

# Close up and personal with the Generation Z

 By [Thabang Leshilo](#)

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In South Africa, our Generation Z falls into another category, that which we call 'born frees' to highlight the fact that they were born after the country attained democracy in 1994...

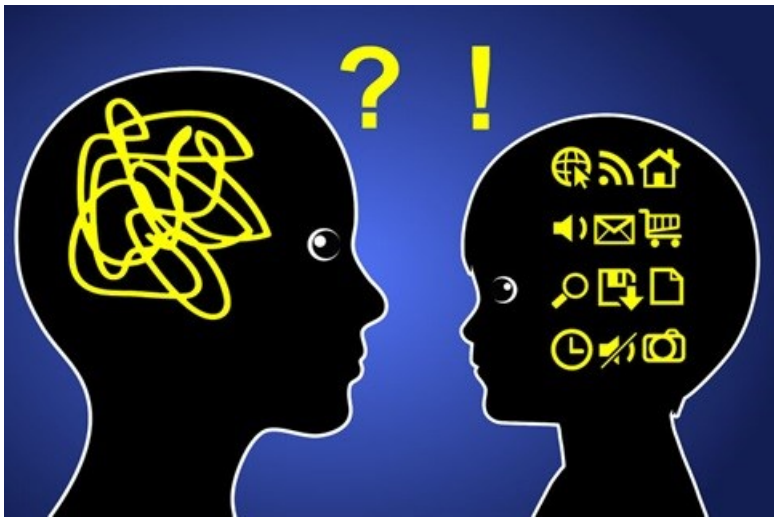
This generation, the eldest of whom will celebrate their 21st birthdays this year, should be on every marketer's mind as they consider how to drive their brands' future growth.

## What's happening in their world?

While the preceding generation, the Millennials, were the catalyst for many of the consumer and work shifts we've seen to date, the guys and girls of Generation Z have been described as being a 'bit edgier' than Millennials. Growing up fast, enabled and empowered by a tech-heavy and digital world, we might start to see them influence the world much sooner than we anticipated.

There is no denying that members of Generation Z have grown up in a time with its own political and economic turmoil, with issues such as unemployment, poor education levels, crime and terror, questionable political leadership, global warming and a recovery from the most recent economic depression shaping the realities of their lives.

And while most of their traits, attitudes and behaviours have yet to be researched and defined, what we can appreciate are the things that are influencing their lives now, and that will shape their mind-sets and behaviours as they come of age in the future.



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Their parents, mostly Gen Xers, have opted to raise them with a less conservative approach to life.

Their communities and schooling environments are far more liberal, diverse and integrated than what any other generation may have experienced before.

The beauty of this generation is that they do not see colour. Unlike their parents and grandparents, when describing their friends, they make no mention of their racial profile and simply refer to them as Mishka or Lesedi. The colour of someone's skin does not plague their lives, as seen by their multi-racial group of friends all from diverse cultural backgrounds, but rather makes them more aware of the similarities than differences between themselves.

Furthermore, with the changing dynamics of families and traditional gender roles, issues of gender inequality may also be less prevalent as they become adults. More than a third of them will be raised by single mothers who are more financially and emotionally independent than the mothers from previous generations, and others will have the presence of more responsible and emotionally involved fathers.

Many will witness parents who share equal loads and responsibilities in raising their families, and more and more will be born to parents of different cultures and race groups, possibly even same sex marriages. Our taboos will simply become their normal.

Equally important is that this group of individuals doesn't know the world without the internet and technology. They've been connected from birth, have had their own cell phones from primary school, and now submit homework on line. They are, in fact, digital natives whose expectations will be set by the immediacy of the digital world and straight-talking brands that can keep up with experiences that talk to their varied and fast changing interests and passions.

## Who are they and what are they all about?

**Informed and empowered** - Unlike the rest of us who relied on our friends (who often gave us poorly informed advice) or on parents and teachers (who tried for some reason to shield us from the truth with their white lies), Gen Zs simply turn to Google to ask why. Be it right or wrong, they have the answer to every single question that is on their minds at their fingertips. Empowered with all this information, they know a lot about a lot of things, allowing them to make decisions confidently.

**Social and global networkers** - Contrary to popular belief, these digitised kids actually know how to socialise better than most of us and they value face-to-face engagement. With exposure to more people from different backgrounds, they are comfortable with having honest conversations with anyone about anything, even if they're twice their age. And thanks to social media, they are accustomed to engaging with friends all over the world, so they are well prepared for a global business environment.

**Confident straight-talkers, opinionated outspoken activists** - Armed with all the information available, these kids will not be afraid to speak their minds, give their point of view and perhaps even school you or give you advice on your personal stuff. Furthermore, having learnt about recycling and solar power at school coupled with exposure to the media, they will be highly aware of the social and environmental issues that impact their world, which will see them actively speak up and choose to be associated only with brands and companies that are making a difference in the world.

**Optimistic and carefree** - Like any youths before them, optimism fuels their enthusiasm for life, and governed by self-belief everything is theirs for the taking. They will further embrace individuality and freedom of expression with much confidence and ease which will see them adopt any tastes, styles and fashions they choose.

**Independent** - Gen Zers seem eager to be cut loose early. They don't sit and wait for their parents to teach them things or tell them how to make decisions; when the time comes, they will want to go out there and discover and explore the world for

themselves. They are simply free to do what they love, without any pressures or family obligations.

**Multifaceted, variety seekers** - Unlike previous generations who have idolised celebrities, prominent professionals or high profile businessmen and built their careers or dreams by trying to follow their exact paths, this generation will not be inspired by a one-dimensional approach to life and success.

Instead they will be inspired by the excitement of exploring different avenues. When they reach tertiary education, they will want to study a BCom Law degree combined with a post-graduate in drama and digital sound engineering, so that they can become business-minded entertainers, simply because of their love for music.

Like true polymaths, they'll combine their different skills, passions and interests seamlessly to achieve their definition of success and, in the process, create careers and professions that the world has never known. One dream is simply not enough. Experiences are their social currency, and they would rather not live than lead a one-dimensional life.

It's all about the freedom of choice This is the generation that will be born into the greatest opportunities. With many being second and even third generation middle class, they will truly have the chance to do so much more with their lives. And, being global citizens with ambitions to see the world starting very early in life, they will only become more aware and more connected to these opportunities.

This generation's greatest privilege - the freedom of choice - could also potentially be their greatest downfall. With endless opportunities in all aspects of their lives be it lifestyle, education, career, social dynamics and brands it will be up to them to take accountability of their decisions in the end.

We can only hope that they live up to their 'edginess' and that their choices will eventually lead them into a far more thrilling, colourful and meaningful existence than any generation has ever seen before.

If you haven't already got a Gen Zer living with you and experienced what they're all about, sit down and have a chat with them. You might be pleasantly surprised.

## ABOUT THABANG LSHILO

Thabang Leshilo is a project manager at strategic marketing consultancy Added Value. As a 'next-generation' marketer with fresh and curious eyes looking into the industry, she has a keen interest for brands that are culturally in tune with and able to integrate and immerse themselves into the everyday realities of the consumer.

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