

Generation Zexual

How Gen Z is reshaping society's understanding of gender identity and sexual orientation

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Abstract

Brands and advertising professionals have myriad opportunities to cater to Gen Z's desire for individual recognition, especially through the lens of diversity and inclusion. Although this concept resonates best in June to correspond with Pride month, advertisers should expect this trend to endure beyond the month of June and for years to come with Generation Z.

This June commemorates the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall Riots of 1969, which are credited with leading to the modern-day gay rights movement in the United States. Each year, numerous cities across the nation host Pride celebrations, celebrating the acceptance and inclusion of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations. Brands and advertisers also participate in the month's activities, adding rainbow colors to their visual identities and showcasing diverse individuals and relationships in their creative executions.

More members of Generation Z, individuals born after 1997, are reaching the age of majority and are increasingly stealing the spotlight from Millennials. Generation Z represents a growing market for advertisers. They are markedly different from their predecessors, especially in their approaches to life. Whereas Millennials value experiences, Gen Zs value self-expression. It is through this perspective that Gen Z emphasizes its acceptance of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations.

History of Pride Month

The 1960s, and preceding decades, were not kind to LGBT individuals. In order to avoid the harsh treatment from city officials and law enforcement, LGBT individuals would flock to gay bars for refuge. On June 28, 1969, New York City Police raided one such establishment – the Stonewall Inn, a gay club in Manhattan. Angered by constant police brutality and discrimination, patrons and locals fought back. Protests continued for an additional five days.

Although the Stonewall Riots did not start the gay rights movement, they are credited with galvanizing LGBT political activism and leading to numerous, still-standing gay rights organizations. This June marks the 50th anniversary of the uprising, which is celebrated in Pride celebrations across the United States.¹

Talk of sexual identification and orientation has increasingly seeped into mainstream American culture, with a significant uptick following the Supreme Court legalization of same-sex marriage in all 50 states in June 2015.

You Do You is the New YOLO

In the realm of marketing and advertising, there has been an abundance of talk about the Millennials generation. Millennials are classified as individuals born between 1981 and 1996. But the latest golden nugget is Generation Z (Gen Z), individuals born 1997 to present.

Millennials have a defining phrase, almost like a motto. *YOLO. You only live once.* This acronym is pervasive across the Millennial generation. It highlights their desire for experiences. It means they seek to live in the present, the right now. And, it's the reason most brands approach Millennials by touting the experience of a lifetime.

Notable role models among Millennials include the Kardashians, Justin Bieber, and Lady Gaga. The first two influencers highlight Millennials' gravitation toward media and entertainment figures who broadcast and share every aspect of their lives. It hasn't been until much recently that Bieber has started to pull back on how much he shares. Millennials' interest in Lady Gaga pairs with their regard for creating an experience, but also using a platform to send a message.²

Gen Zs have a different take on life. Their approach is simple: *you do you*. It implies their desire to be free not only to be who they are but to express themselves, and showcase what makes them different, without consequences. And, this sense of individualistic identity and expression influences how this generation perceives gender and sexuality.

Some of Generation Z's top role models exhibit these qualities. For example, James Charles is a 19-year-old makeup artist on YouTube. He has amassed over one billion impressions in the past year. James is a biological male and doesn't necessarily follow gender norms. He is the first male ever to appear on the front page of *CoverGirl Magazine*.³

Another Gen Z role model is 17-year-old rising pop star Billie Eilish. Eilish is rewriting the rules of stardom, from the genre and content of her music to the way she dresses and her overall demeanor. In an interview with *New Musical Express*, Eilish cites the double standards women

experience in the music industry. If she were a guy wearing baggy clothes, nobody would care. However, because she is a woman, people believe they have a right to insult her life and appearance. Despite the daily onslaught of negative commentary, she doesn't let it deter her from being herself and from using her platform to inspire change.⁴

The Battle of the Sexes is Bigger than Before

Sexual identification and sexual orientation are often confused for one another and used interchangeably. As such, it's important to grasp what each concept means, how they differ, and how they ladder up to the overarching topic of gender and sexuality.

Sexual or gender identity – The way people perceive themselves and what they call themselves. Gender identity may or may not correspond with one's birth sex or gender.

