Editorial

Screenagers or "Screamagers"? Current Perspectives on Generation Alpha

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Abstract

People love to talk about generations, especially when the feeling is that the world is rapidly changing. Terms such as millennials or Generation Z are already used worldwide, even if the sociological origins of the generation theory are less known by the general public. Although Generation Z was defined as digital natives, there are voices trying to suggest that a new digital native generation is here, and its name is Generation Alpha or screenagers. We are not sure if there is a clear border between these digital native generations, although there are some recent findings identifying them as more curious, creative, or self-determined than their predecessors. The technology dependence also brings relational and emotional issues, and we used the term of "screamagers" to describe their ill-tempered behaviors. However, there is a risk of devolving into stereotyping, when the scientific evidence on this topic, for now, seems to be scarce. Perhaps it is too early to speak about a new generation and more scientific studies are needed to increase our understanding of the evolution of people born after 2010.

Keywords: Generation Alpha; technology dependence; emotional life; screenagers.

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Apparently, the concept of "generation" has its origins in the field of sociology. Karl Mannheim, a German sociologist with a certain influence in the first half of the 20th century, is credited to be a pioneer in this regard (Pilcher, 1994), as he offered a systematic approach of generations and he integrated it into a larger sociological theory of knowledge. In a chapter published in 1928, Mannheim emphasized the importance of understanding the generations, as they reflect the rapid social changes that take place in short periods of time (Mannheim, 1928/1952). However, as the German sociologist observed, the unity of a generation shouldn't be confused with the social connections that lead to the formation of a concrete group, as the ties between the members of a generation are more abstract. For an easier understanding, he compared the generations with the position of an individual in the structure of a society (e.g., entrepreneur), may it be acknowledged or not. Five characteristics were considered as critical to describe a generation from a sociological point of view (p. 292):

(1) Each generation is followed by another generation, as new individuals are born, participate to the social life, forget what is useless and create new ideas;

(2) Previous members of a generation are continuously disappearing, taking with them a part of the past practices and knowledge;

(3) The members of a generation inhabit a limited time and social interval in history (i.e., they are born not only in similar times, but also in similar social environments, making it impossible to compare the generations of adult Romanian peasants in the early 1900's with the adult Viennese generation from the same period);

(4) the cultural heritage must be transmitted to future generations, as a set of practices, values, social norms etc., that are considered important enough to be memorized and learned by the new generation;

(5) the transition from one generation to another is a smooth process, as the oldest from the previous generation doesn't meet directly the youngest from the new generation.

The transition is ensured by members that are both familiar with the traditions of the old generation and are willing to understand up to a point the changes brought by the new generation.

According to Strauss and Howe (1991), a generation consists of people born every ~20 years (similar opinions can be found in literature, e.g., Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005), with a lifespan of ~80-90 years. During this period, several generational turnings are expected to appear. The High turning is the first in the life of a generation, with an established general consensus about the direction of a society, with strong institutions, few rebellion acts and a strong feeling of conformism. The second turning was entitled The Awakening, when the feelings of autonomy are rising, people are criticizing the social order and they are looking for the new spiritual, authentic self. The Unraveling is the third turning, with a strong development of individualism and lack of trust in traditional institutions. The fourth and final turning is The Crisis, when the old institutional ways are eliminated and replaced with new ones, reflecting a new social order, and offering in the end a new feeling of belonging to a large social group.

Most authors (e.g., Bonchiș, 2021; Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005) identify the following generations, and we offer the approximate time interval for each one:
- The matures, the traditionalists or the builders, born between 1900 and 1946;
- The Baby Boomers, born between 1946 and 1964;
- Generation X, born between1965-1980;
- Generation Y or the *Millennials*, born between 1981 and 1995;
- Generation Z, born between 1996 and 2010.

