
Demographics of Age: Generational and Cohort Confusion

John Markert

A wide range of dates is accorded Baby Boomers, Gen-Xers, and Gen-Ys. The range of dates is compounded because the term cohort and generation are often used interchangeably when they measure distinctly different time periods, making it impossible to disentangle the group's size and their distinctive lifestyles. This complicates the ability of advertisers to target markets and can prevent product placement and even product development. A standard is set forth in this paper to more clearly define both a generation and a cohort to end the confusion. The standard will provide a clearer measure of who one is talking about when discussing the distinctions among the various age groups and the impact the group will have on society when their attitudes and values are examined.

There are a wide variety of demographic categories used to detail a group's size and classify its behavior. Age is among the most frequently utilized (O'Connor 1997; Gunter and Furnham 1992; Hobcraft et al. 1985; Ryder 1985). The problem is not with age as a marketing tool so much as the ability to clearly delineate age categories. Determining the size and lifestyles of a group is muddled by the range of dates employed by researchers to delineate a generation. These dates can range from seven to ten years upward to twenty years. This is further complicated by the confusing use of the term cohort, which is sometimes used interchangeably with generation, while at other times it is used to demarcate a much more narrowly defined birth group.

The generational measurement problem is sometimes remarked on in the literature but seldom addressed. For example, Wolburg and Pokrywcznski (2001) go to some length in their paper to highlight the extent of the problem and then blithely move on to outline the differences between Gen-Xers and Ys without ever clarifying the dividing line between the two birth groups. Rosen (2001) likewise acknowledges the problem of measurement but relegates his observation to a footnote. The confusion surrounding the different uses of cohort largely goes unnoticed. A clearer understanding of the term generation and cohort is necessary if researchers and marketers are to

accurately target age segments within the wider population. This paper initially appraises the extent of the problem, first as it revolves around size and generational measures and then as it revolves around lifestyle determinates and cohort measures. This is followed by 1) suggestions to overcome the confusion surrounding such heuristically sound generational labels as the Boomers, Gen-Xers, and Gen-Ys, and 2) recommendations for fine-tuning the often ill-defined ways cohort is employed.

The Extent of the Problem

Generations and Size. First and foremost, age hints at the size of the market. This is straightforward Keynesian economics: demand for goods is related to population characteristics. The Baby Boomers are a quintessential example of size driving markets. This group's size has garnered attention since they first emerged in the aftermath of World War II, mainly because of their size vis-à-vis other age groups in society. They are now garnering attention from marketers because they are entering their forties and fifties and will require different goods and services.

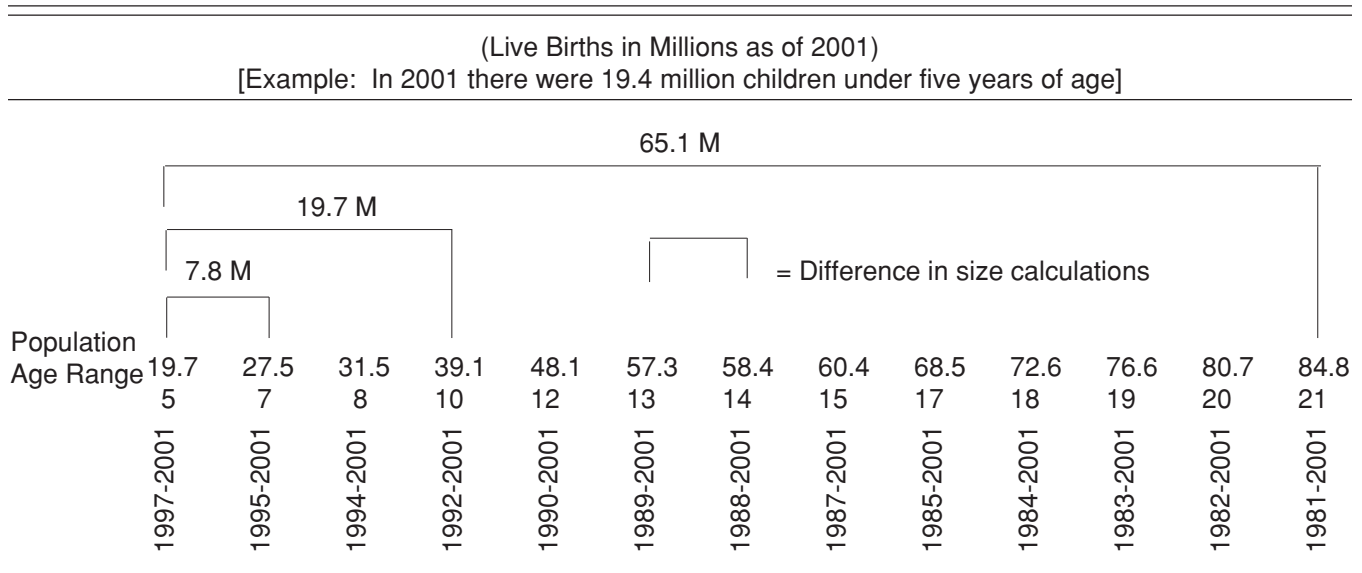
This is another aspect of size: demand for goods change with ages (Gunter and Furnham 1992). Boomers in their fifties have different needs than when they were younger. While this seems intuitive, the problem lies with how one determines size. Discreet age categories—50, 51, 52, or even 51-55, 56-60—are not a problem; the numbers speak for themselves. It is

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Figure 1
Population Estimates Based on Cohort/Generational Parameters in Marketing Literature



***2000 and 2001 populations based on birth estimates by census bureau.**
Dates less than 4 years are not encountered in the literature, nor are cohorts of 6, 9, and 11.
The modal cohort/generation is 10. Other frequently occurring ranges are 5, 7, and 16.

more common, however, to use broad-based classificatory schemes to delineate a group: Boomers, Gen-Xers, Gen-Ys. The age range encompassed by the classification, which can range from a low of five to seven years upward to twenty years, now determines the size of the group.

