



Meet J, the Gen-Y Singaporean

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I received an email from J, a former student, two weeks ago. According to the description in Wikipedia, J is a prime example of the Gen-Y citizen, someone who grew up in the 1990's, and relies heavily on communication, media, and digital technologies for everything in life.

J graduated from a local university with a Bachelor's degree in Mass Communication in 2008. He was one of the brighter pupils in his cohort who pursued higher education straight after he completed his undergraduate programme. Currently a Master's student at a top university in the United Kingdom (UK), he is a young, talented and jovial student who has great plans for the future.

The tone in J's recent email was more sombre and it contained an element of anxiety. J will be graduating in a few weeks, and apparently this is a threatening realisation for him. Given a choice, J would rather remain in the UK to work for a non-government organisation (NGO). Like many of his contemporaries, he would like to explore the world before returning home. A short work stint in Europe would offer an excellent opportunity to gain invaluable work experience in a non-Asian environment. Unfortunately, the employment conditions in the UK are not exactly favourable. His frustration is compounded by other factors, such as financial constraints and family obligations. I gather that his folks are waiting to see him bring home the bacon. J is really upset and he feels subjugated by forces beyond his control. He also resents having to live up to parental expectations.

For the Gen-Ys like J, graduation is a dreadful juncture in life. They may know where they like to go, but the path leading to their destination may either be closed or is full of obstacles. This is the point where formal education ends and they have to chart their own destiny with no guaranteed formula for success. This is also a major source of disappointment as they have to

temper their individual-centric goals to negotiate the brutal social and economic reality; one that is increasingly defined by global economic dynamics rather than domestic factors like investment and education.

While the challenges that J faces are familiar to the ones for people in my generation (Gen-X), our responses are quite different. The Gen-Ys expect instantaneous feedback and affirmation. Although they are prepared to work hard for their goals, they eschew uncertainty and they view their engagement with the world in a linear and deterministic fashion. In other words, it is about changing the environment to suit their personal preference. Perhaps for the Gen-Ys, the single-minded pursuit for excellence masks a denial to the complexities in life.

For the Gen-Xs and baby boomers, their outlook regards unpredictability as part and parcel of life. More crucially, people from these cohorts tend to hold a circuitous view of the world. Rather than altering existing social or physical limitations, the Gen-Xs and baby boomers would change their experiential perceptions and attitudes to adapt to the circumstances. It is not a compromise but a positive interpretation of the obstacles and taking a different route to the end point. And if ever there is a major setback, there is a greater likelihood that people in these groups will embrace and accept their predicament and resolve them in their stride.

Singapore has a world-class educational system that is well known for imparting technical knowledge and skills needed for its graduates to clinch a job and to score A's in international exams. But in order to remain relevant for *future* challenges, we need to nurture a greater adversity quotient among the younger Singaporeans. This could be achieved if there is less emphasis on the outcome of learning in schools. Instead there should be more emphasis on the learning processes and developing an appreciation of the ambiguity in the real world. The Gen-Ys seem so indoctrinated with concepts like "Key Performance Indices", "Evaluation", or "Appraisal", that at times they can neither tolerate events that jeopardise their well-conceived plan of action, nor their obligations to the people around them. Of course such an obsession is not confined to the Gen-Ys but it does look more prevalent in this group in view of their preference for quick and constant feedback. Effective and meaningful engagement with this group of Singaporeans will be critical for ensuring socio-psychological resilience of the nation in the years to come.

I am optimistic that J will find peace within himself.



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