

# **GENERATION ZALPHA**

**Connecting with the Next Micro-Generation  
Maarten Leyts**

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## Foreword by Katryna Dow, Meeco

Every child born in today's digital world will grow up together with their digital twin. The ways in which we enable privacy for their development and security for their digital twin is as important as the rights afforded to protect them in the physical world. If we don't get this right, we risk generations born into digital slavery. *Generation ZAlpha* is a way for us to make sense of the choices we must make to ensure that risk does not become a reality.

From our first serendipitous meeting in Australia I immediately knew Maarten was a unique individual. Introduced by our mutual friend Annalie Killian with the recommendation 'you must meet' has culminated in a wonderful friendship. Maarten has become a mentor, sounding board and collaborator. Maarten immediately inspired me through his ability to share a world of possibility where young people are leading the way. His passion for why it's so important to protect their innocence, identity and future has been the foundation for what is now *Generation ZAlpha*.

Maarten has the empathy and insight to look at children in the way society looks at great inventors and historians. His keen eye, and interest in how kids connect, learn and communicate honours their development and insight in ways that amplify what's emerging in plain sight. Instead of dismissing early childhood development as stages, Maarten is open to how children are reshaping our society and providing a signpost for what's emerging in technology, problem solving, art, music and communication. He's both a scholar and advocate of how kids reshape the narrative for what becomes adopted, rejected and ultimately mainstream.

Kids don't have the filters or biases of adults. They are able to seamlessly move between an imaginary world where dreams are still possible and the real world. The rate of rapid technological change underscores their ideas of what will come into being. However, they are also shouldering a responsibility beyond their years in terms of the world they will inherit. Maarten has the rare quality to see children in the context of their generation; without the expectations of the world we already understand. He looks through the lens of what is unfolding, shaping and challenging society, with the ability to report what is and suspend judgement. That's what makes him a cool hunter. His ability to spot what is emerging on the fringes and then translate it into practical ways to engage with the future,

always from the perspective of what is positive and possible. Regardless of the challenge, Maarten sees the insight as an opportunity to understand how to make things better. He is not one to criticise or pass judgement; his objectivity helps him spot patterns and translate what that means for the services and products of tomorrow.

The first time I heard him say ‘the internet wasn’t made for children’ it underscored why his research, observation and insights are so important. Now almost two decades into the hyper-connected socially connected digital world and the cracks are showing. Cyber bullying, teenage depression and self-harm are on the rise.

Every day children are exposed to content for which they are not emotionally equipped. Technology is changing faster than adults can make sense of it, whilst regulation and education lag behind understanding how to protect and defend against harm.

*Generation ZAlpha* is a playbook for navigating these changes for marketing and communications executives, educators, regulators, advertisers, ethicists, technologists and parents.

This book provides a framework for business, government, classrooms and families to make healthy digital decisions. It provides practical ways to implement change as children move through the stages of their digital development. It’s a tool to help initiate the awkward but important conversations we need to be having now to determine the wellbeing of our children tomorrow.



## Foreword by the author

About four years ago, my then 8-year-old daughter sat across from me during breakfast, her eyes wide with excitement, and made a simple request: ‘Daddy, can we visit Legoland in London?’ The reason? Her ‘friend’ Max had regaled her with tales of Legoland’s wonders, igniting an irresistible desire within her.

Now, you might wonder, who is this Mister Max, and why does his opinion matter so much to an 8-year-old? Mister Max, along with Miss Katy, stars in a popular YouTube family channel vlog that chronicles their everyday life, adventures, and family activities. They tackle challenges with their parents, engage in video gaming, whip up culinary creations, dabble in slime-making, and explore the latest toys. It dawned on me that these family vlogs had become a cultural phenomenon, captivating the minds of young viewers worldwide.