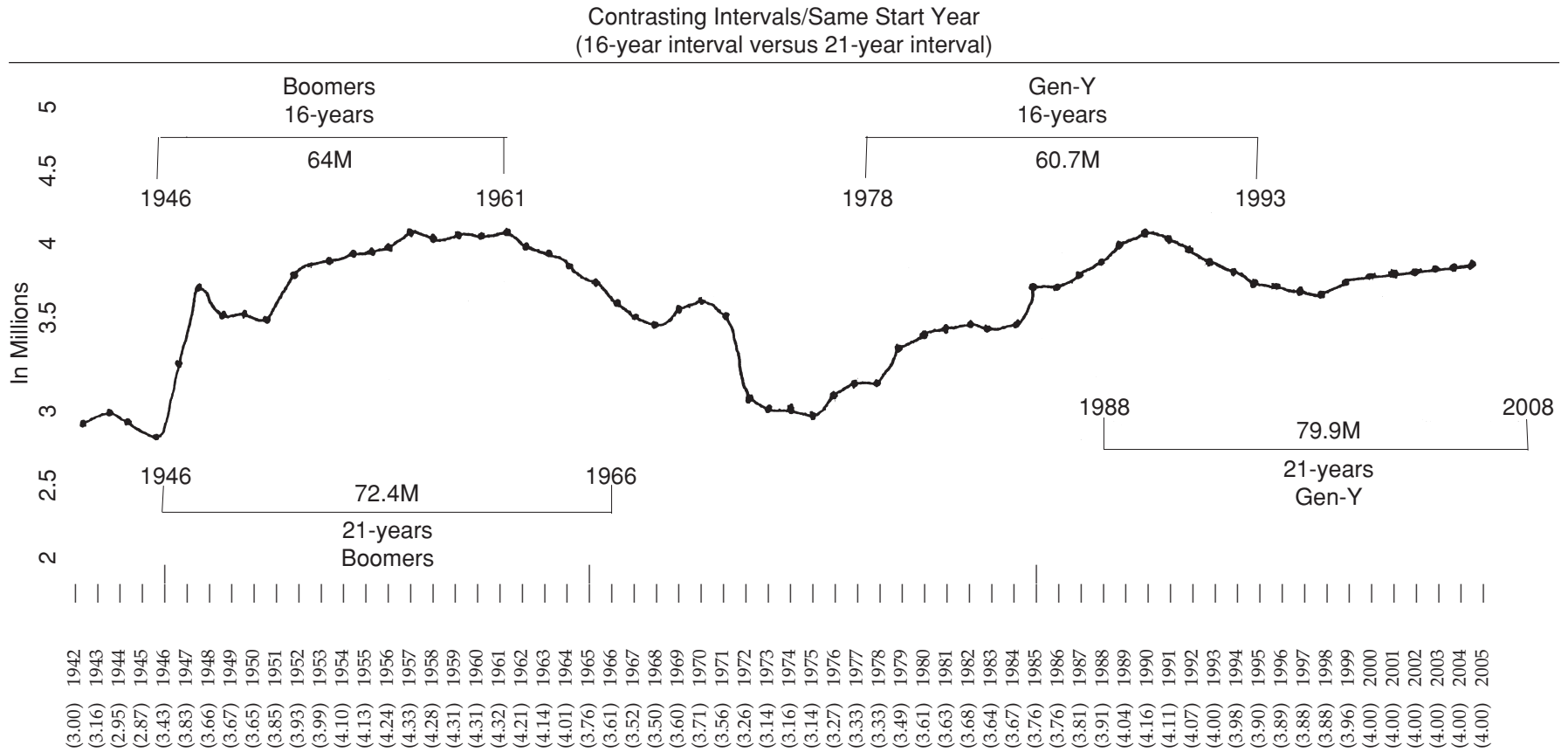
Marketers and researchers who classify Boomers using the seven-year period from 1946-1952 would place the group between fifty-four and sixty years of age in 2005, which puts them at just over 24.3 million people. However, those that use the twenty-year Boomer framework (1946-1965) would place the group between forty-one and sixty years of age and count them to number nearly 74 million in 2005. There is, first of all, a huge difference in the size of the Boomer market, depending on the age standard utilized.

There is also a marked difference in age ranges if one relies on the twenty-year (1946-1965) Boomer framework, with over half of this group some years from the growing fifty-something "oldsters" that is often referenced in contemporary literature (Karner 2001; Gunter and Furnham 1992; Markert, forthcoming; Gerber et al. 1989). In this latter case, the market simply is not as large as pundits might suggest when they talk about the aging Boomers. Size, then, does matter, and the use of convenient but misleading labels such as Boomers, Gen-Xers, and Gen-Ys may cloud the group's size unless accurate, consistent measurement units are used.¹

There is nothing wrong with the heuristically sound generational labels that are used to delineate a group. These labels are convenient because the single term expresses key features of the group and, in shorthand form, summarizes aggregate characteristics that make marketing efforts manageable. This use of generational categories to demarcate a group is well established.

A potpourri of studies recognizes the importance of birth periods and how the unique historical circumstances surrounding a birth period affects an entire generation (Becker 1991; Ryder 1985; Zuschlag and Whitbourne 1994; Zuker et al. 2002; Rogler 2002; Gunter and Furnham 1992; Hepworth 2002). This birth period links groups in time together, Karl Mannheim (1952 [1927]) says in his seminal work on generations, because it "creates the potential for the development of a shared consciousness that unites and motivates people...[and] represents nothing more than a particular kind of identify of location, embracing related age groups embedded in a historical-social process." It might be argued that race and gender, among other demographic categories, now dwarf these generational divisions. These other demographic categories are important, but the group is also influenced by their generational experience. For example, women and African-Americans coming of age in 1950s America will have distinct reference points that shape their attitudes and perception of the world from those women and African-Americans coming of age during the social ferment of the 1960s.

