

Discipling Kenyan Gen Z's on Sexuality: Reflections from the Global Study on Youth Culture

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Abstract

The African continent is among the youngest continents in terms of its demographic make-up. This means that strategic ministry within the continent must engage African youth. While there is some research surrounding millennials, there is a gap in research surrounding Gen Z, that is, those born after the 2000s. Fortunately, there has been recent research on Global Youth Culture (GYC) by OneHope that explored different aspects of Gen Z (ages 13-19) youth culture in twenty countries in five continents, Kenya being one of them. This article is a theological reflection of the findings of that research, exploring the implications for discipling Gen Z in the specific area of sexuality. While similarities are drawn between African (Kenyan) youth culture and other countries, this article also considers how the African (Kenyan) society in general still views sexuality as a taboo topic and how Church leaders can help parents and congregations to approach the topic of sexuality from a biblical worldview perspective and to engage in compassionate ministry.

Keywords

Gen Z; Practical Theology; Youth Culture; Youth Ministry; Youth Sexuality.

1. Introduction

The Kenyan 2010 constitution views youth as those aged between 18-34 years old (KYDP, 2018). However, in considering labor issues among this cohort, the constitution expanded the bracket to 15-35 years. More recently, the 2018 Kenyan Youth Development Policy has maintained the 18-34 years bracket (KYDP, 2018). This is already telling in so far as how we conceptualize youth within the Kenyan context, with an implicit neglect of those aged between 13 and 18 or 19 years. For comparative purposes, the UN considers youth as between ages 15 and 24 years. This article utilizes a wider range of 13-35 years, which comprises adolescents and emerging adults. Specifically, it considers the unique issues arising from the generational cohort called “Gen Z”.⁴⁰ While corporations and churches are wrapping their mind around millennials, the next generations defined as “Gen Z” are also creating both a challenge and an opportunity in the area of discipleship. Within the field of sociology, this generational thinking is utilized by scholars and researchers to observe unique trends that define specific cohorts of generations. Consequently, scholars are thus able to empirically predict certain markers that define these different cohorts (Dimock, 2019).

Gen Z are differentiated from “the silent generation” (Born 1925-1945) who experienced the Great Depression and World Wars, “the Baby boomers” (Born 1946-1964), largely defined by the relative economic prosperity of the post-war years, “generation X” (Born 1964-1980), caught up with the work values and onset of internet communication, and “generation Y” or “millennials” (Born 1981-1895), viewed as the socially connected disruptors (Low, 2018; Seemiller & Grace, 2018, pp. 3-11). Seemiller & Grace (2018) offer a comparative analysis between the generations based on the childhood experiences, socio-economic history and commonly held characteristics and how these have shaped the lived realities of generation Z. However, scholars acknowledge that the boundaries between the generations are not static, with a likelihood that the youngest and oldest in bordering generations may share some similar characteristics (Dimock, 2019, p. 5). While these categories are largely defined through European and North American lenses, some of the characteristics are shared within the African context, particularly among the younger generations due to the globalization of youth culture in the digital age. In a helpful sociological analysis, Wanjiru Gitau (2018, p. 5) observes that while African millennials are defined by the same technological markers as those in other regions, they are

⁴⁰ Gen Z will be used for the rest of this article as a shorthand for Generation Z

unique in the fact that they straddle the traditional world of their grandparents and the urbanizing world of their parents. She summarizes these changes as a grappling with Africa's (and Kenya's) colonial past as well as the intense global changes of the past decades (Gitau, 2018, p.6).

The psychologist Jean Twenge (2017) uses the term "igens" to refer to the "Gen Z's"., she views the ubiquitous nature of the digital world as a reality that defines the lives of these generations. Based on in-depth national reviews among 11 million young people, she summarizes Gen z as:

- super-connected
- less rebellious,
- more tolerant,
- less happy
- completely unprepared for adulthood

The increased notion of tolerance is not difficult to extrapolate from the increased interconnectedness of the digital culture that defines them. Thus, they interact more freely and seamlessly with those from other religions, cultures, and perspectives. However, the same media is correlated with increased anxiety and low levels of happiness, according to her research. Although they write from within a Northern American context, similarities could be traced to the African context. These issues have also been observed from a recent (2020) study on Global Youth Culture (GYC).

The research was conducted by OneHope from February 24, 2020, to March 27, 2020, in partnership with local churches, ministries, and governments around the world.⁴¹ The study was targeted towards Gen Z (ages 13-19), across 20 countries with global representation in all the continents. Globally, 8,394 teens were surveyed, with approximately 400 teens sampled in each country. The table below summarizes the regional representation.

⁴¹ More information about the research can be accessed from <https://www.globalyouthculture.net/about-the-research/>

Table 1: Countries represented in the Global Study of Youth Culture (GYC, 2020)

Region	Countries
Africa	Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Egypt
Asia	China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Vietnam
Eurasia	Netherlands, Portugal, Russia, Romania, Spain, United Kingdom
Latin America	Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico
North America	United States of America

In terms of the categorizations, the study utilized quotas to ensure at least 10% were Christian, or that a minimal representation of Christians and Muslims was achieved (GYC, 2020). In Kenya, gender representation was ensured through using a sampling quota of 40% female. The study in Kenya surveyed 435 teens and explored a 72-item research instrument exploring questions surrounding Christian identity, discipleship practices, personal experiences, sexuality, views on other religions, among others (GYC, 2020).

