Pharmacy Education, Make Way for GenZ

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ABSTRACT

Although our classrooms are filled with students spanning multiple generations, students entering pharmacy school are largely members of Generation Z (GenZ). To optimize pharmacy education in and outside of the classroom, we must appreciate the distinctions making GenZ unique. GenZ students want to change the world! Although much of this population is currently emerging in classrooms and careers, preliminary observations indicate they are loyal, hard-working, self-sufficient, willing to earn hierarchical advancement, and may change jobs less frequently compared with predecessors. They emerge as one of the most socially responsible generations, passionate about diversity and inclusion.\textsuperscript{1} They are more likely to choose a career path, workplace, or educational institution for reasons of social responsibility, rather than salary, compared with previous generations. They are also creative, innovative, and willing to try new things without fear of failure, including entrepreneurialism. They are financially astute and careful to make choices ensuring solid return on investment.\textsuperscript{1} Not surprisingly, most are engaged daily with multiple social media platforms. They care about their digital and social impact and focus on individuality with a desire for customization. GenZ members are uniquely equipped to adapt to today's rapidly changing health care needs. This commentary describes attributes, needs, and perspectives of the GenZ student that must be understood by today's pharmacy educators to assist with tailoring educational strategies. Information presented is summarized from a review of primary and periodical literature, including both research and anecdotal perspectives. We hope that this will be a starting point for further discussion within the academy.

1. Introduction

Although several terms have been used to label the generation entering our classrooms (individuals born between 1996 and 2012), including Nexters, iGeneration, and Homelanders, the term Generation Z (GenZ), was adopted by Pew Research.\textsuperscript{1,2} This commentary offers broad insights regarding the impact of socio-cultural and political circumstances influencing generational behaviors, learning preferences, and institutional interactions. Appreciating differences allow administrators and educators to tailor infrastructure for meeting organizational needs while aligning curricular experiences to optimize learning. When discussing broad generational traits, mindfulness is necessary to avoid applying sweeping generalizations to all individuals in a group. Further, this commentary is intended only to instigate discussion, because observations presented are mostly anecdotal and therefore inherently subjective. Finally, any conversation about generations highlights a broader socio-cultural lens relevant to Americans generally and not only GenZ individuals.

To begin a discussion surrounding GenZ, a baseline understanding of demographic data and societal impacts on their perspectives is essential. GenZ is comparable in size to both Baby Boomers (76 million) and Millennials (73 million) with approximately 74 million individuals.\textsuperscript{2,3} Demographically, GenZ is the most ethnically diverse, thereby increasing diversity within pharmacy classrooms.\textsuperscript{3} This generation appears to be more open-minded than previous generations with historic socio-political controversies now perceived as normative constitutional rights.\textsuperscript{4} Millennials lost their innocence in early childhood after the 9/11 tragedy; however, the threat of security for GenZ is tangible daily.\textsuperscript{3,5} Unsettling terror events, school shootings, economic recession, political strife, and racial unrest are engrained in worldview
from birth, which potentially increased emotional awareness and led them to be financially astute, but also afflicting their mental health, depression, and risk for self-harm. Increased mental health interventions within schools are standard, serving a vital role in their lives. Additionally, GenZ members are tenacious and pragmatic; they recognize that life will not always be easy and may view failure as an opportunity to try again. However, with increased self-awareness, they also appear to be realistic regarding expectations, particularly with finances and incurring college loan debt. Thus, GenZ members may explore alternative career paths to the traditional college trajectory.

2. Discussion

2.1. Digital Impact/Social Media

If the television is the technological advancement defining the Baby Boomer experience, the personal computer defines Generation Xers, the cell phone defines Millennials, and virtual reality will define the GenZ experience. Deeper exploration into this generation’s use of technology and social media can help determine best strategies for effective marketing and recruiting. GenZ students were born immersed in technology, which translates to immediate and extensive online access.

Therefore, GenZ students may have higher expectations than previous generations, but ability to focus is perhaps lower. On the surface they appear to be excellent multitaskers, but recent literature suggests the opposite, citing challenges to working memory because of expanding knowledge. The continuous cycle of digital “updates” lowers attention span and heightens the need for constant stimulation. As a result, GenZ members often identify as “digital device addicts.” Because of social media sites, such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat, GenZ members may absorb information instantaneously, but they lose interest just as quickly.