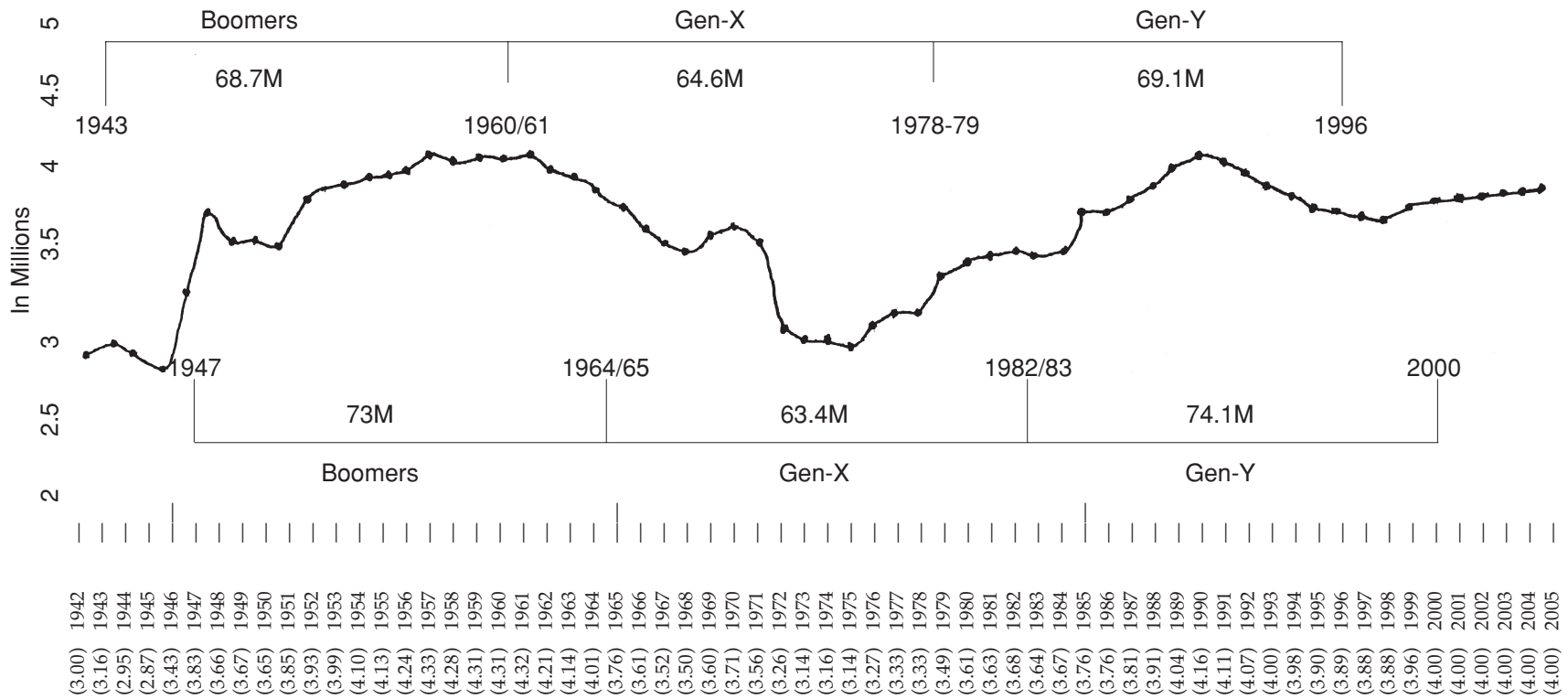
Figure 2
Live Birth: 1942-2005



Projections through 2005 by the Census Bureau indicate the birth rate will remain fairly constant at 4.0 to 4.1 million, after which it is expected to increase steadily to 5 million new births per year.

Figure 3
Live Birth: 1942-2005

Contrasting Starting Year: Same 18-Year Interval
 (1943 Boomers versus 1947 Boomers)



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The importance of one's birth group has been found to be more influential in shaping the group's behavior than subsequent education (Zuschlag and Whitborune 1994) and is fairly stable over time (Lepisto 1997; Edmunds and Turner 2002; Hepworth 2002; Morgan 1998; Attanasio 1998). This does not mean that people in a birth group do not change. There is ample evidence that this too occurs (Hoikkala et al. 2002; Lepisto 1997; McCreary 1997; Rokeach 1979), though subsequent change is often filtered by one's past historical experience (Nichols 1990; Hepworth 2002).

The two-prone past-present time effect is aptly illustrated in McCreary's (1997) study of fifty-something-aged women in the 1990s who came of age in the 1960s. These women, McCreary reports, are more concerned about their souls today, but despite their "fat stock portfolios" continue to embrace those "corny '60s ideals...of peace, justice and progressive taxation" (see also Perkins 1996).² This knowledge of historical antecedents helps make predictions of future behavior more exact (Crosby et al. 1984). It is precisely this birth effect—which Chudacoff (1989) posits makes differences between age groups more significant than within age groups—that makes generational groups so important to marketers.

The problem is not with the generational label (or even the variety of labels used for a specific group) but the disparity in dates assigned to the various age groups. There simply is no agreement on the dates assigned various age groups in society. Becker (1991) starts the onset of the Baby Boomers earlier than anyone at 1940; Sweeney (2002) uses a much later date of 1950. These two disparate dates alone underscore the problem of estimating size, regardless of the range of years encompassed. Boomers born in the ten year period between 1940-1949 will depict a group of some 28.3 million people, while the ten year period between 1950-1959 will be two-fifths larger and encompass 41 million people. This is a considerable difference for anyone attempting to define market size.

Though the 1940/1950 Boomer framework represents an extreme and is an anomaly in the literature, the problem persists because writers place the beginning of the Boomers anywhere from 1943-1947. This, of course, will affect the definition of who inhabits the subsequent Gen-X category. Alternatively referred to as the Baby Bust and Slacker Generation, this group has been categorized as those born within the twenty-one year frame between 1961-1981 (Collins and Tilson 2001; Ritchie 1995) or the twenty-year period between 1965-1984 (Rosen 2001; Bagby 1998). Dunphy (1999) uses the eighteen-year period from 1963-1980. Others define Gen-Xers more narrowly as those born within