2. Findings

a. Nominalism in Christian Expression

The GYC explored how young people define their Christian identity. The Kenyan Gen Z's who self-identified as Christian viewed their Christian identity as excluding Jehovah Witness or Mormon as a Christian identity. The study differentiated between "committed Christians" and "nominal Christians." Committed Christians are largely evangelical, in that they believe in God's existence, in salvation through Jesus Christ, in the forgiveness of sins, in the Bible as God's Word and in consistent Christian disciplines, such as prayer and Bible reading, as central to Christian life.⁴² Christian self-identification among the Kenyan teens also included a wide variety of

⁴² I am aware of how the term "evangelical" has elicited several critiques in recent literature and discourse. Whereas in the traditional sense it involved the beliefs in Jesus, the Bible, salvation, and the power of the Holy Spirit, it has come to include sharp debate based on how the evangelical community in the United States of America has responded to race and political issues. For more reading see Wells, D. F., (1994), *No place for truth: Or whatever happened to evangelical theology?* Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing; Emerson, M. O., & Smith, C., (2001), *Divided by faith: Evangelical religion and the problem of race in America*, Oxford University Press, USA; Kidd, T. S., (2019), *Who Is an Evangelical?* Yale University Press.

denominational and theological backgrounds. These include Catholic, Seventh Day Adventist, Orthodox, among others. Nominal Christians are those who did not believe in any of the above foundational beliefs that marks “committed Christians” in the study.

From the study of 435 Kenyan Gen Z’s, 83% of them identified as Christians, with 44% of this percentage being Roman Catholic. Of the figure, about 30% were committed Christians while a majority were nominal Christians. What is more interesting is that among the teens surveyed, a high percentage of them, 88%, acknowledged the place of faith or spirituality in their life. This speaks to how Gen Z’s may identify as “spiritual but not religious” according to the literature surrounding youth and spirituality (Ammerman, 2013; Bibby, 2018). These self-definitions had an impact on how the teens view real issues in their lives such as sexuality, culture, and ethnicity as well as social and community involvement.

b. Pluralistic Truth in a World of many Religions

On the question of truth, approximately half of the teens believe that all religions teach equally valid truths. Interestingly, it is Christian Gen Z’s who believe in the equality of religions (51%), more than non-Christians (49%). This correlates with a study that the researcher conducted among 77 Nairobi youth who had left the church (Muriithi, 2015). The question of truth remains a critical issue for the postmodern milieu that interprets truth from a subjective, and socio-cultural foundation as opposed to the biblical view on truth (Grenz, 1996). This means that ministry to Gen Z’s must engage in the metanarratives of competing worldviews, as a handmaid to evangelism and discipleship.

c. The New Sexuality - Identity, Attraction and Expression

The results in the area of sexuality reflect how much the global trends are also evident among “conservative” societies such as the Kenyan society. The study revealed the observations reported by youth workers in the areas of gender identity and sexual expression. Given the pluralistic context that Gen Z’s are growing up in, objective definitions around the area of sexuality are expanding and becoming more fluid. At a foundational level, Kenyan teenagers are facing personal struggles that seem to be

definitive of their generation compared to other generations. For example, the struggle with pornography ranked third after loneliness and anxiety. Depression and suicide ranked fourth and fifth respectively.

In terms of gender identity, 73% of Kenyan Gen Z's believe that it is dependent on sex at birth. Thus, a majority of Kenyan teenagers correlate gender identity with genetics. A minority of 22% believe that gender is dependent on one's individual feelings and preferences, while 6% believe it is determined by societal views towards an individual. Both Christian Gen Z's and non-Christian Gen Z's experienced sexual attraction to people of the same gender and also experienced gender confusion recently. Differences in both can be seen between committed Christians and nominal Christians. 9% committed Christians experienced same-sex attraction (SSA) while a higher percentage of 23% nominal Christians experienced SSA. In terms of gender confusion, 5% committed Christians compared to 11% nominal Christians answered in the affirmative. Sexual expression within the LGBTIQAA+ context has also expanded to include wider and fluid definitions in popular discourse.⁴³ The study also revealed that 53% of Kenyan Christian Gen Z's have been sexually active in the recent past. This shows that sexual ethics is a critical issue that Churches and youth ministries must engage. Finally, while a majority (76%) of Gen Z's view marriage as an exclusive and heterosexual long lasting relationship, minorities of 15% think it can be between people of the same sex and 10% are neutral. These are salient markers of the changing views on sexuality and marriage among Gen Z's.