Valuing visual stimulation, this generation appears to prefer pictures and videos over words, seeking immersive, personalized experiences, with error-free, seamless, and intuitive content. With countless avenues for connection, these digital natives are perpetually online, perhaps valuing digital connections over face-to-face interaction.

Being more comfortable communicating through screens, some GenZ members perhaps even characterize digitally based relationships as “real.” This is further reinforced after the COVID-19 pandemic in which reliance on virtual environments shifted from preference to compulsory.

2.2. Identity and Values of GenZ

The importance of individuality, diversity, self-reliance, and creativity further seem to define the identity and values of GenZ. First, GenZ members appear to put great worth on individuality, creating customizable life experiences to individual interests and needs with high demand for personal choice and flexibility. Further, they seem to appreciate the availability of numerous choices before decision-making. In every area of life, regardless of ethnicity, socio-economic status, or living in rural or urban environments, GenZ members seem to crave uniqueness.

Second, diversity, inclusion, social justice, and globalization are major themes in the literature for GenZ. Globalization expanded in response to human experiences instantaneously streamed live through international communication on social media. For example, the world watched protests unfold in response to the live-streamed death of George Floyd and several other individuals of color. Alexander characterizes the “Trayvon Generation,” raised on instances of police brutality, causing personal trauma, sparking activism, and shaping world view. Reports indicate GenZ members not only value diversity and inclusion, but they strive for pluralism and enthusiastic engagement to create a common society with highly progressive social policy perspectives. This discussion is bolstered by crowdsourcing in which experiences are more connected than ever. One only needs to observe the #NEVERAGAIN movement of Marjorie Stoneman Douglas high school students, and March for Our Lives, to recognize the growing political advocacy of this generation. In applying these values to interaction with social institutions, corporate social responsibility may be a major factor when choosing where to spend time and money, such that one may even weigh financial risks to work at a socially responsible company.

A third trait of GenZ members identified in the literature is self-sufficiency. Other terms include self-learners, self-reliant, ambitious, persistent, realistic, innovative, goal-oriented, and self-starters. Recent literature highlights underdeveloped social skills and students may limit personal interactions, be more critical of peers, and prefer individual reflection. They appear to prefer an intrapersonal approach to learning, becoming accustomed to teaching themselves through YouTube. Furthermore, GenZ individuals seem to place priority on the ability to find the right information fast, rather than knowing the right information. Conversely, although GenZ members are considered self-reliant, meeting emotional needs may be equally as important to meeting academic needs.

Finally, creativity is identified as an important trait valued by GenZ members. This generation may learn best through active, simulated experiences. They also seem to be drawn to nostalgia of previous generations, fascinated by process and systems behind technology. Both technology and creativity are closely associated and valued. Reports suggest GenZ members may not feel prepared for the real world unless they have learned by doing.

2.3. Career and Education

Understanding the unique qualities of GenZ members can help with appreciating perspectives on career and education. GenZ members remain skill-focused, with competency and outcomes-driven education born from “No Child Left Behind.” They seem very concerned about the cost of higher education and how dollars translate to job market benefits. GenZ members are early starters, potentially forgoing a college education and immediately join the workforce, unwilling to incur debt without guarantee of success. As such, entrepreneurship is increasing, perhaps because the path to a sensible career changed in response to delayed retirement from previous generations. Because of alternative venues for obtaining quality education outside of college, designing career-relevant academic programs with consistent hands-on instruction would be beneficial.

This generation wants to influence the world! They appear to be seeking fulfilling work, job stability and work-life balance when considering career options. Reports indicate they desire a decent living working for a stable employer, respect authority, and humbly accept hierarchical advancement opportunities. Furthermore, because they value a pathway to advancement, they are loyal and may be more willing to stay with a company compared with previous generations.

Although, attitudes post-pandemic are yet to be studied. Although some reports indicate members of this generation may struggle with multitasking because of challenges with focus and working memory, others indicate employers may find GenZ members to be effective multitaskers and prefer unstructured work environments to achieve assigned goals. Additionally, GenZ members became accustomed to a remote working/learning environment, which will likely continue into post-pandemic employment. It is believed that they will prove to be an excellent workforce.