The new generations

In our modern times, terms such as "Millennial" and "Generation Z" are already used worldwide by people that are not necessarily specialists in the field of psychology. Almost everyone who uses a smartphone and has an account on social media is familiar with these terms, but the growing scientific interest is obvious. For example, searching the Web of

Science database in March 2022 for the keywords "Generation Z" returned 845 results for the category "publication titles", with 449 of them (more than half!) being published since 2019. Searching in all categories, we found 85,820 results, with more than 26,000 results since 2019.

Topics such as media dependence (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017), or the relation between gadgets and cognitive processes (Drugaș, 2021; 2022) are clearly connected with recent research in the field of Generation Z, but in the scientific literature we can find very few articles investigating Generation Alpha.

According to the above-mentioned classification, the last members of Generation Z were born around 2010; so, a logical question arises: what is the status, in terms of generations, of those people born after that year? Is there a need to identify and define the characteristics of a new generation? If so, what is its name?

Mark McCrindle, who describes himself as a futurist, demographer, and social commentator, suggested the use of "Generation Alpha" to describe the cohort of people born after 2010, in an era defined by unprecedented technological advancement (McCrindle, 2020). The name was catchy and was quickly adopted, for example, by marketing journals (e.g., *Meet the Mini Millennials: Generation Alpha*, 2021).

Still, a name for this new generation is yet to be established and acknowledged, as the term of "Generation Alpha" is still debatable. It mainly arose from the writings of a single author, McCrindle, who will certainly gather a lot of citations in the following years. Alternate names, such as *screenagers* or *the wired generation* were used by Ziatdinov and Cilliers (2021), with reference to Gen Alphas exposure to the screens of smart devices.

However, there is a strong resemblance between the members of the Generations Z and Alpha. Since birth, both cohorts experienced a world with internet and smart devices, with trendy apps to have fun, communicate, learn and even work with. Both generations enjoyed unmatched attention and cuddliness from their Gen Y parents.

So, will there be significant changes for Gen Alpha, compared to Gen Z? Can we talk about a new generation, if its oldest members are around 10 years old? Can we draw conclusions about the characteristics of a generation, based on scientific studies of children conducted in the last few years?

Generation Alpha: *The screenagers*

Their development in front of the screens of smart devices and growing up with social media apps, such as Instagram or Snapchat, is definitory for this generation, who will start working later than its predecessors, but will receive more formal education.

For some authors, conducting research on children born after 2010 means automatically that they targeted Generation Alpha (e.g., Putri & Umah, 2020), and they emphasize an important characteristic of its members: "most understand technology" (p. 132). However, the same claim has been previously made by Prensky (2001), but for the Gen Z! Can we speak of a deeper understanding of technology, or perhaps our expectations are too high in this regard? For example, Drugaș (2021) identified in the scientific literature that digital natives are not that "net-savvy" as it is expected. They are rather consumers, and not creators of digital content, and more than three quarters of them are using only the basic functions of digital apps.

It is specific for Gen Alpha that the COVID-19 pandemic infused a boost of using smart devices very early in their life, so technology was integrated in their education earlier than for Gen Z. But are these children really prepared for the challenges of the online life?

In their virtual world, the Gen Alphas have easy access to interlinked information of all kind, but the reliability of online information is questionable. Their speed of browsing, their need for short answers and immediate feed-back, their preference for multitasking behavior, all these are obstacles in the development of critical thinking, which takes time, attention, or interest for details (Bonchiș, 2022).

Qualitative research showed that Gen Alphas are more curious, creative and self-determined, compared to Gen Z (Apaydin & Kaya, 2020). The same findings of cognitive flexibility and dynamism were found earlier by dos Reis (2018), who emphasized that Gen Alphas future jobs will be technologized and characterized by decision-making autonomy. According to Ziatdinov and Cilliers (2021), Generation Alpha will be an entrepreneurial generation, and it is expected that one of two will obtain a university degree. They will probably build a career in new domains such as cyber-security or other digital-connected jobs, and perhaps their adapting capabilities will allow them to handle several jobs at once. This is a very optimistic view, but we wonder who will take care of the lesser jobs in 50 years. After all, we must admit that not all around us can be replaced by devices driven by artificial intelligence… And yes, we agree that technology is expected to play an increasing role in our lives, but what happens when the electric power is out and we need manual replacements?