For those uninitiated, the fascination kids have with creating slime or watching others play video games may seem like a mystery. However, this phenomenon isn’t as puzzling as it may appear. In fact, it’s rooted in a fundamental mechanism of social learning: imitation. Children mirror what they see, and in today’s digital age, influencers wield remarkable influence over them. These favourite influencers, primarily active on social media platforms, shape not only kids’ interests but also their thought processes and even their choices in what they watch and purchase.

Family vloggers, in particular, hold immense appeal for kids. They serve as aspirational figures, not just in terms of lifestyle but also as purveyors of friendship and portrayers of joyful family dynamics. The significance of family resonates deeply with children, whether they hail from households with parents together, separated, or struggling to find moments of togetherness amid hectic work and school schedules. As long as families continue to create content, kids will remain engaged, underscoring how marketing has evolved, moving from brands to consumers through the conduit of one consumer to another.

Children are spending an ever-increasing amount of time in front of screens, where advertisements inevitably lurk. Be it on TV, within video games, or through product placements in the YouTube shows they adore, children often struggle to distinguish between content that mirrors their daily lives and advertisements. The lessons gleaned from these shows often reinforce the idea that acquiring more

material possessions leads to greater happiness. Just like adults, young people tend to buy from those they trust.

Dale Kunkel, a respected expert in children and media issues and a professor of communication at the University of Arizona, found that children, up until around the age of eight, lack a full comprehension of advertising's persuasive intent. They may not grasp that marketers seek to sway their opinions or mould their thoughts in a particular direction. Steffi De Jans, a researcher focused on children's advertising literacy at Ghent University in Belgium, has highlighted that children are more susceptible to advertising than adults. This susceptibility often translates into more positive attitudes toward brands and products, sometimes prompting children to nudge their parents toward specific purchases. In a nutshell, Alphas – the generation born after 2010 – are a direct influence on the wallets of their Generation Y parents.

I founded Trendwolves roughly 15 years ago – an agency specialising in trends, futures, marketing, and innovation, with a distinct focus on youth culture (ages 12 and above). Admittedly, I was initially surprised by the extent of influence wielded by influencers within youth culture, especially among kids. The realisation hit closer to home when I saw my own children becoming targets of influence through the YouTube shows they adored. What's more, children of their age often fail to recognise these tactics as advertising. In this respect, traditional television, with its regulated advertising, seems like a safer haven for parents compared to the sometimes less-than-transparent strategies employed on the internet.

At Trendwolves, our mission is to assist governments, brands, and companies in connecting and engaging more effectively with young audiences. The ongoing debate over the compatibility of marketing and ethics is a valid one. However, it's undeniable that choices must be made, and our role is to help consumers make informed choices based on social selling. Our approach revolves around building trust, fostering co-creation, nurturing real communities, creating social value, and harnessing the Power of We. Our marketing principles are founded on transparency, responsibility, fairness, and honesty.

With this book, my goal is to delve into the value of generational thinking as well as the power of micro-generations by shedding light on this latest cohort, Gen ZAlpha, who are made up of the youngest of Gen Z and the eldest of Gen

Alpha. In the following pages, I want to introduce you to the evolving context that shapes and shaped their upbringing, their behaviour online, the watch-outs, kidfluencing, learning, technology, gaming, advertising, privacy and laws, and much more! I aim to share a more positive narrative, firmly believing that youth culture is a potent catalyst for change. So, let's embark on this journey together, as we unravel the intriguing world of Generation ZAlpha and their profound impact on our society.

Generation Alpha entered the world at the same time the Apple iPad made its debut. This isn't just a coincidence; it's the defining backdrop of their existence. More broadly, through this book, I hope to highlight how technology has played a more profound role in shaping generations than any other factor (e.g. historical events). As stated by Dr. Chromey (2019) 'It's through technology that we experience events and times.'<sup>[106]</sup> He explains that while Baby Boomers had Woodstock, Millennials were marked by '9/11 Awareness', Gen Z the climate & economic crisis and Gen Alpha by Covid-19, it's technology that truly shaped us. Across different generations, technology has shaped the way we experience those events more than the events themselves. Moreover, he says that 'without technology, we wouldn't be aware. Without awareness, we wouldn't change. Without change, we wouldn't grow. And without growth, we wouldn't have definitions of generations.'<sup>[107]</sup>

Within these pages, you'll discover a collection of insightful conversations with exceptional children and their parents from around the globe. We've delved into their digital behaviours, concerns, aspirations, the rise of kidpreneurs, and the influence of kidfluencers. This book is a reflection of their generation, offering a glimpse into their inner world for anyone seeking a deeper understanding.