Sexual or gender expression – External appearance of one's gender identity, usually expressed through behavior, clothing, haircut or voice, and which may or may not conform to socially defined behaviors and characteristics typically associated with being either masculine or feminine.⁵

The most common and widely accepted concept of gender is known as gender binary. This refers to the clear distinction between male and female, often pitting them against one another as complete opposites. Binary gender is largely a fabrication of Western culture. It permeates nearly every aspect of society, and can be found in language, customs/traditions, religion, arts/literature, government, and economic systems.⁶

Generation Z goes against this deeply rooted understanding of gender. In fact, precisely half of Gen Z members believe that society is not accepting enough of individuals who identify as neither men nor women. Additionally, 6 in 10 believe official forms and surveys should offer additional gender options aside from just male and female.⁷

But, it's tough to say just how many and which genders are appropriate and notable to include on forms and choices. Below is a sample of a few gender identity terms and definitions that have risen to mainstream knowledge in the past decade:



Cisgender: Someone's sex assigned at birth and their gender identity match. Often abbreviated to *cis*.



Gender Fluid: Someone who does not subscribe to a fixed gender identity and/or is a mix of the traditional genders of male and female.



Transgender: Describes an individual who is transitioning or has transitioned from one gender to another. Anyone whose sex assigned at birth does not match their gender identity.



Bigender: Sense of personal identity encompasses two genders (not limited to male and female).



Gender-queer: Denoting or relating to a person who does not subscribe to conventional gender distinctions but identifies with neither, both, or a combination of male and female genders.



Gender nonconforming: Whose behavior or appearance does not conform to prevailing cultural and social expectations about what is appropriate to their gender (i.e. gender binary).⁸

Additionally, over a third of Generation Z members know someone who uses a gender-neutral pronoun. *They* and *them* are the most commonly used gender-neutral pronouns.⁹ Other examples include *zie* and *zir*.¹⁰

<i>Instead of...</i>	<i>you may use...</i>	<i>which is pronounced...</i>
he/she	sie zie	“see” “zie”
him/her	hir zir	“here” like “sir” with a “z”
his/hers	hirs zirs	“here’s” like “sirs” with a “z”
himself/herself	hirsself zirsself	“here-self” Like “sir-self” with a “z”

They are a writer and wrote that book theirsself. Those ideas are theirs.

Zie is a writer and wrote that book zirsself. Those ideas are zirs.

In languages that include grammatical gender, using gender-neutral wording becomes challenging. For instance, Spanish uses *elle* and *elles*, replacing the masculine *-o* and feminine *-a* endings with *-e* to denote neutrality. However, this process of replacing the endings occurs within each word that denotes gender.¹¹

Elle es une escritore y escribió ese libro elle mismo. Esas ideas son suyas.

Setting the Record [Not] Straight

In conjunction with sexual identity is sexual orientation, or the enduring emotional, romantic, or sexual attraction to other people.¹²

One in three Gen Zers do not identify as heterosexual, or straight. This is the highest reported statistic of this kind out of all the generations. For instance, a mere one in ten Baby Boomers identify as non-heterosexual.¹³

A recent study from dating app Tinder found that one in five LGBTQ+ people, across all demographics, are coming out online first. Among Gen Z respondents who participated in the survey, 75% identified that they came out via an online platform prior to telling their family and friends. Social media gives individuals an opportunity not only to share their story and message to the masses, but also to choose how and with whom they share it.¹⁴

Unsurprisingly, tolerance of LGBT individuals and same-sex marriages is higher among younger generations. According to a May 2019 Pew Research report, 73% of US Gen Zs favor same-sex marriage. Gen X sit at 58%, while a little more than half of Baby Boomers are in favor at 51%.¹⁵

Like gender, there are many types of sexual orientations. Below are a few types of sexualities with their corresponding pride flags.



Homosexual: Attracted to the same sex.



Bisexual: Attracted to people who correspond to their gender identity and another gender identity.



Asexual: Having little or no interest in sexual relationships. Often referred to as “Aces.”



Demisexual: People who have some sexual attraction, but after forming a strong emotional or romantic connection with a partner.