Generation Alpha: "*The screamagers*"

"With great power comes great responsibility", it is said in some movies in the Marvel universe. For Gen Alphas, with great technology dependence comes great relational problems. Their communication skills could be lower, so *GITMOE* ("Give It to Me, or Else") could be a good description for their egocentric behaviors.

Characteristics such as the need for recognition, impulsivity, or risk-taking behavior, will have to be in the attention of parents, who will be tasked with the healthy integration of technology in the everyday life of Gen Alphas (Jha, 2020). Bonchiș (2022) describes Gen Alphas as creative and curious, but also notes that they are more ill-tempered, impatient and self-centered, compared to Gen Z. According to Selvi et al. (2022, p. 273), the Gen Alphas are missing some critical qualities, such as "loyalty, thoughtfulness, compassion, open-mindedness, and responsibility".

The recommendations for the parents and teachers of Gen Alphas target the development of critical thinking, communication and collaborating skills, so non-traditional teaching methods (including online education) will certainly be required, but perhaps not all teachers are prepared for these challenges (Drugaș, 2020).

Knowing that there is a strong correlation between the socio-economic status of parents and the emotional intelligence of their children (.662, according to Chitra, 2020), we should remember that the parents of Gen Alphas are late Millennials or members of the Generation Z, who are willing to spend more time with their children (statistically speaking) and get more involved in their educational and personal life (Drugaș, 2021).

Also, these modern parents will expose their children to personal chosen toys, foods, or personal care products that often have to meet best quality and safety characteristics (*Meet the Mini Millennials: Generation Alpha,* 2021). Could the Gen Alphas become overindulged? Yes, perhaps. For example, Carter (2016) described how 4 days before Christmas an iPad Case, marketed to gen Alpha, was "the most wished for" tablet accessory.

Yes, *screenagers* is an appealing term, considering the critical role of technology in the life of nowadays children, but when we take into consideration their emotional and relational life, maybe *screamagers* will come to our minds.

Conclusions. Is there a need to describe a new generation?

Most of the previous reported characteristics for the Generation Alpha appear in marketing journals, McCrindle's website (e.g., https://mccrindle.com.au/insights/blog/the-generations-defined/), personal blogs, glossy journals or popular science magazines.

Unfortunately, it seems that there is a gap in the scientific literature on the characteristics of Generation Alpha, and more ink is spilled on promoting its "catchy, but empty name" (Nagy & Kölcsey, 2017, p. 112), and the scientific community agrees that "little is known and littler is wrote on this topic, for now" (Bonchiș, 2021).

Nagy and Kölcsey (2017) refuse to accept the birth of a new generation as a real and needed phenomenon; rather, they are willing to accept a Gen Z 2.0, whose members are just continuing the digital trends of Gen Z. The cited authors argue that, except for a few marketing interests, we know virtually nothing about the attributes of Gen Alpha and trying to impose a new name is nothing but a sign of vanity.

So, these efforts could seem a bit premature, because when we describe a generation, we should take into consideration the way its members interact with culture or if they are the initiators of social movements (Pinsker, 2020).

Other authors adopt a lighter approach on this topic. For example, dos Reis (2018) also noted that there is a lack of knowledge of parents and teachers on the characteristics of Gen Alphas, and we agree that more scientific studies are needed to increase our understanding of the evolution of people born after 2010.

In our opinion, it is premature to speak about a new generation, as their contribution to social life, for now, is limited, and the full cycle described by Strauss and Howe (1991) didn't even reach its middle for the parents, the Millennials or the Generation Z. Maybe the massive technological exposure and its consequences, common to Gen Z and Gen Alpha, will be a critical characteristic for a cohort with larger birth intervals than before. We will wait and see if the ~20 years interval (around 2030) will be established as a new landmark, clearly identifying Generation Alpha, or if 2030 will be in fact the end of a 2.0 Generation Z.

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