Drawing from these candid discussions and our expertise in generational dynamics, this book offers a unique perspective on Generation ZAlpha, shedding light on their distinctive characteristics and the evolving landscape they inhabit. The book also deep-dives into Gen Z and Gen Alpha separately, what distinguishes them and what unites them. Let's go!



## Chapter 1: Gen ZAlpha and Generational Thinking

‘I want to invent a device for getting shots easily in a less scary way’, says Zy, a 10-year-old girl who is afraid of needles. Another 11-year-old, Fia, is interested in inventing a submarine for collecting waste materials from the oceans. Mylo, 11 years old, says, ‘Climate change is like a snowball which is growing but it is yet small enough to control.’

Generational thinking has always been controversial. How Gen Y, Gen Z and Gen Alpha differ from each other and older generations such as the Baby Boomers or Gen X has been debated for many years. But if you talk to today’s kids you will realise that they have very sharp minds with clever ideas and they are willing to act on them. In spite of social media age restrictions, parental controls and a pandemic, they are rapidly showing signs of great potential.

In this book, we are going to talk about today’s kids i.e. Gen ZAlpha, the children born between the year 2006 to 2012. They are on the cusp of Gen Z and Gen Alpha. This micro-generation is the one that was most affected by the pandemic. ZAlphas are a hybrid generation of children who are the youngest of Generation Z and the oldest of Generation Alpha. They are aged between 10 and 15 and are the children of Millennials. ZAlphas are wise beyond their years. They are using their childhood experience, shaped by the climate crisis, cost of living crisis, the war in Ukraine, the pandemic and economic recession, to think productively. According to a recent study by Barnados (2022), 70% say that cost of living increases have negatively impacted their children over the past 6 months.<sup>[101]</sup> They have inherited traits such as digital nativism and a belief in social good, while rejecting time-wasting and self-deprecation on social media platforms. They are taking control of their finances and demonstrating positive money habits, with a growing interest in the pocket money economy and entrepreneurship, also known as ‘kidpreneurs’. They might not be old enough yet to open their own bank accounts or drive to a store, but they are definitely steering some of their parents’ purchasing

decisions from what they see online in unboxing videos or other content on social media etc. Brands are smartly taking notice of this. They are also highly aware of environmental issues and are becoming our redeemers, with a staggering 45% of global youth saying that climate anxiety affects their daily lives.

## The Pandemic as a Catalyst of Change for Gen ZAlpha

Professor Buller of the London Business School suggests that ZAlphas are set to reshape society in the coming years, with a focus on sustainability, social justice, and inter-generational exchange.<sup>[1]</sup> Data from a survey conducted across 20 countries (Denmark, America, Australia, Switzerland, India, Singapore, UK, UAE and others) shows the effects of the pandemic on the ZAlphas. The kids were asked to describe their feelings about the lockdown during the pandemic. The younger kids said that the inability to go and play outside was the major reason behind their frustration during the lockdown while for Gen Z the cancellation of board examinations and not being able to apply for university admissions was the difficult and frustrating part. However, the hardest part of the lockdown was not being able to see friends and go on trips. Many kids, around 53.6%, said they missed meeting their friends and family the most. About 20.9% said they missed playing sports and doing activities. Not being able to hang out with friends and do things made them feel not so good in their minds. Because of the lockdown, they didn't get to spend time with their friends or important grown-ups like teachers. Now they really want to be around people and have fun. They also saw their parents working from home, which made them think about how to balance work and other things in their lives. This pandemic experience has also impacted Alphas' screen time usage. Today, thanks to social media, that subject frequently goes viral. Whether it's a blog post or newspaper article, video interview or lecture, Gen Alpha are heavily influenced by social media and the Gen Z influencers who dominate their feeds. So events of the lockdown years will have had a significant impact on who they are. We can also say that this generation has been unofficially labelled 'Gen C', as in Generation Covid, because of how much their lives will have been shaped by this pandemic. The educational, economic, psychological and social effects of the pandemic will affect the Alphas for a longer period of time. It has left marks on their minds as they are more empathetic towards the environment and they want to talk more about social issues. They have been playing video games from a very early age