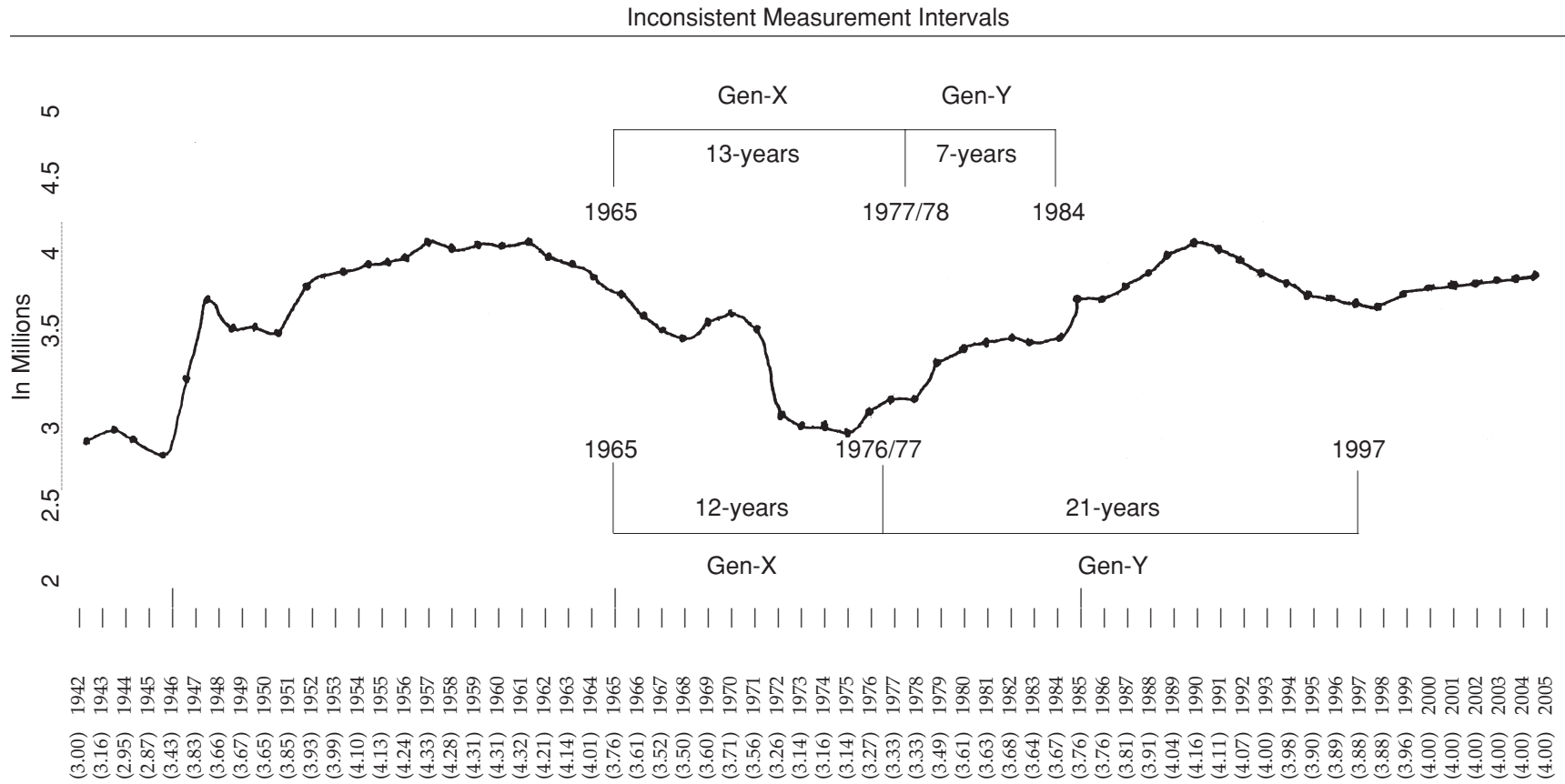
a ten to thirteen year period from 1964/1965 to 1976/1977 (Alch 2000; Lovern 2001) or between 1964-1973 (Stapinski 1999). This makes it extremely problematic in identifying Gen-Y. Some demographers define this group of Boomlets (aka Echo Boom) as those born in the narrow range between 1978-1984 (Lovern 2001) or more broadly from 1977-1994 (Paul 2001:17; "The New Target...", 1999) or from 1982-2002 (Collins and Tilson 2001). The late-1970s timeframe has Gen-Ys graduating from college as early as 1997 (see also Wolburg and Pokrywcznski 2001), while an early 1980s timeline would have them still in high school in 1997.

The issue is further complicated as many simply talk about the groups as a given—the Boomers, the Xers—without indicating the age range in question (Ortner 1998; Shepherdson 2000; Wolburg and Pokrywcznski 2001), or broadly defining the group as those born, for example, "in the sixties and early-seventies" (Dandaneau and Falcome 1998) or "those born after 1955" (Becker 1991:32), without providing clear perimeters (see also Ortner 1998). The wide range of dates has tremendous repercussions in determining how their size will impact society.

The size issue is complicated for marketers because of inconsistent use of dates by the same author, resulting in an apple to lemon measurement standard. For example, Morton (1998) identifies the World War I Generation as those born between 1901-1924 (24 years) but the Silent or World War II Generation born between 1925-1945 (20 years). On the other hand, Collins and Tilson (2001) designates the Silent/World War II Generation taking place between 1925-1942 (18 years), but Gen-Xers are assigned the time period 1961-1981 (21 years). This inconsistency is fairly common: Paul (2001) uses eleven years for one generation and sixteen for another, later (2002) using nineteen years for one generation and ten years for another; Lovern (2001) uses both seven years and thirteen years; Alch (2000) uses as few as ten years to define one generation but twenty years to categorize another. There might be some rationale for the various timelines; none are offered, however.

One of the most frequently compared measures is the contrasting size of the Boomers to Gen-X. Gen-X is often much smaller than the Boomers primarily because Boomers are accorded a longer age framework than the Xers. The truncated range allocated Gen-Xers will obviously result in smaller size. Paul (2002), for example, states the Boomers consist of those born between 1946-1964 (19 years) but Gen-X is categorized as those born within the ten year range of 1965-1974 (she inexplicably reverts to a twenty-year frame for the Echo Boom [aka Gen-Y]). Using her timeline, the Boomers would number 76.4 million;

Figure 4
Live Births: 1942-2005



Projections through 2005 by the Census Bureau indicate the birth rate will remain fairly constant at 4.0 to 4.1 million, after which it is expected to increase steadily to 5 million new births per year.

Xers, 41.6 million. If, however, an apples-to-apples measurement were utilized—the same nineteen-year framework, for example—Gen-X (1965-1983) would comprise 66 million (see Figure 2): smaller than the Boomers, to be sure; small, absolutely not. Obviously, some agreement on how to measure a generation is necessary so that when Boomers are compared to Gen-Xers or Gen-Ys, or their own forebears, the Silent Generation, one knows exactly who is being referred to.

The problem with generations is not that groups cannot be categorized as sharing some common historical orientation that affects their behavior, but in defining who exactly comprises a generation. At least four problems are identified that makes categorizing a serious problem in even determining the size of the group when labels such as Boomers or Xers are used in place of discreet categories and in the absence of agreed upon generational perimeters. One problem is the different periods assigned the birth group: 1940, 1945, 1947, 1961, 1963, 1965. Another problem is the inconsistency in generation ranges: 1940-1955, 1946-1965, 1961-1981, 1964-1976. Still another is the inexplicable range of dates used by the same author to measure different generational groups: 1946-1965 contrasted to 1966-1970. And lastly, there is the all-to-frequent tendency to simply talk about the group without ever clearly specifying who is meant: The Boomers, Gen-Xers, or alternately, “those born after 1955...” or “those born in the mid-1960s...” This problem is further compounded by the diverse uses of the term cohort, discussed below.

Cohorts and Lifestyles. Cohort is widely used interchangeably with generation (Edmunds and Turner 2002; Muller 1997; Fullerton and Tossi 2001; Cooperman 1995; Nichols 1990). This would not be a problem if it was simply a synonym and there was a standard unit of measure for a generation. Such a consensus does not presently exist, so the problem of measurement that plagues generational definitions also taints cohort. The difficulty with cohort is compounded because it has other, nongenerational meanings. Sometimes it is used to refer to a group who share a common bond. This is one reason for its interchangeability with generation, since both can be used to designate a group of people who share a historical framework that shapes their mindset. But cohort is also used to link together multiple generations who share some bond. Mueller (2001) does this when he talks about European royalty from 1790-1939. More commonly, however, marketers use the term to recognize horizontal slices within a generation.

