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Generation What? An Outcast of Generation X

Amye Hommel

Reflecting upon my writing is one of the most difficult tasks I have ever been asked to do. Looking back upon my work, I realize that this is one of the most important papers I have written. Not only was this piece the first paper I have written for a writing studio, it also enabled me to release some of the frustrations I have with my generation.

Generation X. Slackers. Twentysomethings. There has been so much written about this group. There have been countless attempts by the media to analyze them. The media panders to and laughs at them, almost in the same breath. They discuss the group's alienation and disaffection, and their pride in multiculturalism. The media mocks their seemingly constant depression and applauds their tolerance and open-mindedness. Movies such as *Reality Bites* and *Singles* show this group in all its glory. Most people in this age group watch these movies and feel a connection with them. The backdrops of these characters' lives, and the experiences these characters face are similar to their own. However, I, as well as many of my peers, cannot relate to any of the so-called "Generation X" movies, TV shows, music, etc. While we are all in the correct age group, these forms of entertainment are for the products of a white, middle-class, suburban upbringing. This category leaves out a considerable amount of young Americans.

The whole concept of a Generation X reminds me of junior high school, where knowing the right people, wearing the right clothes, and listening to the right music means status and popularity. Back in junior high, there was the popular crowd rich kids, athletes, and beautiful people. These popular people had one thing in common conformity. They all wore the same type of clothes with the same brand names. They went to all the socially key functions parties, dances, etc. As much as twentysomethings would like to think they have progressed beyond this point, they have not. Generation X also has a popular crowd. Instead of going to the socially key parties, they attend concert events like Lollapalooza and Woodstock '94. Instead of going out of their way to look like everyone else, they go out of their way *not* to look like everyone else and end up looking like everyone else in the process. The audience at a Lollapalooza concert is a study in nonconformist conformity. Both sexes wear baggy jeans, flannels, and stupid t-shirts. When I write "stupid" it is not just my opinion the wearer thinks the shirt is stupid as well, precisely the reason he or she is wearing it. These t-shirts must be worn with a sense of irony. If the wearer is male, the t-shirt must be oversized. If the wearer is female, the t-shirt must be undersized. Regardless of who is wearing the shirt, it is vital that the shirt not look extremely new. One type of stupid t-shirt that appears to be gaining popularity is the baseball style t-shirt with the iron-on decal of a rock band. These were extremely popular back in the late '70's and early '80's. By wearing the shirt, one *appears* not to care about fashion, and yet looks very fashionable indeed. Other essential accessories include body piercing and tattoos. It is no longer enough to have a pierced ear or nose to be considered truly "unique", one must have a pierced navel, lip, tongue, eyebrow, and nipple. Tattoos are popular as well, especially ones that involve enduring excruciating pain while receiving them. Those who wear these fashions claim they are trying to be different from the "norm" and that they are rebelling from the mainstream. However, like the junior high school competitions to see who could be the most popular, Generation X battles to see who can be the most different and/or "alternative."

The competition does not stop with the clothes one wears. It continues in the music one listens to. Until the emergence of the idea of a Generation X, groups such as Soundgarden and Pearl Jam (as Mother Love Bone) did not get much airplay on the radio or sell many records. In fact, if one was a fan of these groups (which at the time were few and far between) and one wished to read about them, one would have to read "heavy metal" rock magazines such as *Circus*. Of course, Mr. and Ms. Generation X would never buy a heavy metal magazine or listen to heavy metal music, because it is good to be different, but not too different. The correct kind of different is what gets respect these days. Owning a Tony Bennet CD is the aural equivalent to the stupid t-shirt it is listened to

with irony. Owning a Yanni CD, however hard one tries, could not be listened to with irony, because it is the wrong kind of different. Bands with the right kind of different quality include Pearl Jam, Nirvana, Stone Temple Pilots, and Smashing Pumpkins. All these bands are consistently marketed as "alternative" bands, but each group has sold millions of records. How alternative can a band possibly be if their albums go platinum? Fans of these groups argue that the music is different than the music that is played on the radio. At one time, this argument had merit. However, now it is difficult to find a radio station that targets youth that does not play any songs by these bands. Clearly, there is an alternative mainstream when music is in question.

The quest for alternativeness does not end there. It crops up in the most unusual places, such as home decor. Granted, the typical twentysomething person cannot afford a palatial estate with luxurious furnishings. However, the way some choose to dress their homes is like the way they choose to dress themselves- stupid, but worn with irony. Walter Kirn points this out in his essay, "Twentysomethings." He criticizes an article in *Details* magazine about the bedroom decor of young men:

Paolo, described as a "sound engineer/motor cycle racer", takes obvious pride in his wacky scavenging, in the fragments he has shored against his ruin: "I found the dentist's chair on the street; the sofa is the back of a van." Then there's Craig, a "graphic designer/DJ" (the cute juxtapositions never end), who boasts: "The trunk's from a

thrift shop, the cowhide rug was a gift." The implication, of course, is that one can never be too aware of the ironic signals one is sending, even while alone, in private. (230)

ead as all the other characters, for that is the only way Generation X can achieve the goal of multiculturalism.

If one does not fit the Generation X mold- young, gorgeous, alternative, white, middle-class one cannot be invited to the Generation X party. The competition to see who can be more alternative, more ironic, more alienated has grown to ridiculous proportions. However, for those of us on the outside looking in, this is not an issue, for we have no expectations for us to live up to. Since we are not part of the alternative

Probably one of the more frustrating aspects of this group is hearing how alienated and misunderstood they are as a whole. Some X-types truly are as alienated and as misunderstood as they claim to be, having been victims of child abuse or *truly* dysfunctional, loveless families (*not* the new definition of dysfunctional family, which everyone seems to be a part of). However, most "alienated" types seem to believe alienation comes from moping around as if it were a badge of honor, something to take pride in. Often, they align themselves with oppressed ethnic groups, claiming they can understand their pain. It is also trendy to be part of an oppressed minority, thanks to the efforts of the faux-alienated.

Although minority status is desirable in Generation X, there is very little minority representation. Token minorities on TV shows or in movies are quite typical. The token minority almost always falls into one of two categories: 1) a stereotype, such as a Black college student whose sole purpose is not to get an education, but to play basketball (as on *Beverly Hills, 90210*) or 2) an extremely underdeveloped character whose primary functions are to be scenery for the main characters and occasionally to offer advice when someone else is in crisis (as on *Models, Inc.*). These characters are never the focus of the show. They are usually relegated to sideshow, subplot status. Of course, no matter what the character is like, they cannot be too Black or Latino or Asian. They can occasionally stand up for themselves when a grave injustice has been committed against them because of their skin color, but they must never take too much pride in their history and culture. For instance, the Black college student can be on the basketball team, but he could not be a member of the Black Students Union. Regardless of their skin color, they must act just as whitebr

mainstream, we are the true alternativesomething Generation X could never be in their wildest dreams.

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