which has helped create minds which take an active role in finding solutions to the problems around them. Gen Alpha kids feel a responsibility to reverse the damage caused by the older generations. They are learning empowerment and self-expression and have developed their own personal style. They know that relationships are two-way streets which is why they need to be built on trust, participation and authenticity. To understand what has shaped their thinking and behaviour, we first need to learn about generational thinking.<sup>[2]</sup>

## So, Generational Thinking?

It's okay to feel different thoughts about generational thinking. Some people think it's a good way to understand generations, while others think it's not helpful. For example, when we look at different generations, we can find things they have in common and things that make them different. A 45-year-old person from Generation X might see similarities with Millennials, and a Baby Boomer might realise they share things with Generation Y colleagues. Sometimes people don't agree with the things that are said about their generation.

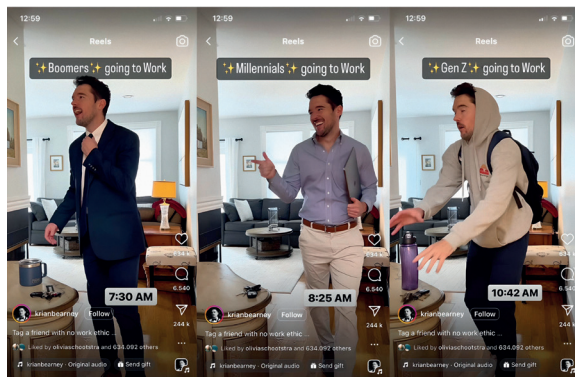
Meanwhile we also see patterns, values, beliefs, etc. from certain generations coming back in the younger generations. Gen Alpha are born to Millennials, hence why we call this younger cohort the mini-millennials and see them copying their parents' behaviour and brand preferences, for example. They are like a mirror to their parents (e.g. matching mother-daughter outfits) as Millennials like to offer their mini versions the things they like too (e.g. mini versions of their favourite car!). We see the same effect with Gen Z being the children of Gen X.<sup>[87]</sup>

‘Two troubling phenomena converge in this mommy-and-me thing. There’s the infantilisation of women to look like little girls and, on the flip side, [the pressure] for young girls to always look older – to wear bikinis and crop tops.’

Natalia Mehlman Petrzela,  
Professor at the New School in Manhattan in an interview with WSJ.

The thing about generational thinking is that it makes general ideas and stereotypes. But these general ideas are about what's usual for a group of people. It's about what most people in a generation might do or be like. Julien De Wit, president of the Flemish Association for Students and author of 'Ge(n)eratie', also argues in his book that today we reduce and generalise people too quickly to the generation they belong to. For example, everyone aged under 25 is too young to be taken seriously, and simultaneously everyone aged above 65 is already 'written-off'.<sup>[96]</sup> But in reality, not everyone in that generation is the same. Some people might not like to be seen as a typical example of their generation. That's okay because everyone is unique. There are always exceptions to the rules. But this doesn't mean we should ignore the idea of generational thinking completely. Instead, we can think about it as a way to understand that no one is just average.