This generational slice is frequently in ten year intervals (Muller 1997; Ryder 1985; Becker 1991; Gersick

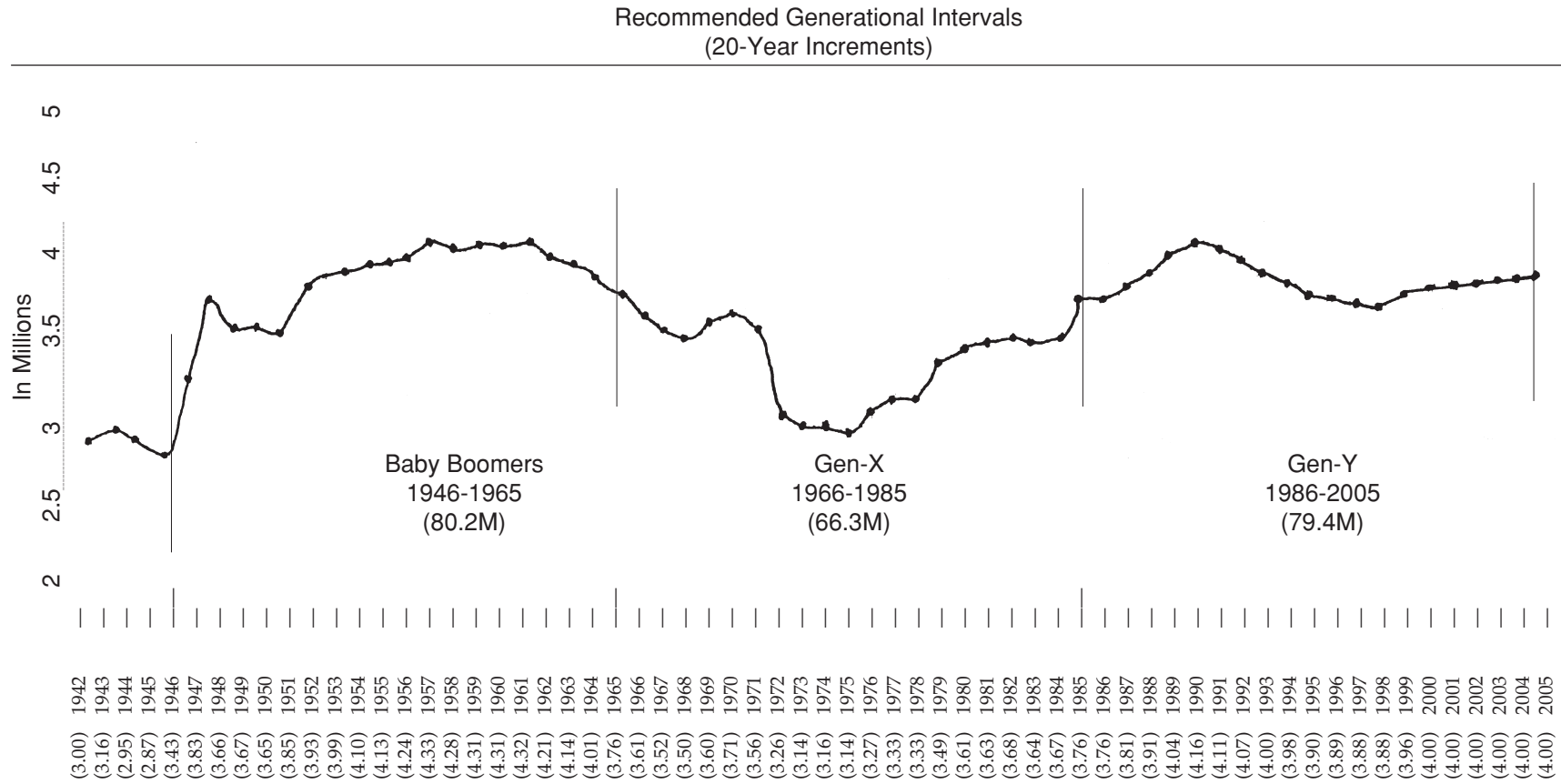
and Krams 2002; Zuschlag and Whitbourne 1994; Iams 1993; Deegan 2002; Williamson 2002) though five-year ranges are fairly frequent (Edmunds and Turner 2002; Allanasio 1998; Ebenkamp 2002; Williamson 2002) and seven year intervals sometimes occur (see Wolburg and Pokrywcznski 2002). In fact, it is not uncommon for an author to talk simultaneously about a twenty-year (generational) cohort *and* a five- or ten-year cohort segment, thus a reference to “the Boomers...” could include those born between 1946-1965, 1946-1955, and/or 1960-1964.

The use of horizontal slices is an attempt to distinguish intragenerational subgroup lifestyle differences. This intragenerational cohort difference allows for more discrete timeframes, if only for practical tracking purposes. A cohort can be thought of as exhibiting a characteristic lifecycle, and different cohorts with different starting dates might show substantially different lifecycles. People born over a twenty-year generational frame may share similar historical references, but at their generational extremes they are also different. This is the rationale, when it is used, for the division into Early-Boomers and Later-Boomers (Muller 1997; Sweeney 2002; Paul 2002). Early-Boomers are those born in the first ten-year generational frame (1946-1955), Late-Boomers are those born in the second, later generational frame (1956-1965). It is common to call such a division a cohort. In this usage, two ten-year cohorts comprise a generation. A finer distinction is sometimes used by further subdividing cohorts into five-year intervals. Sometimes two five-year cohorts are viewed as a generation; other times, four five-year cohorts suggest a generation. These five- and ten-year cohort distinctions may or may not show subgroup differences. If they do not, marketers can treat the generation or ten-year cohort group as a homogenous entity. If five- or ten-year distinctions are observed, marketing efforts can be fine-tuned to target distinctive attributes within the larger group. This is the whole point of target marketing (see Weinstein 1994; Peter and Olson 2002:376-400).

A few examples illustrate homogeneity by generation, and the finer homogenous distinctions that may or may not exist for five- or ten-year cohort divisions. This homogeneity/heterogeneity-yet-homogenous distinction might be characterized as the similar-but-different intergenerational/different-but-similar intragenerational thesis.

A study of college-educated women by Zuker et al. (2002) across three twenty-year generations (women in their 20s, 40s, and 60s) found distinct personality traits amongst the groups. One finding was that women in their twenties rated themselves significantly

Figure 5
Live Births: 1942-2005



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lower on identity certainty, confidence, and concern about aging than women in their forties, who in turn rated themselves significantly lower than women in their sixties.

A finer dichotomization by ten-year cohort periods conducted by Zuschlage and Whitbourne (1994) did not find any significant differences in college students' psychosocial development between cohorts. Sweeney (2002) came to a similar conclusion when she determined men and women were coming to resemble one another with respect to relationships in her study across two five-year cohorts. Taken together, these findings suggest the generational influence is greater than the cohort influence, supporting the similar-but-different intergenerational thesis.

