond what is described in this book and on our website) about how our data was collected and analyzed.

**Predictions**

Generation Z covers a wide time range (birth years of 1995 through 2010). And although some characteristics might span the entire generation, it is highly unlikely that we can make serious future predictions, especially about social issues, by asking the youngest of this generation for their perspectives. During the 2016 election, we read reports that pointed to this generation leaning a certain way in terms of who they would have voted for if they were old enough to vote. This is likely okay if 16 and 17 year-olds were surveyed, as they are situated in the context of voting in the near future. However, asking 7 year-olds who simply repeat what they hear their parents talk about or overhear on the news is not scientifically sound, nor predictive of what will happen in 11 years when they are able to vote. We must be very careful in making sure that generational research is informative and not predictive. We can assert that there are things to be expected given the track record of their behavior, however, to say that what the youngest, most impressionable think today will hold true in a decade, is questionable at best.

**Filling the Gaps with Qualitative Research**

Nearly all research on Generation Z to date has been quantitative. This means that survey respondents or interviewees are asked to select from a list of pre-set responses. Quantitative data is very telling and provides a way to consistently report on findings because the data fits into categorical representations, answering questions of how many, to what extent, and how frequently, while providing us demographic descriptors of the research participants. In addition to quantitative data, though, it is important to collect qualitative data, which can fill in missing pieces and answer the questions of how and why.

In our original study, we found that our Generation Z study participants identified as being intrapersonal learners. That is an interesting and important finding. But, it wasn’t until looking deeper into the qualitative data that we understood why. Our first instinct was to think that they
were burned out from too much group work in high school or didn’t like working in groups, like many of us. Although these came up in the data, the most prominent theme we saw reflected a deeper issue around their identities. These students wanted to learn material first before being asked to share their thoughts with a group. They didn’t want to be wrong, as being wrong would contribute to a negative reflection of their larger identity. This is a generation used to being judged in every arena of their lives and didn’t want their peers to judge their intellect in class. To us, that reasoning hits on something much more complex than “they don’t like working in groups” and provides insight we would not have been able to get without the qualitative data.

Misinterpretation of Original Data

We have found that online news reports and even blogs are great places to find data on Generation Z. We don’t use the opinions of the authors or even the numbers presented outright but use the hyperlinks in their stories to find original reports. Interestingly, we will often come across a gem of a statistic in a news story only to find that when we access the original report, the data written in the news story was misinterpreted. In fact, we have come across this with our own data. We have found stories we have no knowledge of (other than coming across them online) that discuss our research findings but referring to our data as the Wright State University dataset (“In a survey of more than 1000 Wright State University students”). Corey works at Wright State University, but the dataset is not from or has anything formally to do with Wright State University. It is a national dataset of students across the U.S. We believe that when misreporting does occur that it is likely not intentional in any way. As a secondary author, it is tricky to accurately report on research that was conducted by someone else. Although we are confident that we accurately reported findings from other studies in this book, we encourage you to read the original reports. We have included overviews of each major study used in this book in the table below and full citations in an endnotes section for every statistic, quote, and research finding.