Generational thinking is often used to explain social and cultural trends, as well as political and economic changes. In today's context, for example, we see many influencers and content creators creating depictions of the generational differences in funny memes on Instagram or TikTok – most often on topics such as work, management styles and parenting. An example of this is Krian Bearney (@krianbearney) who in one of his memes on Instagram (2023) shows the different attitudes to going to work. Other trending hashtags for this type of memes are #generations, #genzvs millennials, #genzmemes. Meme culture in general is generally a very accurate representation of what currently lives and breathes across generations. Meme culture is also a platform for youngsters to express themselves, what they think etc. As De Wit expresses in his book, 'We don't really listen to what youngsters have to say', which is also a reason why he wants to shed a light on the younger generations through his book.



@krianbearney depicts the different attitudes to work for Boomers, Millennials and Gen Z.



However, a first challenge to this approach is that it can be limiting and can lead to a narrow understanding of people's experiences and perspectives. There is more diversity within generations than between them. There are many factors that shape a person's identity and worldview, such as their race, gender, class, and upbringing. These factors can have a greater impact on a person's values and beliefs than their age or the time period in which they were born. Therefore, the author suggests that it is important to recognise the diversity within generations and not make assumptions based on age alone.

Younger generations appear to be more progressive and open-minded than older generations. While it is true that younger generations may be more supportive of certain social and political issues, such as LGBTQ rights and environmental protection, the author argues that this is not exclusive to them. There are many older people who hold progressive views, and many younger people who hold more conservative views. Therefore it is important to avoid stereotyping people based on their age and to recognise the diversity of opinions and perspectives within each generation. It can also be divisive and can lead to a lack of empathy and understanding between different age groups. By focusing too much on generational differences, we can overlook the commonalities that exist between people of different ages. For example, all generations experience the challenges of ageing, such as declining health and loss of loved ones. By recognising these shared experiences, we can build bridges between generations and foster greater understanding and empathy. Also De Wit<sup>[96]</sup> also states in his book that youngsters might pick up the 'zeitgeist' more quickly than others, but in the end each of us deals with the same insecurities and questions. One should celebrate the commonalities we all have.

A second challenge is how one defines generations. It is not about birth dates. Can you have a Millennial mindset when you were born in the late seventies? Are generational characteristics linked more with your current life stage than the era in which you were born? Your age and the things happening in your life right now can affect how you act and feel. When you graduate, find a partner, look for a job, become a parent, or lose a parent, these things will influence what you do. Your genes from your parents, your experiences as a kid, and the culture around you also play a role. But apart from your personal qualities and your childhood, the time when you were born also has an impact on your life. Events and issues of that time shape how you think and behave.

As children grow up, they change their surroundings and think about their experiences. But even then, what they do is connected to their characteristics and what they've learned from their surroundings. As they grow, things like technology, science, politics, and economics influence their thoughts and actions, not only now but also in the future. This affects everyone who's alive during those times.

Some people quickly adopt new ideas, while others take more time. But the biggest impact is on those who are young during those times. This is why they share similar values, thoughts, and traits as a generation. And just because they're moving into a different stage of life doesn't mean they'll agree with what older generations say. Often, they like to do things differently from what came before. This leads to changes in ideas and values between generations.

So yes, thinking about generations can cause disagreements. But it's a helpful way to understand and navigate our interactions with coworkers, clients, family, and others. When you see things from this perspective, it can explain why people act the way they do and help you predict how they might act in the future. But on the other hand, as we just mentioned, as a marketer it can be more interesting to celebrate what unites us, than what tears us apart and defines us differently.

