



**Interview with Roberta Katz, co-author
*Gen Z, Explained***

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KENNEALLY: If you remember life before YouTube and Facebook, then you are not a member of Generation Z. Born in the mid-1990s, along with Netscape and other early graphical web browsers, members of Generation Z comprise the first generation never to live without the internet. They expect to inherit from previous generations an onerous legacy – a world in crisis over climate change, inequity, and social revolution. While most takes on Gen Z are unforgivingly judgmental, describing lives permanently distracted by social media, US and UK research in anthropology, linguistics, history, and sociology now offer a richer, more optimistic view of a confident, collaborative cohort.

Welcome to CCC's podcast series. I'm Christopher Kenneally for Velocity of Content.

Roberta Katz is a senior research scholar at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, an interdisciplinary research lab at Stanford University. She is coauthor of *Gen Z, Explained: The Art of Living in a Digital Age*, recently out from the University of Chicago Press.

Roberta Katz joins me now from Palo Alto, California, to share the team's findings, based on interviews with 120 Gen Zers conducted by other Gen Zers. Welcome to the program, Roberta Katz.

KATZ: Thank you, Chris. I'm delighted to be here.

KENNEALLY: Well, we appreciate you joining us, Roberta. We want to discuss this book, which is fascinating and well worth the patience it takes to make your way through it and to learn about Gen Z. Our own era isn't the first, of course, to see a great technological revolution spark an equally tremendous social revolution. The Industrial Revolution, you point out, drove a generation of young people away from farms and villages into cities where new social constructs were born. So tell us, how is the digital revolution that's already transformed all of media and commerce also remaking society? Generation Z is the most diverse generation yet. Is that what makes them so different from any past generation?

KATZ: Well, that's one of the factors, Chris, but there are many factors. I like to point out to people that the digital revolution has come on with unprecedented speed. It has presented



us with unprecedented scope and scale of information. And most importantly, it has kind of given a rocket boost to how we communicate. The internet is all about communication. And if you think about the importance of communication to human life and the fact that we have this extraordinarily powerful new tool, you begin to understand why this revolution has us all kind of with our heads spinning.

KENNEALLY: Many of our listeners will be familiar with, *Free to Be... You and Me*, which appeared first as a children's record album in 1972 and then later as a television special produced by Marlo Thomas and the Ms. Foundation for Women. What's critical there is how it shaped – it was part of shaping Generation Z because of the values that *Free to Be* expressed. It expressed values of individuality, tolerance, comfort with one's identity, and sort of post-gender neutrality. That is key to understanding Gen Z.

KATZ: Absolutely. They are living the legacy that was set down by past generations, or at least one generation – I think two. But the fact that they had access to learning about so many more ways of living, both online and then in their schoolrooms because of immigration, because of urbanization, because of these other changes that have happened, they have a familiarity with more ways of living than was true in the past.

KENNEALLY: And they have familiarization with intersecting identities. There isn't a single identity. They are overlapping, connecting. It allows them to exist in a variety of different spaces at the same time.

KATZ: Exactly. Humans have always had multiple identities. You have an identity as a son, as a brother, in your professional life, as a father. Those are somewhat different identities. What has changed is that largely because you can find so many diverse communities online, you have more pieces of that identity that you can live out. So we talk in the book a lot about what you reference as the intersection of all of these identities that together form one person and the uniqueness of every person.

KENNEALLY: But at the same time, there is an emphasis among Gen Zers on the whole self – being whole. And it strikes me it's an interesting challenge to be both whole and to have these multiplicity of identities. That's where this notion of trust comes in. You report based on the interviews you conducted and your team conducted that many Gen Zers want to know who you are and that that will lead to trust – whether they friend you on Facebook or follow you on LinkedIn.

KATZ: Yes. We talk a lot about the importance of this term authenticity. They have grown up online, where they've been exposed to scams, to fake news, to inordinate number of ads, and they've gotten very savvy about, as it were, separating wheat from chaff. By authenticity, what they mean is what you say is consistent with what you do. So they're



OK with someone presenting a doctored photo or whatever, as long as that person is saying truthfully, this is a doctored photo. I'm doctoring this because I want to present myself this way. But if they say this is not a doctored photo when it is, then you've broken that trust, and you are not being authentic.

KENNEALLY: And the emphasis for Gen Z, you point out, is around relevance and relatability. I think that would be a key for anyone hoping to communicate with them, whether it was a parent trying to communicate with someone in Generation Z, whether it was an organization, a company, an institution, a university. Relatability, relevance – these are all critical to them.

KATZ: Absolutely. And where that comes from, as we point out in the book, is that they've grown up with such an abundance of information, they had to get good at sorting what they needed from what they didn't. There are attendant worries about that, and there are some people who are starting to – in how they educate about online information seeking – they are starting to try to address that, because it's not an absolute good to be dismissive of something that you don't think is relevant. But it comes from having learned how to deal with an abundance of information.