This may not always be the case, depending on the attribute (e.g., education/marriage) or product (e.g., insurance) being studied. Chen et al. (2001), for example, found that the Boomer generation purchased markedly less life insurance than predecessor generations; however, there were distinct and important differences within the Boomer group when five- and ten-year increments were utilized. This supports the generational homogeneity market idea, yet it also recognizes distinct heterogeneity influences within the larger group—the different-but-similar intragenerational thesis.

The division into ten-year cohorts is well-established in gerontology (Bond and Coleman 1990; Atlmann 1981; Jerrome 1992; Bytheway 1989; Kolhi 1988; O'Donnell 1985). Ten-year cohorts are typically used to differentiate young or active seniors (65-74) from older seniors (75-84) and the elderly (ages 85-plus) because of the different needs of the three age groups. Ten-year cohort breakdowns are likely to become even more common as marketers discover the over-fifty-fives. Lazer (1985), for example, divides the "matures" into four ten-year discrete age groups, each with distinct needs and interests: 55-64, 65-74, 75-84, 85-plus. The same cohort distinction may hold for younger age groups: for example, twenty-year-olds who are still in the mate selection pool compared to thirty-year-olds who are starting a family.

A five-year cohort breakdown may be further illuminating. The 55 to 59-year-old group is further from retirement than the 60 to 64-year-old group, who must face the more imminent aspects of retirement, which may affect their interests. Similarly, recently retired 65 to 69-year-olds may have different concerns in their early phase of retirement than those 70 to 74 who are more firmly "settled" into a retirement lifestyle. Likewise, early-twenty-year-olds are generally still dating, while late-twenty-year-olds are more likely to be in a committed relationship, whereas early-thirty-year-

olds have very young children compared to late-thirty-year-olds whose children are likely to be in school.

Karl Mannheim first brought attention to the generational influence in his seminal work, "Generations," published in 1927. Norman Ryder fine-tuned Mannheim's work in 1959, when he focused on the importance of ten-year cohorts over the longer, more aggregate generational approach. Ryder's work coincided with the growing interest during the second half of the twentieth century to examine lifestyle choices by finer market segments (Edmunds and Turner 2002; Becker 1991; Gunter and Furnham 1992; Chudacoff 1989). The need to more accurately pinpoint markets, which spurred the development of psychographics in the 1970s, may lead to greater attention to five-year cohort increments. This appears to be what some writers are moving toward when they subdivide ten-year cohorts into five-year frames, even if they may not articulate the reason for examining five-year market segments or mislabel them as generations. This would mean that the present ten-year Early- and Late-Boomer categorizations would be further subdivided into four five-year increments: Early-Early Boomers (1946-1950), Late-Early Boomers (1951-1955), Early-Late Boomers (1956-1960), and Late-Late Boomers (1961-1965). This (somewhat) cumbersome generational subdivision may be one of the reasons no such labels have been broached, and marketers have kept to the more straightforward Early/Late-Boomer cohort division. Nevertheless, a four-tiered Boomer breakdown does show discrete taste preferences.

Take music consumption. The Early-Early Boomer marched into their teens to the beat of Elvis Presley, Buddy Holly, Roy Orbison, and the like, during the late 1950s (circa 1958), Late-Early Boomers came of age during the Beatles and the British invasion that took place in the early-1960s (circa 1963). Rock and roll underwent further change with the psychedelic sounds of Jimi Hendrix and The Doors that reached out to Early-Late Boomers (circa 1968) and then was tempered by the pop rock of early-1970s musicians like Patti LaBelle and Olivia Newton-John, who appealed to Late-Late Boomers (circa 1973). The early-1980s witnessed a whole new musical scene with such groups as Metallica and Motley Crue (circa 1983) that reached out to Early-Early Gen-Xers. This initial musical exposure continues to influence broadcasting today in the form of "Oldies" stations that segment these different markets: classic rock, hard rock, soft rock, alternative rock, progressive rock, and so forth.

The attempt to separate Early- from Later-Boomers is an important development that more clearly differ-

entiate lifestyle trends within the generational group, and may benefit further by subdividing ten-year cohorts into more discreet five-year ranges. Interestingly, there has been no attempt to extend even this Early/Late dichotomy beyond the Boomers and apply it to Early/Late Gen-Xers or Early/Late Gen-Ys, let alone more discrete five-year Gen-X and Gen-Y categories. The absence of even simple ten-year generational cohort divisions for any group other than the Boomers is puzzling, particularly given the widely held view in marketing today that the more recent Gen-X and Gen-Y groups are much more diverse in taste-preference and consumption habits than predecessor generations (Ritchie 1995; Mitchell 1999; Rosen 2001; Napoli and Ewing 2001).

The problem of using cohort for a five-year age category is that cohort tends to be used more often to delineate ten-year generational slices, further complicating the already confused use of the term cohort. Compounding the issue is the frequent use of cohort to label twenty-year generational ranges. Before marketers can move to a five-year "cohort" framework, there must first be a working definition of the term cohort. The next section of this paper proposes some solutions to the divergent use of both the term generation and cohort.

Fixing Parameters

Generational Markers. One reason for the wide disparity in generational dating is that there does not appear to be a definition in the marketing literature as to what constitutes a generation or cohort. One dictionary definition of a generation refers to all the offspring that are at the same stage of descent from a common ancestor, such as a father/mother and son/daughter. There is another, less anthropological, dictionary definition of a generation that is more widely embraced by marketers. It delineates a group of individuals born and living at the same time who, by virtue of their birth placement, share some common cultural or social characteristics. This suggests that a generation begins with the birth of child at some historical period and ends with the child maturing and establishing his/her own progeny, the next generation.

