

## “CHECK YOUR FACTS, FETUS”: #GENZ VS. #MILLENNIALS AND THE ROLE OF TIKTOK IN THE GENERATIONING PROCESS

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In summer 2021, another TikTok meme joined the emerging (English-language) debates between Gen Z and Millennials. The acting skit typically includes one TikTok creator portraying two characters: a (drunk) Millennial and a Gen Z'er. The original sound template by comedian Brian Moller (@bmotheprince) provides the basis for the audio meme. In the videos, a Millennial walks into a room and the Gen Z'er reacts irritably, “Another one? Ugh, why do y'all keep coming here (TikTok)?” The Millennial and Gen Z'er debate who belongs on TikTok; the Gen Z'er explains, “We're the social media generation,” to which the Millennial retorts, “Bitch, we made social media. Check your facts, fetus.” The banter continues with the Gen Z'er referencing TikTok's “For You Page” and the Millennial referencing a 401k. The video ends with the Millennial zoning out and the Gen Z'er critiquing their drinking habits as the Millennial dances off out of the frame.

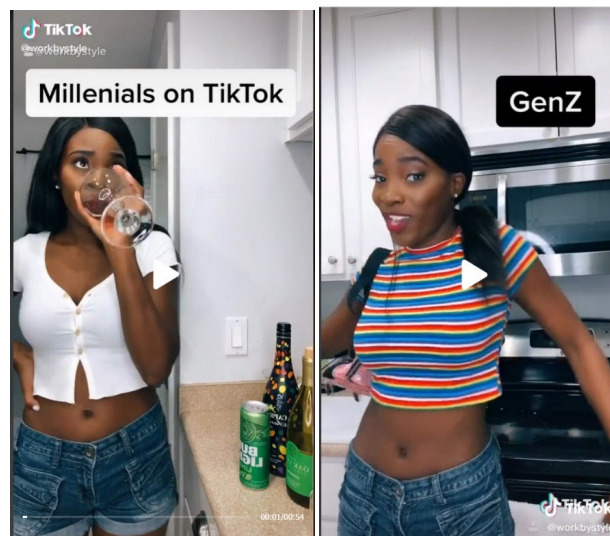


Figure 1 Screenshots of a Millennial and a Gen Z'er on TikTok (credit: @workbystyle)

At first glance, the “generational war” between Gen Z (born approximately 1996-2012) and Millennials (born approximately 1981-1995) appears to be merely the latest iteration of an emerging generational cohort demarcating their taste cultures, subjectivities, and values. However, these seemingly trivial and playful debates over who “belongs” on TikTok and who is the “real” social media generation provide a fruitful inquiry into examining the generationing process. While many Millennials may have come-of-age with the internet, Gen Z is unique in that they are the first generation to co-construct their generational identity formation in such a public, collective, and vocal manner and at such a young age through platforms such as TikTok.

In their exploration of generational identity, Vittadini et al. (2013) suggest that media scholars should pay more attention to the ways members of a particular generation produce and circulate self-narratives about their own understandings of their generation. Heeding their call, this paper examines the ways that self-proclaimed members of Gen Z and Millennials dyadically use TikTok to co-construct their respective generational consciousness by asking:

*What role do the platform logics, affordances, memetics, and creative vernaculars of TikTok play in the generationing process, specifically the collective construction of generational borders between Millennials and Gen Z?*

I conduct a qualitative discursive analysis of the ways Gen Z and Millennials create dialogical TikTok memes, challenges, and trends to co-construct their respective generational identities. I argue that simply dismissing these debates as trivial “generational conflicts” masks Gen Z’s attempt to resist colonization of their digital spaces and obscures deeper anxieties about space, belonging, social change, and the development of a generational habitus.

## **The Generationing Process**

Generationing refers to the process through which a generation develops a collective generational consciousness. Thus, I approach generations as social constructs that function discursively and symbolically, rather than as biological determinants. There is ample evidence to suggest that mediatization and the accelerated pace of technological change play increasingly significant roles in the generationing process and the development of generational identities (Bolin, 2017; Vittadini et al, 2013).

Generational demarcations such as Millennials and Gen Z function to discursively produce collective identities through repetitive social performances, thus drawing a generational border between “us” and “them.” Integral to the generationing process then, is the production of a “we sense” that contributes to a shared identity and the ways a generational identity is performed in social relation to others (Mannheim, 1970). Such narratives are co-constructed in a multitude of ways, including through the reciprocal relationships between digital media platforms and users.

## **Method and Analytical Approach**

Bolin (2017) argues that a generation's "fresh contact" with media in their formative years can play a significant role in the habitus of a generation; because Millennials have come of age alongside social media, many feel as though these spaces "belong" to them. With the rise of TikTok practices and the cultures that young TikTokers are creating, Millennials are for the first time experiencing a trend-setting digital space as Other. Such anxieties and cultural contestations are originating through TikTok-specific vernaculars, memes, and challenges. Thus, I have chosen to limit my analysis to TikTok due to the unique affordances of the platform that privileges memetic participation above social connections and for the ways it influences the norms, trends, and discourses of other platforms (Zulli and Zulli, 2021).

