

GENERATION X

Kirsten Cole

Journalist Kirsten Cole wrote this article for The Observer on the generation who followed the Baby Boomers. The label "Generation X" characterizes a group similar in some ways to the "Beat" generation, who preceded the Boomers. Like the Beats, Xers profess spiritual rootlessness and prefer a transient style of life and career. In particular they define their values against those of the Boomers, as the Beats defined their values against those of their parents, the generation reared during the Depression and the Second World War. Douglas Coupland's book, Generation X: Tales for An Accelerated Culture is the definitive source on this group's values. In the article reprinted here, Cole introduces the concept of Generation X through example and interview.

Do you remember seeing *Star Wars* on the big screen? Was one of your favorite childhood games Atari? Did you spend your teenage years wanting your MTV?

A "yes" answer to one or more of those questions may mean you are one of 44 million people between the ages of 18 and 29 and a member of Generation X.

The generation following the baby boom is slowly creeping into the spotlight. As the boomers age, advertisers, marketers and media have begun to recognize and pay attention to this new group, which has been saddled with such titles as "baby busters," the "bland generation," "13ers," "twentysomethings," "slackers," the "repair generation," "post-boomers," "Xers," and the "shadow generation."

This generation represents a \$125 billion market. But thanks to its one commonality, diversity, everyone—including the media, advertisers and just about everybody else—are having a hard time defining Generation X.

5 Heidi Shields, 25, of Chicago, fits many media definitions of an Xer. She graduated from college in 1991 with a degree in graphic arts.

"When I started college, computer graphic people were in demand," she said. "When I got out of college, the market was completely saturated. There had been cutbacks in the field, so people with 20 years experience were back in the market. It made sense, but I thought, 'it's our turn.'"

So, like an estimated 58 percent of all unmarried singles age 20 to 24, Shields moved back home and began a two-year search for a job in her field.

Also, like many of her contemporaries, she took several jobs, none career-related, just to pay the bills and save a little money.

"I knew it was going to be hard, but I didn't think it would take two years," Shields said. "I searched endlessly for a job in the Peoria area (where she was from). I would have liked to stay in Peoria but I was scared to be too far out of school without any experience."

10 Shields ended up working four jobs, including bartending and painting sweatshirts with her sister, to save up enough money to move to Chicago.

Shields was able to find a job in computer graphics in Chicago. Although she doesn't plan on staying with the company for a long time, she sees it as a stepping stone.

"I want something more challenging. This job is not very creative," Shields said, "but I am definitely getting experience. Ultimately, I would like to do freelance graphics for people."

"I may be living check to check right now, but I am not at the total bottom. I am trying to stay optimistic for sure."

15 Shields falls in the middle of the generation, whereas Tom Sargeant, 28, accountant supervisor for Resource Marketing, which is a division of R & B Productions, falls at the tail end.

Sargeant, who found work almost immediately out of college, had a different outlook on employment than Shields. Although he didn't know for sure if the money he was spending on college would be worth it, he was banking on it.

"I figured it would ultimately pay off. I looked at college as an investment," he said. "My expectations haven't changed that drastically after college. I maintain the attitude the harder you work, the more money you make."

Some people claim baby busters are cynical about boomers. According to an article in *U.S. News and World Report* (Feb. 22, 1993),

busters see boomers as "insufferably self-righteous yuppies who sold out their principles, placed work over family and money over community."

Sargeant, however, said there shouldn't be an "us against them philosophy."

"All we've talked about is baby boomers, so many people, so many years," he said. "Now, another generation wants the spotlight."

20 Twenty-four-year-old Eric Blankenburg agreed with Sargeant that baby boomers are not all to blame.

"Things were not perfect when they were born," he said. "It has progressively gone down hill and unfortunately things will get worse."

"Baby boomers say we are rebels or hooligans. I think we are exactly the opposite. Like people my age, 99 percent vote and honestly care about the future. Society needs to look at us as the future," he added. "They should work with us instead of against us."

Ellen Clore, 24, is not so convinced by people her age.