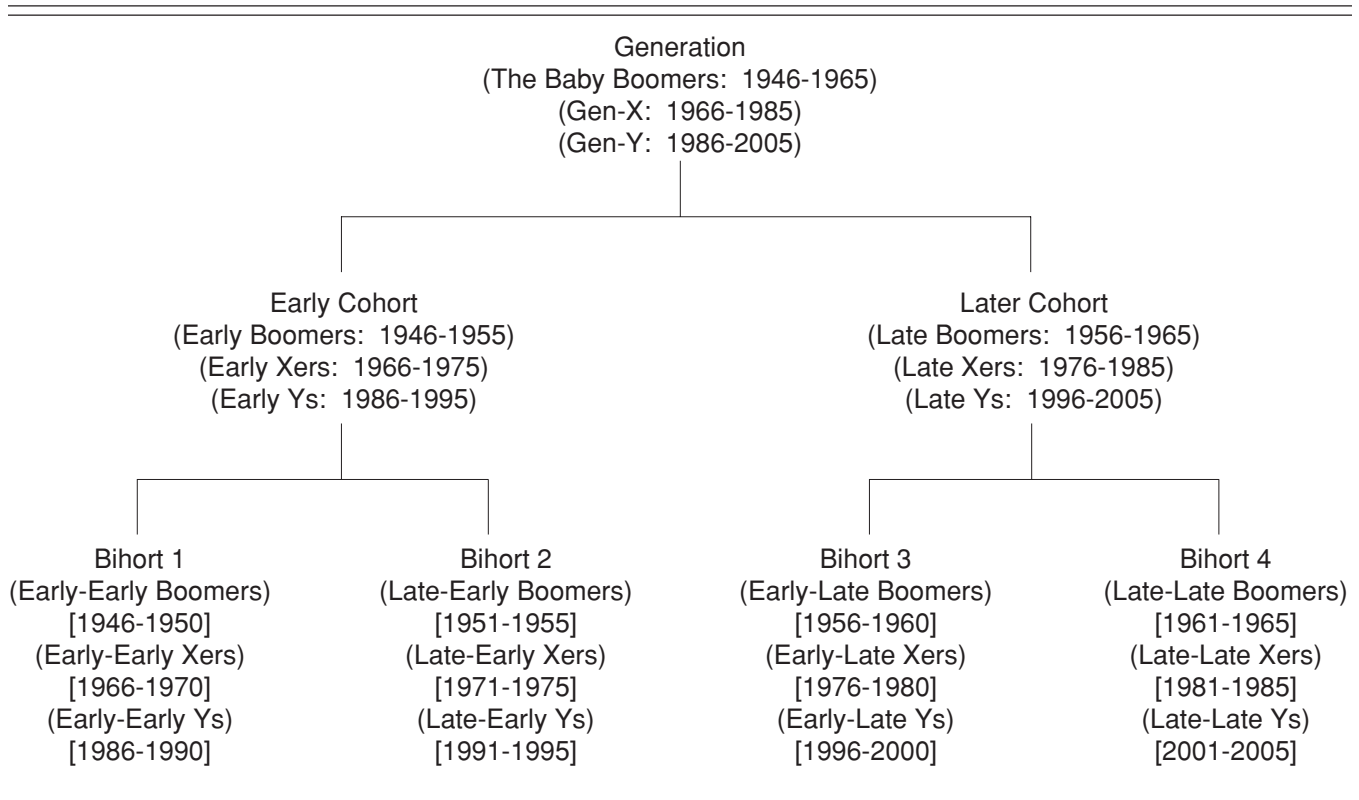
In modern industrial society, a person comes of age when he/she finishes school and enters the full-time labor force (Heinz 1999a; Lowe 2001; Thiessen and Looker 1999; see also Stubblefield and Keane 1994; Mahdi et al. 1996). Young adults may still live at home but they now have the potential for self-sufficiency. It is during this phase of young adulthood that the mate selection process intensifies and marriage soon oc-

curs. This process explains why those who talked about a generation in the 1930s, such as the social philosopher Ortega y Gasset (1883-1955) and the sociologist Karl Mannheim (1893-1947), classified a generation to encompass, respectively, fifteen and seventeen years. The first half of the twentieth century required, at best, some high school for job entry: 75 percent of the population over twenty-five years of age had less than a high school education in 1940 (*120 Years of Education*: 18). During the second half of the twentieth century, a high school degree was required and some college encouraged so this process of work-entry began somewhat later: by 1990, 77 percent of the population over twenty-five years of age had at least a high school education (*120 Years of Education*: 18).

Erickson (1950), taking these changes into account in his seminal analysis of the life course, established 18-22 as the period when young people today come of age and moved from adolescence to adult status (see also Goldscheider 1999; Heinz 1999b). If a four-year college degree becomes more important for job entry and people postpone independence by continuing their college education, the coming-of-age work/mate selection/marriage process may be delayed and fixed at a later date. Although the delay in independence is not yet a mainstream occurrence, it is starting to occur, which explains why some commentators are beginning to urge that adult status does not begin until age twenty-four (Alwin and McCammon 1999; Glenn 1999), which could change the definition of a generation in the twenty-first century. Young adult status continues, at least through the end of the twentieth century, to be defined along the parameters established by Erikson at a mean of twenty-years-of-age: less than 26 percent of Americans have at least a four-year college degree (*Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 2001:217). Twenty (+/- two years) can therefore be established as generational parameters. This is the period that many young adults break with their parents, move into the workforce and soon, with marriage and progeny, begin the generational cycle over again. Though often not articulated in the literature, this twenty-year generation framework is what many marketers are intuitively arguing when they dichotomize the Boomers into two ten-year Early/Late cohorts.

Where to begin the generation cycle is also problematic, as was seen in the range of start-dates for a generation in the first section of this paper. Some established the Boomer period as starting as early as 1940, others as late as 1950. These start periods were acknowledged to be atypical. Most writers use the dates between 1943-1947, with the immediate post-war period, 1946, the most widely utilized. The rea-

Figure 6
Birth Groups and Timelines



son for this is that the post-war period ushered in a new historical phase of economic prosperity and optimism that did not characterize those generations raised during the Depression and World War II (aka the Silent Generation).³ This new prosperity dramatically reshaped the mindset of those raised during the post-war period. Using a twenty-year generation frame, the Boomer generation should encompass those born between 1946-1965. This is a frequently agreed upon time-period in the literature. This would mean that, traveling backwards, the Silent Generation should refer to those born between 1926-1945, and the Great War Generation to those born between 1906-1925, though a case could be made for using either fifteen or seventeen years to demarcate these early-twentieth century groups because the coming-of-age standards began a little sooner. The decision to use fifteen, seventeen, or twenty year ranges for pre-Boomers needs to be established by marketers when discussing intergenerational differences of these early generations.

The real problem begins after the Boomers, and dates for Gen-Xers and Ys are wide-ranging. There is no reason for the range to be different than the range of the Boomers because all three groups inhabit the second half of the twentieth century and share similar coming-

of-age standards (though the next, post-Y generation, which will start by our date method in 2006, may or may not share similar standards). It appears that the shorter five- and ten-year frames being used by marketers today is an attempt to more finely evaluate intragenerational segments in the market, which is in keeping with the late-twentieth century recognition that mass markets are a thing of the past and more discreet market segments need to be utilized (Edmunds and Turner 2002; Becker 1991; Gunter and Furnham 1992; Chudacoff 1989). These five- and ten-year frames, however, are *slices* of a generation, and should not be incorrectly identified as a generation to avoid confusion.

