



# Gen Jones

## - *revisited*

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### **Do you have a generational identity crisis? Do you get your 'Matures' and 'Boomers' mixed up with your 'Xers' and 'Yers'? Not sure where your 'Pre-Boomers' and 'Millennials' fit into the hierarchy of age segmentation?**

Don't worry. There are other marketers, just like you, too embarrassed to share their generational doubts and questions. This is an article written for people who feel lost in the Sea of Silly Names that masquerades for a scientific method of age segmentation. I hope it helps.

Back in 2006 I wrote an article about a group called Generation Jones. I thought it was about time I had a look to see what, if anything has changed and what more, if anything, we know about this bunch.

First things first. The intervening years have taught me that few people have any idea about the definitions of generational groups so at the end of this article you will find a crib sheet giving their birth dates and ages. There are numerous other definitions but these are mine and I am sticking to them.

GenJonesers were born between 1954 and 1965. Like all of the other groupings, the dates are arbitrarily specified. For those of you who have mislaid your calculator, that makes them aged between 44 and 55. If you want to annoy a GenJoneser then refer to them as a Boomer (now aged 45-63), it has the same effect as mistaking a Canadian for an American. They get really grumpy. They get even grumpier if you think they are called Jones after Tom Jones or Zeta Jones or Indiana Jones. Apparently, it is because they feel they are the anonymous generation and wanted a matching nondescript name.

The biggest gripe of this group is about their identity; or to be more accurate lack of one. Are they really the last stages of the Boomers or the first gasps of Gen Xers? Come to that does it matter?

Well it matters to the sociologist Jonathan Pontell, who always felt he was trapped inside a Boomer's body. "I can remember first hearing the words 'baby boomer generation' as a high school student," muses Pontell. "The whole class burst out laughing when the teacher told us we were Baby Boomers. It was so obvious we weren't..... I wasn't spending sleepless nights obsessing over the fact that I'd been mislabelled, but in the back of my head, I never identified with the boom."

Let me come clean. I find all of this stuff a pile of sanctimonious rubbish, but clearly it does exercise the minds of lots of people and deserves to be investigated.

Determining where one generation stops and another starts seems to be as much an art as a science. How are marketers supposed to categorise the poor souls who are born at the edge between one generation and another? Do we have millions of people, whose birthdays come at the boundaries of the generational divides, spending their life in a perpetual state of confusion about where they belong?

Discovering a new generation is a bit like finding another planet in the solar system. Astronomers debate whether the thing is an asteroid, a planet, or spec of dust on the end of their telescope and then some bright spark comes along with 'new research' that proves categorically that it is a planet.

Well, some research, carried out by the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), has performed marketing's equivalent of discovering a new planet. We can officially declare that the GenJonesers are an age group in their own right.

UCLA has conducted an annual poll of 350,000 college freshmen since the mid-60s. One of the questions concerns students' ranking of two different life goals: "how important is it to develop a meaningful philosophy of life" and "being very well off financially".

