

Background and Facts about Twentysomethings

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Key Terms for This Topic

Twentysomethings—large demographic sector of young people ages 18-35 (30 is the new 20)

Gen Y, Echo Boomers or Millennials—the terms for today's twentysomethings, born between 1978-1994, implying that group "coming of age" around 2000 A.D.

Emerging adulthood—term coined by Jeffrey Arnett to define primary life focus of twentysomethings

Helicopter parents—parents who "hover" in an attempt to ensure children succeed; loving enablers whose children often become boomerangs (see below).

Boomerang kids—twentysomethings who return to reliance on parents for shelter, food, support, etc., after college and/or initial foray into independence.

Starbucks™ syndrome—term derived from the coffee house community where millions of young people discuss their futures, work on their laptops, and build their friendships.

A multi-sided metaphor for the challenges facing today's twentysomethings:

- The plethora of drink choices arrayed before them (think large, triple-mocha skim organic decaf latte)—reflecting both unlimited opportunities and being immobilized by too many choices.
- Employment at coffee shops—symbolizing work for those in transition, where there is the comfort factor of known surroundings and minimal stress.
- The unfavorable picture of highly caffeinated, ear-bud wearing individuals—personifying isolated young people who live in their own world.

All these images reflect both truths and stereotypes.

Boomers/boomlet (demographic blip)—Boomlet is the demographic increase resulting from the Boomers (the prevailing and powerful demographic) having had children.

Twentysomethings make up the majority of the boomlet.

Perfection paralysis—inertia caused from delaying choices and actions when circumstances appear less-than perfect.

Non-decision Decision—the tendency to avoid making a decision, so that a decision ends up making you. It becomes the opposite of purposeful choice, and creates "stuckness."

Facts at a Glance—Myths Busted or Supported

Issue	Fact	Who Else It Affects	What It Means
Spending Twentysomethings are free spenders	In 2008 37% of young people have more than \$5000 in debt outside of mortgage or student loans.	Parents <i>Source:</i> Greenberg, Quinlan, Rosner Research 2008	Stereotype, but myth is somewhat supported—financial stability is a concern
Sponging off their parents More young people are moving back home	About 40% of people age 18 – 34 live at home, and nearly 20% move back after having left. Since the 1970s, there has been a 50% increase in the number of young adults in their 20s living at home	Parents <i>Source:</i> US Census Bureau, Current Population Survey 2006	Stereotype, but myth somewhat supported, also consider impact of economic times
Meaning and Purpose Developing a meaningful philosophy of life is more important to Millennials than it is to Boomers	Fewer Millennials than Boomers see a meaningful philosophy of life as important	Parents Employers <i>Source:</i> CIRP, HERI, UCLA 2007	Myth of rising number of young people valuing purpose in work is somewhat busted—maybe practicality prevails
Career takes back seat Twentysomethings' values regarding family and career are different from their parents and more well-rounded	The top five life goals for college-bound students have not changed much over the years, though raising a family has moved up in importance	Employers <i>Source:</i> CIRP, HERI, UCLA 2007	Myth is somewhat busted, more similar to their parents than commonly believed.
Twentysomethings bring big changes Twentysomethings will demand changes in the workplace	Less than 40% of college students believe they are more adventurous or more likely to take risks than their parents; being well off financially has increased in importance	Employers <i>Source:</i> CIRP, HERI, UCLA 2007	Myth is somewhat busted, this is a more conventional generation
Team players Twentysomethings have an increased sense of teamwork	No change in first-year college students self-ratings of cooperativeness/competitiveness from 1990-2001	Employers <i>Sources:</i> CIRP, HERI, UCLA 2007	Myth somewhat busted—while they may have more experience with teamwork, behaviors haven't changed—yet
Career preparation Twentysomethings are well prepared to enter the workplace	Only about half of college students are satisfied with career planning and job placement services at their school.	Educators Employers <i>Source:</i> CIRP, HERI, UCLA 2007	We thought we were better at this than we are. Young people need a different kind of coaching for 21 st Century workplace.
Cynicism Twentysomethings believe their lives are controlled by outside forces and feel more disconnected from society	Longitudinal studies show that people increasingly feel that things are out of their control; Millennials less likely to believe that people are trustworthy, helpful and fair	Employers Community Politics <i>Sources:</i> Twenge, 2006; RNTA 2005	Myth is somewhat supported—Millennials less trusting of promises made. The term “Whatever” takes on new meaning.
Community service Millennials volunteer more and have an emerging sense of service	Slow rising trend of high school seniors performing volunteer work (up 1.4%), though only 18.6% of people in their early twenties volunteer	Community Educators <i>Source:</i> US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2008	Myth is somewhat supported—there is an evolving interest in volunteerism

Background and Facts about Twentysomethings—Discussion

A better understanding of twentysomethings has profound implications for

- Parents
- Employers
- Educators
- Political, cultural, and religious movements
- The young people themselves

The cultural perception of twentysomethings is of a vast group of free-spending partiers who sponge off their parents and take advantage of their employers. Glued to their ear buds, cell phones, and laptops, they seem directionless, and take forever to get their lives together. The reality, of course, is far more complex, as complex as the opportunities and challenges facing this **Boomlet**.

There is a basis in fact to aspects of the stereotype. It is indeed a sizable demographic. These are largely children of the Baby **Boomers**, born between 1978 and 1994, and represent by most estimates around 70 million young people. By contrast, their predecessors, Gen-Xers, are a much smaller group, around 50 million. Today's twentysomethings are often referred to as **Gen-Yers, Echo Boomers** or **Millennials**—due to their coming of age at or around the year 2000. As is so often the case, certain characteristics of this group seem to be the direct result of the era they were born in, who raised them, and how they've been reared. Toward that end, a brief description of their parents—the Boomers—is instructive.