"Some are and some aren't more aware and active," she said. "I think the majority are apathetic, with a few that are very concerned. They don't watch the news or read the paper."

25 "Aspirations were not as high for the baby boomers. We (busters) have greater expectations, but they are harder to reach because it is more competitive," she added. "Back then, a high school diploma was equivalent to our college degree. Now we need to attend graduate school to get a good job."

Blankenburg, like Shields, discovered a degree doesn't automatically guarantee someone a job.

"I wanted the best job out of college. I thought after I graduated I could have any job I wanted and be making \$35,000 a year," he said. "A week before graduation I said 'great a degree, the key to the world.' After graduation, reality hit me. It's not like that (receiving the dream job) and it still is not two years later."

Blankenburg, who works for Multi-Ad, did end up moving back home with his parents for several months. However, he did find work before they enforced a rent rule. Things have improved, but he is still a ways from the income level of his dreams.

He said he is living a lot check to check, even though living expenses are lower, due to a roommate. However, he blames this on the attitude, "the more you have, the more you spend."

30 "Among friends my age, it's typical to live like this. They are not doctors and lawyers," he said. "It is harder to make money for our generation."

"I know, our parents worked hard and climbed the ladder to be successful. It is time for us to take out ladders and start climbing. It may be longer, but we need to climb it just the same."

Clore, who is currently working at the Peoria Civic Center as a temporary executive assistant, was another Xer who discovered ways of cutting expenses, including living with her parents.

"I used to have a roommate and we split most everything," she said. "I didn't have car payments, so I had lower expenses. I worked in the suburbs of Chicago and took the train to work, which was cheaper."

Clore, who attended graduate school, also experienced a reality check after graduation.

35 "I really did believe the money spent on college would be worth 35 it," she said. "I went to a private school, spent a lot of money and now have a lot of debt. I didn't make nearly as much money as I thought I would, but I will probably step up the ladder with my extra education."

Observing the struggle of peers has created somewhat of a pessimistic attitude at the lower end of Xers. Steve Szymke, 18, expects there is going to be a struggle after graduating from Bradley University.

"I see my friends that don't have jobs," said Szymke, who dreams of directing films one day. "In the movie industry, it's a real struggle to get above water. But, I have a definite advantage over those who don't have a degree. A person also needs the extra edge of graduate school."

"I am sure there will be a rude awakening for a lot of us, but now we sit around at Lums and think we know everything. We pretend we are solving the world's problems."

Contrary to Clore's concern about the involvement of Xers, Szymke votes and also reads, not fluffy material, but *Time*. He does agree that attitudes have changed.

40 "In the '60s kids cared about political things. Now, kids are into 40 activism and have stances on abortion, environmental issues and religion," he said. "Our political involvement is nowhere near the '60s involvement."

Szymke is also aware that money isn't a bumper crop.

"My first semester of college I would spend a dollar here and another one there," he said. "I figured out quickly that it adds up. And although my dad is helping quite a bit with college, I still have to pay for my graduate work."

Reportedly, three quarters of college professors say students are very unprepared in basic skills. Szymke, a sophomore at Bradley University, doesn't dispute that fact.

"I was lucky when I went to Dunlap, but there were some students from California at Bradley who studied in public schools," he said. "They are really bad and don't know how to study. They also don't know how to take tests."

45 Though there are common links in attitude, like the group's bleak 45 economic and financial future, the common denominator for the group, as Sargeant said, is diversity. That may explain the term "Generation X."

"There is no given for 'X.' It's a variable. It's not an acronym," he said. "You can't put the same values in place of the variable for everyone."

"I think we are lost," Szymke said. "There are so many variables and things are so uncertain. Maybe X means exploration."

"I think we associate with material things rather than an economic situation. We were asked to categorize Generation X in an art class. They asked people if they remembered seeing *Star Wars* on the big screen," he added. "If you said yes, they said, 'Well, then you're a member of Generation X.' Look at MTV, too, it's the channel for 18-27 year olds."

And if Generation X is recognized as the Atari and MTV generation, then what's in store for the next generation?

50 "We'll probably have the Nintendo generation next." Szymke 50 said, laughing.