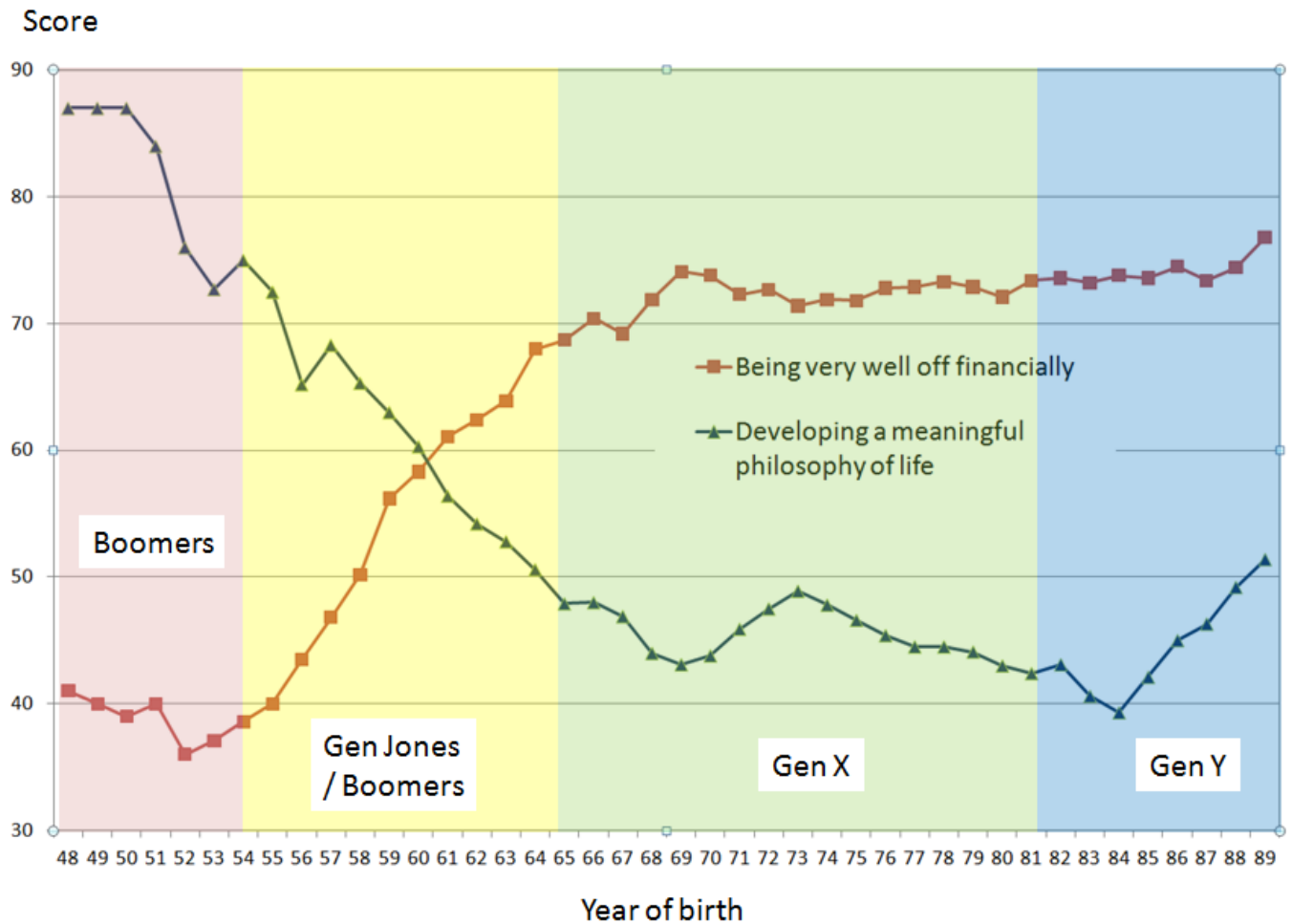
The table shows the data is for students entering college between 1966 and 2008. I have assumed they were all aged 18 years old at this time. If this assumption is true then it represents the results for students born between 1948 and 1990. Beware, I might be wrong in this assumption.

There can be no doubt about it; these Jonesers have a distinctly different view of life from generations on either side of their age divide.

Life goal	Freshmen ranking goal as "essential" or "very important"		
	1966 (median yr. of Boomers)	1977 (median yr. of Jonesers)	1990 (median yr. of Xers)
"developing a meaningful philosophy of life"	85%	61%	42%
"being very well off financially"	44%	60%	76%

This is the only 'quantitative' evidence that the proponents of Jonesers offer to support their existence as a distinct group. Most of the justification is along the lines of: "How could it make sense that somebody who was eight when the first transistor radio was launched (1954) has that much in common with an eight year old who witnessed Apollo 16 landing on the Moon. (1972)?"

If UCLA's research is proof of a distinctive age cohort I wondered what other insights it could provide. The next figure shows a graph of the responses to the two life-goal questions since the research began overlaid by the period of the four generations.