KENNEALLY: Reaching this generation is a challenge. It's a challenge for anyone not a member. It's probably even a challenge for themselves to really understand each other fully, since they exist in this cyberspace, although they value personal contact.

KATZ: One of our most surprising findings to us was that almost to a person among the people we interviewed, when we asked what is your favorite form of communication – we thought they would mention something online. Almost to a person, they said face to face. They value their friends. They value their human experience much more than we had expected.

KATZ: One of the conclusions in the book is that we believe these young people, being as savvy as they are about online existence, are fighting very hard to preserve the human, messy experience – the messy part of the human experience.

KENNEALLY: They seem to really favor collaboration, but of a different kind. These are collaborations based on teams, based on identifying people who can contribute for a specific reason, and these are also teams that essentially are leaderless.

KATZ: Absolutely. If you think of it, this, too, relates to how they grew up. I'll never forget when one of my children came home and said I'm going to work on a project. We get a group grade, and we will all work on it together. For my husband and myself, that was like, what do you mean, a group grade? These young people grew up absolutely working together. And then if you think about what they experienced online with fanfiction groups,



Wikipedia, GoFundMe, the number of online group efforts that have been successful has influenced them. So both through their educational experiences and what they were doing online, they realized that working together was positive.

One of the other surprises from our study was that when we asked them about leaders and leadership, one of the things many of them said is, well, we choose a leader based on the need. So you could have multiple leaders during the course of some team's work based on the expertise of the different members of the team. And in some cases, they said we just don't need a leader. Everybody knows what to do. That was a big change, but they are making it work. And it's one of the places where as they go into workplaces, I think we're going to see some friction.

KENNEALLY: Interesting. And we expect to hear from Gen Z a kind of complaint around what they are inheriting – the climate change conundrum, inequity, social revolution of all kinds. Yet in spite of that gloom, which is gloomy for me as well – you don't have to be in Generation Z to think that's a gloomy prospect – in spite of that gloom, this is a generation that you say really has some hope. They have some optimism. And you also make the case that they are not self-centered, which many would accuse them of being, but they are self-reliant. That seems an important difference, too.

KATZ: Chris, I'm so glad you point that out. They have learned to go get the information that they need. They can go to the internet. It's not that they reject all forms of expertise, but they will seek out the expertise that they feel they need to complement what they already know. So a didactic form of teaching them, which is to say if someone says, well, let me tell you what you need, is not going to sit well with them.

They are self-reliant. They're not self-centered in a selfish way, because they do care so much about each other, because they are used to working with each other, and because they feel, I think rightly, that they have huge challenges in front of them. They are disappointed in their elders, I think is the best way to put it, for not having solved these problems. It's a natural human reaction of, well, how come you've left me with this mess? But they have no choice to be hopeful and pragmatic about how they're going to address these changes. Climate change, of course, is a big one. Gun violence in schools is another place where they've come together. You can find lots of places where they do it by coming together.

KENNEALLY: I'll honestly tell you that as I was reading through the book, there were moments when I had to really continue to get ahead, to move page to page, because there were some comments and some insights that were hard for me to swallow. I'm not a member of Gen Z, so for me, this was a perspective that seemed alien to me. Yet the



reward in the book is to get to that message of optimism. I just found it striking and surprising, and I bet you and your team did, too.

KATZ: Yes, we did. We did. I think it's safe to say that the four of us, all from older generations, we started this study because we couldn't understand these students we were dealing with, and we all had the sense that they were not just young people, but they were really different young people from the young people we had been counseling and teaching in prior years. Something had changed, and we didn't understand it. That was really what led to this study. They are the future. So the whole point of the book is to promote cross-generational understanding.

One of the fun things that's happened as the book has now gotten out is that I'm also hearing from younger people who are saying, oh, I didn't realize that we are that different from our parents or grandparents in some particulars. In some ways, they know they're different. But in other ways, they just hadn't stopped to think about how different their own upbringing had been from that of their parents or grandparents.

KENNEALLY: Well, I appreciate you shining a light on those differences. Roberta Katz, senior research scholar with the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University and coauthor of *Gen Z, Explained: The Art of Living in a Digital Age*, thanks so much for joining me on the program today.

KATZ: Thanks so much, Chris. It was a pleasure to talk with you.

KENNEALLY: Our co-producer and recording engineer is Jeremy Brieske of Burst Marketing. You can subscribe to the program wherever you go for podcasts, and please do follow us on Twitter and on Facebook. I'm Christopher Kenneally. Thanks for joining me on Velocity of Content from CCC.

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