Graysexual: People who sit on the spectrum between asexual and sexual.



Pansexual: Attracted to people of all gender identities.



Aromantic: Disinterest in romantic relationships.

Key Takeaways for Brands and Advertising Professionals

Gender identity and sexual diversity are hot topics not only for the month of June, but also are enduring characteristics and identifiers of Generation Z. Each day, the amount of information on these topics grows, and our agency feels that other advertising professionals should be aware of the cultural shifts that are happening now, especially with this up-and-coming generation. Below are some of our observations and recommendations.

Client/Brand Management

It is not enough for advertisers to keep diversity and inclusivity in mind throughout product and communications development. Being a supporter and forerunner of diversity and inclusivity is not a one-and-done scenario; rather, it must be an intentional decision that both advertisers and agencies uphold. All parties must be in alignment to push content effectively and efficiently.



Figure 1: A compilation of brands that adapt their logos with the rainbow flag during Pride month. However, they lack a true branding and strategic connection Pride.

Take Pride month for example. It's a time when advertisers across the nation, and the world, adorn rainbow flags and logos to show their support for the LGBT population. But, just for the month of June. And nobody likes just being "valued and appreciated" for a single month of the year. Instead of jumping on the Pride month bandwagon, advertisers must determine if welcoming and supporting LGBT communities is truly a facet of their brand identity. Then, advertisers have an opportunity not only to cater to a billion-dollar market, but also speak volumes and generate waves beyond the monetary value.

Planners

For demographics, gender has been a standard filter, most often executed with a binary lens. However, a majority of Generation Z believe that forms, such as surveys and profiles, should offer more than just male and female options in order to cater to the other types of genders that people ascribe to. In fact, these youth no longer use gender as a means of identifying oneself or others, posing a significant challenge for planners and strategists who use such labels to identify audiences.

Gender ambiguity in advertising is increasingly becoming the new norm among campaigns targeted to Generation Z. Planners must work to develop a personification of the brand that evokes basic human truths and aspirations that anyone, regardless of gender, may believe.¹⁶



Figure 2: Coca-Cola's "Dude or Diva" campaign which encourage users to show their masculine and feminine sides

Coca-Cola and its agency partner, Wunderman, developed the "Dude or Diva" campaign, built on the insight that Gen Z consumers do not like being labeled. The campaign, which worked with 7-Eleven, offered consumers the chance to express both the masculine and feminine aspects of their gender identity through consumer-generated content.

“Gender used to be a way to simplify marketing,” said Jamie Gutfreund, global CMO at Wunderman. “But now there are opportunities to think well beyond the old constructs.”¹⁷

Digital/Social

Digital and social media are the first channel where gender and sexual diversity and inclusivity are to be expected. Adaptations in word choice and imagery should be reflected in these channels first as they are Generation Z members’ zero moment of truth.

The easiest thing digital and social strategists may employ is using gender neutral language. This includes using gender neutral pronouns such as they/them/ze/zir. Otherwise, the best course of action is simply to refer to an individual by name so as to mitigate the potential of falsely identifying someone with an incorrect gender. In addition, strategists should be aware of the expanding list of terms that describe people of various sexual identities and orientations.

Creative

Just as one might instill nuances when catering to audiences of various cultures, the same applies to audiences of varying gender identities and sexual orientations.



Figure 3: Tylenol's "How We Family" campaign shows that sexual identity and orientation aren't the focal points of family. It's how one loves that matters most.



of Lesbians and Gays) to show real have been torn apart and reunited communication and connection.¹⁹

Tylenol’s “How We Family” campaign in 2016 identified that it isn’t about who you love, but about how. The campaign included people of color, diverse gender identities, and various sexual orientations to showcase the changing face of American families. The three-month campaign featured a microsite that housed all of the campaign’s assets, including ten mini-documentaries about how families perceive their dynamics to be the norm.¹⁸

This June, as part of its Pride messaging, Verizon’s “Connected by Pride” campaign leverages the telecom category’s coverage ploys to show how the carrier can connect people emotionally as well as physically. Verizon has partnered with PFLAG (Parents, Families, and Friends

Figure 4: Verizon's Connected by Pride seeks to connect and reconnect all families.

stories of families who through

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