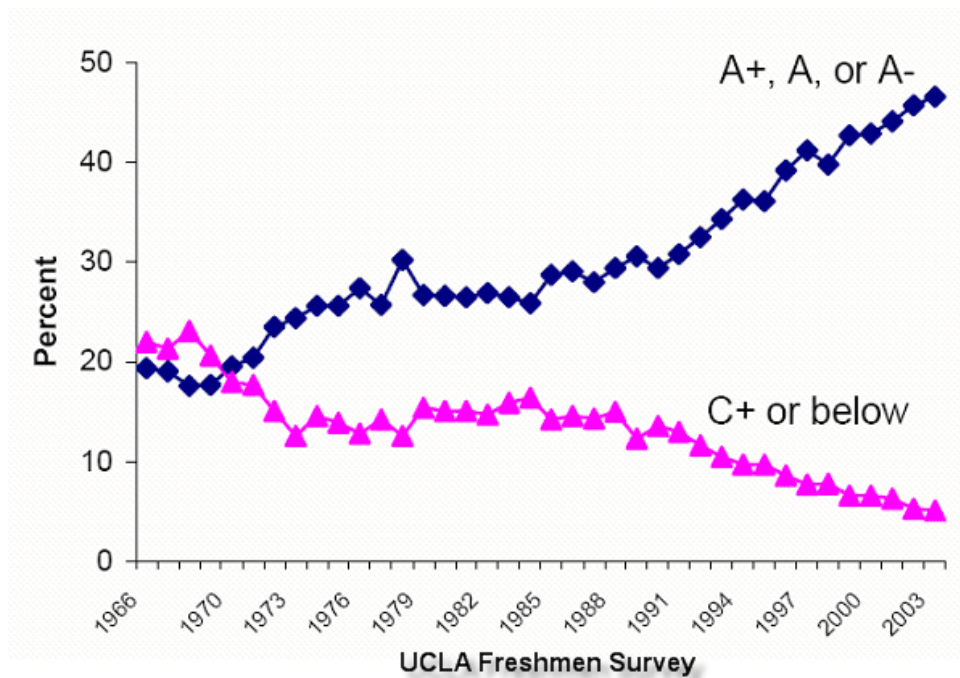


The far more interesting conclusion from this analysis is that there has been very little change in attitudes since the early 1980s (i.e. those born post 1965).

If the definition of a radical change in life-goals marks the birth or death of new generation then for the past quarter of a century we have had a single generation holding similar life goals. Perhaps I have accidentally discovered 'Generation Boring'?

It is interesting to see how Gen Y appears to be echoing the sentiment of Boomers and wanting to "develop a meaningful philosophy of life" – they also seem to be increasing their interest in "being very well off financially."

Whilst looking through the other results from the UCLA study, I found the following analysis of freshmen's college grades.



I guess that one conclusion from these results is that once the effects of the substance abuse of students in the 1960s abated, the intellect of following generations has always been higher than the one before. Perhaps we should re-christen the 'Baby Boomers' the 'Baby Dunces' generation? The cynic in me says the ever higher educational attainment might just have something to do with grade inflation. I digress.

The arguments for generational segments are predicated on the concept that we associate ourselves as belonging to one of these wretched groups. Since most people I talk to haven't the faintest idea if they are a Boomer, Xer, Yer or Zer it seems a totally false, and useless, concept.

There is an argument to support the idea of a 'Baby Boomer' generation, even though the US birth rate started to climb in 1940, not in 1945 as a result of a hoard of sex starved men returning from the war. The birth rate in the US then declined from 1957 onward - so why the official end date of the Boomer generation is 1964 beats the hell out of me and everybody who has studied the subject. Even though Europe's birth rate had a totally different shape to that of the US we still persist, idiotically in my view, to label our over-50s as Boomers.

From there on, the generational divisions are totally artificial. The term, Generation X, (loosely referring to people born in the 60s and 70s), is a cultural idea, rather than a demographic term.

Generation Y, (loosely referring to people born in the 80s and 90s), beats all records for having lots of other silly names. Here are a few: the Millennial Generation; the Millennium Generation; the Net Generation; N-Gen; Generation NeXt; Generation 2000; Generation Y2K; the Sunshine Generation; the Digital Generation and the Explorers. The list goes on and on and on.



This brings us to Generation Z, those born from 2004 to 2025. Not too much is known about them yet.

So, what is the value of all of these totally artificial age groupings? Not much is the simple and precise answer.

Other than the fact that these well known US politicians were born within three years of each other, and are heralded as archetypal examples of Gen Jones politicians, I wonder what aspects of

behavior, culture, interests and beliefs they have in common?

Since age is limited use to a marketer, other than in the context of physiological ageing and life stage events, these artificial subdivisions of age are less than worthless and can be dangerous. They appear to bestow on marketers 'certainties' about group behaviour where in truth none exist.

So, you can sleep secure in the knowledge that not knowing a 'Boomer' from a 'Zer' will not make a jot of difference to your marketing career and your ability to keep up with the Jonesers.

# Generation definition crib sheet