Searching for various Gen Z and Millennial hashtags on TikTok from June 2020-December 2021 led to the identification of popular sounds, skit acting memes, and generational challenges that formed the basis of the Gen Z vs. Millennial TikToks included in this paper (full paper includes a complete table/method). I conduct a thematic and discursive analysis of the visual and audio elements of the memes, including the on-screen text or stickers, sound clips, fashion, and body movements that are used to visually differentiate Gen Z and Millennial identities. The analysis focuses on the assemblage of the narrative, visual, and audio content of the memes alongside the platform logic and affordances that make such memetic participation feasible (Author, 2014). Such an analysis reveals how Gen Z and Millennials are using TikTok to publicly negotiate the borders of their respective generational identities and thus allows for a closer examination of the role of TikTok in the generationing process.

## Memetic Discursive Patterns

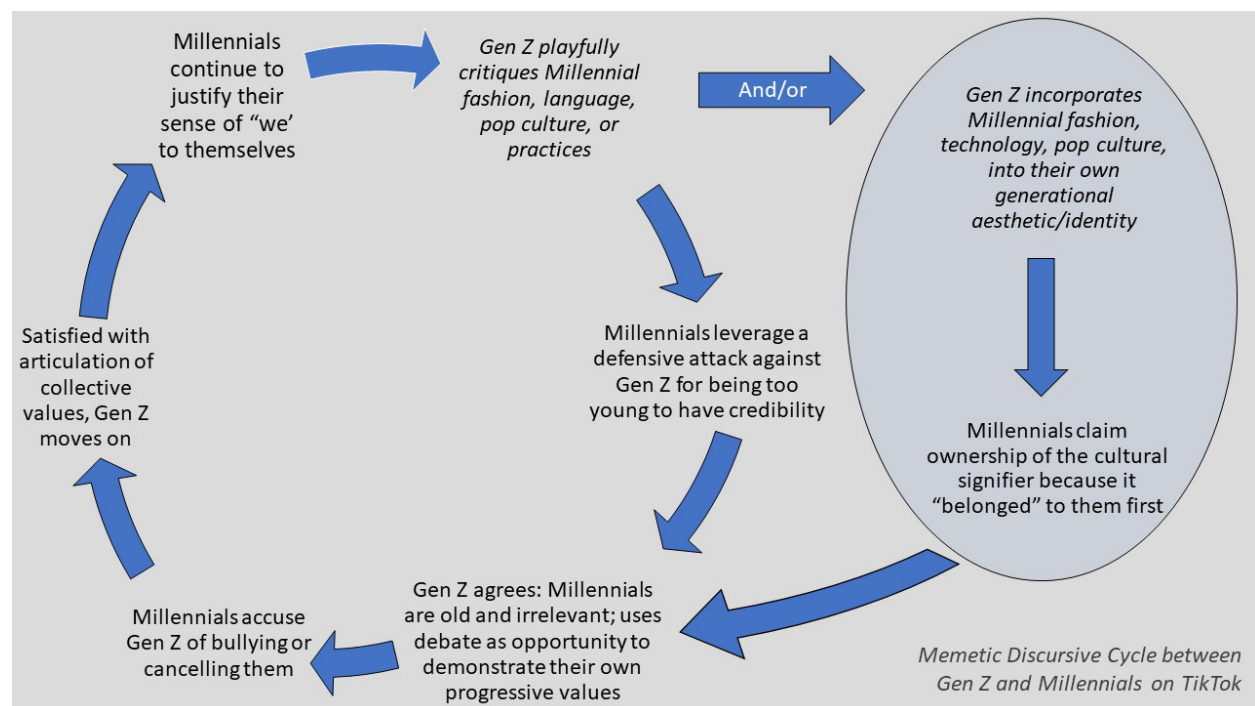


Figure 2 Memetic Discursive Cycle between Gen Z and Millennials on TikTok

As the memetic discursive cycle in Figure 2 reveals, a paradox emerges in which Millennials disavow Gen Z's credibility because of Gen Z's young age, yet such a defense serves to reify Millennials' credibility precisely because they are the older generation. Yet Millennials simultaneously refute Gen Z's accusation that Millennials are old, since such a critique is intended to either render Millennials irrelevant and/or to hold Millennials responsible for upholding the problematic values that Gen Z is critiquing (Zeng and Abidin, 2021). The paper will analyze specific examples to support each moment in this cycle.

As will be demonstrated, this pattern is communicated alongside the platform logics and creative vernaculars of memes and the public dialogue that TikTok uniquely affords. The ability for Gen Z and Millennials to playfully articulate respective generational subjectivities in such a mutual, reciprocal, and public manner provides greater insight into the generationing process than earlier media industries or technologies have afforded.

Lastly, while playful in nature, I demonstrate how the “templatability” (Abidin, 2021) of the memetic discourse functions as a way for Gen Z to solidify what they perceive as their more progressive values while forcing Millennials to come to terms with the paradoxes of their own problematic values, subjectivities, and positionalities. For Millennials, arguments over who “belongs” in particular spaces or who “owns” pop culture may be playful and trivial debates that reveal anxieties about aging and cultural relevance, but for Gen Z, they are playful acts of resistance that allow them to negotiate and generate collective, collaborative, and progressive spaces to fine-tune their individual identities and generational values (Katz, et al. 2021).

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## **Appendix**

Screenshots from @workbystyle video

[https://www.tiktok.com/@workbystyle/video/6836823692865981701?is\\_from\\_webapp=1&sender\\_device=pc&web\\_id=7070187623888815659](https://www.tiktok.com/@workbystyle/video/6836823692865981701?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id=7070187623888815659)