3. Implications for Discipleship

i. The Focus on Children and Youth: “Let them Come to Me”

The implications of the study on discipleship abound. An interesting finding from the statistics revealed that whereas teenagers consult family members (and parents) when they are wrestling with important questions such as meaning, identity and morality, they first seek out peers and social media when it comes to sexuality. This reflects how sexuality is still a taboo topic within African communities. However, this

⁴³ LGBTIQAA+ is an acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer, Asexual, Aromantic and + shows the ever-expanding definition of gender identities and sexual expressions in popular discourse.

study should encourage parents and church leaders, including children and youth pastors, to continue to invest in the discipleship of young people. While the hierarchical nature and the big power distance between elders and children is a part of African traditional cultures, Christian communities should view “eldership” and concepts of “childhood” or “youth” from within a biblical perspective (Chiroma 2019; Ndereba 2021a). Like Jesus, adults in African (and Kenyan) communities of faith must welcome young people to the Church and nurture them in the ways of Christ. Given that 82% of the teenagers surveyed noted that the children ministry they attended played a huge role in their spiritual life, the ministries of the Kenyan churches must invest “downwards”.

ii. The Role of the Bible: “Equipped for every good work”

The study also reveals how cultural confusion must be met with biblical clarity. With Gen Z Bible reading habits in decline, children and youth workers must retrieve the centrality of the Scripture in the Church’s ministry. Given the many questions that young people ask concerning a compassionate and truthful response to LGBTIQAA+ issues, we will do well to explore God’s wisdom in these complex areas. Secondly, the doctrine of *tota scriptura* invites children and youth workers to continue to progress as better workmen of God’s Word, as they develop a biblical theology for sexuality from the entire canon. Usually, challenges in sexual ethics among Gen Z’s come from developing their viewpoints from an isolated text or reading biblical critical theorists. Youth workers who are convinced that the Bible is the final authority for matters of life and doctrine will increasingly be called to ground young people in the freeing truth of God’s Word, written and incarnated.

iii. The Place of Evangelism: “Go therefore and tell the world”

The study revealed that Gen Z’s are less likely to evangelize their peers. Based on the literature survey, this can be linked to the increasing view of tolerating different perspectives. While this could be a positive outcome of postmodernity, in that we sensitively learn how to deal with differing viewpoints, in a negative sense, it may water down some of the biblical expectations of what it means to live the Christian lives. Thus, youth workers are invited to tag Gen Z’s along in their evangelistic

ministry. Secondly, youth pastors are urged to teach and model to Gen Z's how to have gospel conversations with friends and neighbors. Finally, there is a need to utilize the digital media that they are deeply embedded in, as a platform of evangelism. This means that church ministry may be called towards innovative ways of sharing the gospel in the digital culture that is definitive of global youth culture.

iv. The Place of Apologetics: “Always be Ready”

Whereas intermural debates in apologetics center on its usefulness, methodologies and approaches, practical ministry to Gen Z's cannot function without some level of apologetics. The researcher has argued elsewhere that in the African society, a good place to begin is by viewing apologetics not only as a cognitive aspect of theological ministry but also appreciating the affective aspects of adolescent development and their place in doing apologetics in or community (Ndereba 2021b). In light of this conversation on sexuality, practical apologetics must engage the field of Christian ethics, biblical interpretation, and pastoral sensitivity.⁴⁴ The need for apologetic engagement comes as a result of some scholars in the African context who are normalizing sexual practice that may be divergent with the biblical ethic of marital and covenantal sexual relationship between a husband and his wife.⁴⁵ On the underlying worldview foundations of popular ethics that distort Christian truth claims, youth workers will be called to explore the questions of truth, logic and reality as undergirded by a Christian worldview (Sire, 2020).

v. The Role of Parents: “Teach them all the time”

The study revealed that the African communal thinking still looms large even within the realities of globalized African societies. Gen Z's still value the opinion of their parents when it comes to critical life questions (Awiti, 2016; GYC, 2020). While parents are called to be more understanding, empathetic and conversational when it comes to dealing with the underlying taboos in the area of sexuality, this research reveals that

⁴⁴ I would recommend the following resources as a place to start: Allberry, S., (2013), *Is God anti-gay? And other questions about homosexuality, the Bible and same-sex attraction*, The Good Book Company; Butterfield, R. C., (2012), *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert: An English Professor's Journey into Christian Faith*, Crown & Covenant; DeYoung, K., (2015), *What does the Bible really teach about homosexuality?* Crossway; Gagnon, R. A., (2002), *The Bible and homosexual practice: Texts and hermeneutics*, *Pro Ecclesia*, 11(3), 377-379; Hill, W., (2016). *Washed and waiting: Reflections on Christian faithfulness and homosexuality*, Zondervan; Perry, J. H., (2018), *Gay Girl, Good God: The Story of Who I Was, and Who God Has Always Been*, B&H Publishing Group.

⁴⁵ See for example Van Klinken, A., & Chitando, E., (2016), *Introduction: Public religion, homophobia, and the politics of homosexuality in Africa* (pp. 1-16), Routledge.

this is an opportunity for parents to disciple their teens. Whereas children and youth ministries have been seen as a replacement of daily discipleship in the home, the biblical priority on the role of parents as the key disciplers of young people is emphasized. The biblical portrait of older generations commending the faith through personal convictions, public proclamation as well as public lifestyle will still be the major way of pointing our young people to Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit (Deut. 6; Ps. 78; Eph. 6).

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