GenZ members are starting to look more like their great-grandparents, the Silent Generation, in decisions regarding privacy, caution, and the pursuit of “sensible” careers. Although previous generations may have underestimated the value of privacy because of the novelty of social media, GenZ members appear to have learned strategies to protect their privacy through witnessing examples of indiscretion. This is illustrated through increased use of applications such as Snapchat, Secret,
and Whisper. Creation of both “fake” and real accounts are common in controlling how personal information is shared and with whom. GenZ members may be willing to provide personal data in exchange for connections and convenience.6,8,11 However, Netflix productions such as The Great Hack and The Social Dilemma illustrated how data mining bots manipulate users, and targeted “fake news” posts may affect user willingness to share data in exchange for convenience.

2.4. Implications for Pharmacy Education

Broad implications for recruitment and learning strategies for pharmacy education are included here; however, specific recommendations go beyond the scope of this commentary. Although still joining college and careers, further research regarding GenZ impact is necessary. Early findings include specific recommendations that the reader may find helpful regarding the need for detailed individualized feedback and strategies for precepting.2,4,9 Furthermore, additional specific examples of learning styles, preferences, and needs of GenZ individuals in health care classrooms are available in a scoping review of the literature.6

Considering the value this generation places on digital impact and social media presence, institutions must focus on their program’s digital presence. Social media platforms can be enhanced to better appeal to this digitally centered generation, focusing on pictographic storytelling with realistic narratives.2,4,10,18–20 This generation provides new challenges for marketing and recruitment, although novel opportunities exist. Today’s generation often values the celebrity of social media influencers over the celebrity of actors and sport stars, many striving to achieve viral status.3 As such, GenZ students make excellent brand ambassadors and influencers, efficiently spreading the word on social media. Schools and colleges would be wise to not only market to GenZ students but also through them. Finally, faculty must ensure expertise with both software and hardware technology skills and ensure credible websites and software applications are utilized.3,4,9

Institutions can take advantage of the desire to individualize education by increasing student options. For example, create self-paced curricular components, permit students to determine their own schedules, and design their own program of study.3–4,17 Suggestions include increasing options, such as joint degree programs, accelerated (or decelerated) curricula, virtual learning environments, competency-based curricula, and specialized certifications. Furthermore, instructors might consider customization by offering choice in types of assessment, project, or assignment. Considerations for inclusion of entrepreneurial activities and practical application to the work environment across all programmatic, didactic, and experiential activities is necessary to support return on investment regarding offerings, value for the price.3

Also consider how personal, professional, and emotional development will be addressed. Colleges can capitalize on opportunities for faculty development in technology and cultivate supportive relationships with students for both academic and personal matters.3 GenZ students may crave similar close mentoring relationships with faculty that they had with parents.3,4 Often struggling to respond to challenges, faculty can provide guidance identifying solutions. Further, faculty may support student mental health in the classroom through reduced-anxiety grading, trigger warnings for sensitive topics, and offering space spaces to talk after traumatic events.3 Finally, this generation will likely be drawn to institutions promoting general wellness, such as physical fitness and healthy eating.

The significance of diversity, inclusion, and social responsibility when reviewing curricular and co-curricular opportunities is imperative. GenZ learners want to see diversity in their classroom, and fully inclusive educational and clinical experiences, such as incorporating social materials and technology into assignments.4 Socially responsible relevant activities in the co-curriculum would also likely be welcomed. Finally, schools and colleges can capitalize on the desire for increased privacy and careful attention to professional presence by creating opportunities to support highest levels of professional behavior in development of this next generation of pharmacy practitioners.

3. Conclusion

Pharmacy educators should be excited about the prospect of GenZ students joining our programs. Welcoming a group of creative, self-sufficient learners, who value active educational experiences opens the door to optimize the use of technology and available resources in providing high quality education for this next generation. The high level of entrepreneurship seen in this generation, coupled with strong values, is likely to produce a generation of pharmacists, who will cultivate new and innovative ways to advance patient care and the practice of pharmacy.

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References