Cohort Markers. The word cohort is derived from the Latin and literally means a division into tens. This ten-year cohort division was initially urged by Ryder (1985 [1959]) and, until recently, when five-year periods began to creep into the marketing literature, was the standard across a variety of disciplines. One of the primary reasons the ten-year cohort frame is so widely accepted is the abundance of literature that establishes the importance of ten-year markers—20, 30, 40—to delineate the crucial role that ten-year turning points play in a person’s biological and psychological development (Erikson 1950, 1959; Gersick and Kram 2002;

Morgan 1998; O'Donnell 1985) and in one's spending habits and purchasing decisions (Attanasio 1998; Chen et al. 2001; Deegan 2002; Imas 1993; Nichols 1990). There is no such importance imputed five-year periods, though there may be some structural variations within the wider society at five-year intervals that *could* give rise to subcultural lifestyle changes within the generational group.

The use of five-year cohort ranges is simply not semantically correct. Five-year ranges may be important segments within the generational group and for this reason should be taken into consideration. However, the term cohort for this five-year segment confuses the identity of the intragenerational group. It might be better, therefore, to further dichotomize cohort and call it a bihort. The term itself is heuristically intuitive: two five-year bihorts constitute one ten-year cohort; two ten-year cohorts comprise a generation.

There is an alternative that needs to be considered. The terms Cuspers and Core-Boomers have sometimes been used to dichotomize Early- from Late-Boomers (Paul 2002). Cuspers, however, can be applied to those at either end of the generational continuum, those on the cusp. This group may not share the full range of values, attitudes, and lifestyles as those individuals born in the middle or core of the generation, since they were born close to the last/next generational group and this proximity may cause some generational attitude spillover. Cuspers would be those five-year bihorts at either end of the generational group (Early/Late Cuspers), while those in the ten-year range, in the middle of the generation constitute its Core. The importance of this middle core is noted by Ebenkamp (2002: 20), who reported the recent findings by Yankelovich Partners that women "smack in the middle" of the Boomers "are actually losing interest in looking younger." This distinction between Cuspers and Cores is an alternative method to segment generations. Because the terms used to designate the group are different from the earlier suggested four bihort/two cohort division, it need not pose a problem when used in the literature, because the terms are applicable to different generational segments. For example: Early-Early/Late-Late Boomers (1946-1950/1961-1965) versus Early/Late Cuspers (1946-1950/1961-1965) + Cores (1951-1960). It should be noted that to avoid confusion when talking about the Cores, they are not referred to as a cohort even though they comprise a ten-year span.

Conclusions

The realization that a mass market no longer exists, at least to the degree it once did, is a phenomena that

occurred only in the second half of the twentieth century. It was this realization that led Ryder to fine-tune Mannheim's generational distinction and to talk about ten-year cohorts. The increased use of five-year "cohorts" in marketing literature is fairly recent and seems to reflect the growing interest to further segment intragenerational differences. There is nothing wrong with this; indeed, it is commendable and may be necessary—some authors have found distinct lifestyles within bihorts, though others have not. It is necessary to examine these bihorts if one is to determine whether such distinctions are there, and found or not, this will help fine-tune marketing strategies. The bihort distinction is not as fine-tuned as psychographics and is not meant to replace it. The bihort distinction is important, however, because it does more finely define segments by age group, a traditional and relatively straightforward means by which to determine market tastes. A five-year bihort may not be as illuminating as a ten-year cohort from the standpoint of differentiating market needs, attitudes and preferences; on the other hand, it might on occasion indicate significant cohort distinctions and therefore can be an important heuristic tool when it is necessary to distinguish intracohort differences.

The problem is not with attempts to examine generations, or even in segmenting generations into five- or ten-year horizontal slices. The problem is that "generation" is widely defined and often confused with cohort, and that cohort is often incorrectly used to encompass a five- ten- and twenty-year period. All this causes problems for marketers because there is no agreed upon meaning when talking about such heuristically sound groups as the Boomers, Xers and Ys.

Problems cannot be addressed until they are identified. In the process of identifying the generational-cohort problem, some solutions have been offered. Generations should be discreet twenty-year periods, at least until changes occur in the present maturation cycle that could extend the present twenty-year lifecycle. But a generation is a large timeline. To differentiate early from late generational differences, ten-year cohorts, already widely used, should be employed and not used interchangeably with twenty-year generational frames. In those instances where a cohort might be further dichotomized for distinct cohort taste differences, a bihort is recommended to avoid confusion with the term cohort. Other suggestions to resolve the problem are welcome. The intent of this paper is not to put forth *the* solution but to urge an ending to the confusion. This is necessary so that when marketers and others are talking about the various groups there will be a standard of measure. Without

this measurement standard, who the Boomers, Xers, and Ys are will never be clear, and the size of the group and their taste preferences will not be known, which is precisely the goal of target marketing and market segmentation.

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Endnotes

1. Caution needs to be exercised in interpreting census data that is relied upon to determine market size. The present analysis relies exclusively on live birth data, which tracks the number of births that occur in the country on a year-to-year basis. Since these individuals are all born in the same cultural milieu at a specific historical period they are more likely to share a similar mindset. Census data is also available on the resident population in the country. These numbers are typically higher as they include immigrants. Because these individuals are born at the same historical moment but in a different cultural milieu they may or may not share cohort / generation lifestyle bonds with native-born Americans. For those interested in the sheer size of the market, and not cohort / generational lifestyles, resident population figures are a better mechanism to determine size. For example, if Figure 2 was relied on for population (cohort effect) membership, the size of the population between 30-39 (1962-1971 in 2001) would be 37.6 million, whereas if resident population data was taken into account those in the same age bracket would now number 42.9 million. The difference is not particularly strong for those under 20 years of age.
2. Similarly, young people who came of age during the late-1960s and early-1970s had to confront the growing

disillusionment with the Vietnam War. The conflict that raged around America's involvement in Vietnam would be much different than the attitudes of young people who came of age during the Persian Gulf War, or those a decade later when Afghanistan and later Iraq were invaded in the aftermath of the World Trade Center bombings.

3. Numerous authors argue that a generation only occurs when there is a coincidence of major socio-cultural and/or economic transformations/shocks that delineate one generation from another. But there is *always* something that marks one group off from another. For those who

lived through the global conflagration of World War II, Vietnam might appear a minor, regional skirmish; for the Vietnam generation, the Grenada invasion (1983) or the subsequent Persian Gulf War (1991) pales in importance to the years of conflict that "disrupted" the social world of the late sixties, early seventies. It could be argued in the Existential tradition that nothing is as important as something, which is to say that those raised when nothing cataclysmic occurs in their world will have their views and attitudes framed as uniquely as the flanking generations to which some earth-shaking experience occurred.

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