## The Power of Micro-Generations

Generational thinking and the surface-level categorization of each generation such as Gen X, Gen Y, Gen Z can offer very useful statistics & facts, but the desire for more specific insights is what led to this notion of hybrid generations, or micro generations. Think for example of the Xennials who bridge the gap between Gen Xers and Millennials or Zennials as in-betweeners of Millennials and Generation Z. All of these are also known as 'cuspers', or, people born at the end of one generation and near the beginning of another one. These micro groups are in unique positions: often getting a flavor of two generations in once. It is specifically beneficial for brands to be aware of this as it can help them develop even more targeted and precise strategies by knowing an even more accurate description of what the drivers, motivations and characteristics are of each subgroup. Instead of targeting children and people by age, it is even more precise to segment your target by their behaviour: everything from their passions, mindsets, values, opinions etc. Trendhunter<sup>[93]</sup> for example also talks about separating Millennials into Pro, Mid and Nouveau Millennial - as each of them grew up by

experiencing different events at that time and therefore exposing different values and beliefs.

## Demarcation of Generational Boundaries

Let us look more carefully at what we mean by the demarcation of generational boundaries. The generation gap is the perceived divide between different age groups in terms of their beliefs, values, and behaviours. However, The Guardian article titled ‘The Big Idea: Why the generation gap isn't as wide as you think’, by social researcher Rebecca Huntley,<sup>[3]</sup> challenges the popular notion that the generation gap between young and old is a vast and unbridgeable chasm. Instead, she argues that the differences between generations are not as significant as they are often made out to be and that these perceived differences are often used to create divisions between groups.

Many of the beliefs and values that are attributed to different generations are not unique to those age groups but are instead shaped by broader societal trends and historical events. For example, values associated with the Baby Boomer generation, such as their political activism and quest for social justice, were largely a response to the political and social challenges of the 1960s and 1970s, rather than something innate to that generation. Similarly, the so-called ‘Millennial’ values of social and environmental consciousness are not unique to that age group but are instead a reflection of broader societal trends towards sustainability and community engagement.

The differences between generations are often overstated because of the way that social media and the internet have created echo chambers in which people are only exposed to information that reinforces their existing beliefs and values. This can lead to a sense of alienation between different age groups, as each group feels like the other is living in a different world.

However, there are many areas where different generations share common ground. For example, both young and old are concerned about issues such as economic inequality, climate change, and the future of work. Many of the stereotypes that are associated with different generations are not accurate and young people are often more politically engaged and active than they are given credit for, Bobby Duffy in his book ‘Generations: Does When You’re Born Shape Who You Are?’<sup>[4]</sup> suggests that we should ‘*ditch*’ these stereotypical labels.

We might say that the generation gap is an insurmountable barrier between different age groups. Instead, we should focus on the commonalities between generations and work towards creating a more inclusive and united society. By recognising that many of the differences between generations are not as significant as they are often made out to be, we can begin to break down the barriers that divide us and work towards a more collaborative and equitable future.

However, according to the French philosopher Auguste Comte, *'generational change is the key driver of the speed of societal change'*. A difference exists between the young generation and the older ones on the basis of attitude, morals, norms, values, thinking process etc. Usually, younger generations are easily adaptable to change in the society compared to the older generations.

<p>400 BC</p> <p>'The childres now love luxury; they have bad manners, they show disrespect for elders ...'</p> <p>Socrates</p>	<p>1771</p> <p>'A race of effeminate, self-admiring emaciated fribbles'</p> <p>Letter in Town and Country magazine</p>	<p>1843</p> <p>'Young ladies in the market town of Bilston had taken to drive coal carts, ride astride upon horses, drink, swear, fight, smoke, whistle, sing, and care for nobody'</p> <p>Earl of Shaftesbury</p>
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While talking about generational differences, we are more likely to create certain stereotypes about each generation that may cause *'generational conflict'*. Older generations have always looked down upon the younger ones. For example, Socrates said, in 400 BC, *'The children now love luxury; they have bad manners, they show disrespect for elders and love gossip in place of activity ...'*. I bet you can relate to this statement in today's age as well. Every older generation has been saying the same things about the younger generation since day one but now it seems more intense. One of the main reasons behind this is that in the digital age where news spreads really fast, people believe this news without even double checking the sources, which may create division. For example, if we look at the internet usage time of every generation alive today, Gen Z is at the