Products of the Boomer Generation

Baby Boomers in general took decisive steps to distance themselves from their parents. Their teen and early adult years were often characterized by rebellion and reaction to the stiff social mores of the fifties and early sixties. But by the time they reached full adulthood, they became a hard-working, hard-charging group determined to be successful, and by all accounts they have been. They are currently in power in all aspects of American life, from business and economics, to politics and education

As parents, Boomers have behaved differently than their parents did. They've encouraged individuality, boosted self-esteem, told their kids they can do anything they choose in life. With the material symbols of their own successes for props, they've set an ornate stage for their kids, one full of promise and potential for a dramatic life to come. And it is precisely within this heady, high-minded family atmosphere that some of the challenges of twentysomethings begin to emerge.

Not wanting their kids to experience failure, they've hovered over their every move, ensuring things never get too bad, earning the term "**helicopter parents**" for their efforts. They have, by and large, much closer, more communicative relationships with their kids than their parents had with them. They understand, they sympathize, and they can talk together about just about anything. With all that support and attention, who'd want to leave? The result has been, in part, a plethora of "**boomerang kids**" who return—or in many cases never actually leave—the loving protection of their parents' homes.

But what do the twentysomethings actually see and experience? After all, the world's their oyster, and should be theirs for the slurping. They live in the Warrior phase of their lives, a

time to go out and conquer the world with their vision and energy. But America is a different place than it was 30 years ago. It's more global, more plugged in, more safety conscious, less formal, less homogenous. Opportunities—and distractions—are around every corner. And that's a big part of the problem.

The Era of the Millennials—Today's Twentysomethings

Twentysomethings are responding to the cultural and global changes that surround them—diversity, globalization, terrorism, social networking through the touch of a button instead of the personal touch. As a group they are more disconnected from society, less opinionated, more cynical, and have a greater expectation of world war. Yet despite all this, they are not more pessimistic about their own lives, in fact they tend to be pretty self-confident.

And now, despite our cargo culture desire to accumulate stuff, the market crash and global recession have sobered everyone, and indeed dashed some hopes. And this kicks the **Starbucks syndrome** into high gear. Twentysomethings show up in droves to drown their sorrows in a latte, or find a way to earn a few bucks in hard times.

In the midst of all this, the sheer number of Millennials makes them a force to reckon with. Torn by the desire to succeed like their parents, but fearful of the economic downturn and cynical about how the world works, they enter and navigate their twenties cautiously. Demographic trends predict they will spend most of this decade job hopping and working hard at figuring out their options and their obstacles. So the **Starbucks syndrome** continues to flourish and the opportunity for **non-decision decisions** or **perfection paralysis** sets in.

So in this decade of **emerging adulthood**, where only a generation before this period was spent marrying and starting a family, how do these twentysomethings spend their time and their energy? Mostly searching, sifting through a maze of opportunities and dilemmas, and finding their place. Research shows they are less likely to read a newspaper, attend church, vote for president, or identify with a political party. This kind of disconnection contributes to them growing up a little more slowly than generations before them, as they try to absorb the array of information and deal with overload.

Twentysomethings allegiance is towards their family and their jobs, with less attention paid to politics, civic matters, or volunteering their time. And communication? The personal touch has converted to the texting touch, with e-mail, chats, texting, and Facebook becoming the preferable modes.

Time on Their Hands and Opportunities Galore

Twentysomethings have a whole decade to make decisions, during a period when previous generations were occupied with marriage and kids. While it sounds luxurious to have the benefit of this time, it also creates its own angst. Add to that the anxiety of the global recession—which looks like it's going to hang around for a while—and anxiety starts to set in.

Background and Facts about Twentysomethings—Expert Analysis

According to Twentysomethings expert Susan Berg, the staggering array of choices before them causes many twentysomethings to be immobilized by indecision. They may be afraid to take smaller, progressive steps, or any action at all that may not directly lead to their lofty goals. Their parents have told them they can do anything, have anything, be anything, but if they can't get there right away, many falter. Think of it as an en masse **perfection paralysis**. And when the economy dives, the pressure drives young people to either a big stall pattern or knee-jerk reactions. Either decisions get made out of fear, or the **Non-decision decisions** start taking over. All poor choices.

She looks at change facing this age group in thirds. First, in the top tier there's the "Go-Go" group—the adapters, who are flexible, lifelong learners. On the bottom are the "No-Goers"—people who put on the brakes and just don't engage. And in the middle are the "Go-Buts"—the ones who *say* they're with the program, but just sit on their butts with excuses and rationales.

The twentysomething decade is a prime place to develop "Go-But" habits. And that's what motivated her to turn her attention to this generation. If we're going to get out of this economic mess, if we're going to green up the world and bring stronger ties of tolerance and peace, we need the energy and contribution of this 70+ million generation. Her focus is on propping up the "Go-go" group, reaching a few "No-goers" and pulling more people out of the "Go-but" group. Her solutions? Work directly with twentysomethings, as well as their parents, educators and employers:

To overcome Perfection paralysis—

- Seek progress over perfection, emphasize getting off the fence
- Accept compromise and small steps toward goals
- Be willing to settle for "good enough" as you go

To move past Non-decision decisions—

- Recognize that making a decision puts you in the driver's seat
- Understand the impact of stress and frustration
- Learn the skill of moving beyond disappointment

To make purposeful choices—

- Find the crossing point between what you want and what the world needs
- Use physical activity to energize creative thinking and decision making
- Seek action over anticipation and anxiety

Susan Berg is the author of *Choose On Purpose for Twentysomethings: finding work you love, places to grow, people who care*.

www.ChooseOnPurpose.com