ICMA Research

Gen Z – The Anxious Generation?

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Abstract

The recurring theme of older generations expressing concern over the perceived decline of youth behavior is a historical constant, manifesting differently across decades while maintaining a consistent tone of anxiety and disapproval. This paper examines the evolution of such concerns from the 1930s to the present day, highlighting key societal influences that have shaped these perceptions.

In the 1930s, economic despair was blamed for youth delinquency, while the 1950s and 1960s saw moral panic over the influence of rock music and countercultural movements. The 1970s and 1980s shifted focus to the impact of media consumption on youth behavior. Currently, the discourse centers on Generation Z, labeled as "the anxious generation," with mental health concerns attributed to social media and smartphone usage. The present analysis delves into the divergent views of scholars, such as Haidt (2024) and Etchells (2024), on the effects of digital technology on youth well-being. Haidt argues for restrictions on digital device usage, while Etchells challenges the causation claims regarding screen time and mental health.

Additionally, the paper explores the impact of societal pressures and the decline of face-to-face interactions on Gen Z's social skills, citing historical and contemporary perspectives on communication. Despite the ongoing critique, statistics indicate improvements in several societal metrics for Generation Z compared to previous cohorts. The paper concludes by reflecting on the cyclical nature of generational criticism and the potential future narratives that may arise as today's youth age into positions of influence.

Introduction

The familiar pattern of older generations fretting about the young is as old as history.
In 1935, *Harper's magazine* released a depressing piece saying that young Americans were "rotting before our eyes, " with increased incidents of criminality, apathy, and disillusionment. The authors attributed this catastrophe to *widespread unemployment*.

In the 1950s older Americans fretted about the sexy hip-swivelling of a young Elvis Presley, and how he was *"corrupting white youth by peddling black-man's music to them".* In the 1960s the musical revolution that Elvis started went global, and the bad influence of the Beatles and the hippies with their marijuana and the slogan *"make love not war"* became the main concerns worldwide in Western-influenced nations. The fact that the 1960s were also the time of the Vietnam war, the assassination of Martin Luther King and the race riots in America – all of which had nothing to do with the youth of that time was glossed over. In the 1970s and 1980s, elder people once more lamented that the younger generation was becoming misguided and that teenagers were taking up adult vices including binge drinking, crime, and excessive sex. *Television and video games* were seen the main offenders. And so it goes on…

Generational Analysis

Generational analysis provides insight into the evolving cultural, economic, and social landscapes across different periods. Each generation is shaped by unique historical events and technological advancements, influencing their values, behaviours, and societal contributions. Here's a summary of several key generations:

The Silent Generation (1928-1945): Born during the Great Depression and World War II, this generation values hard work, discipline, and thrift. They experienced significant economic hardship and societal change, leading to a strong sense of duty and respect for authority. The Silent Generation played a crucial role in building post-war prosperity and are often characterized by their traditional views and preference for stability.

Baby Boomers (1946-1964): Following World War II, there was a significant increase in birth rates, leading to the Baby Boomer generation. They grew up during a time of economic expansion and social change, including the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War. Boomers are known for their optimism, ambition, and belief in personal growth. They played a crucial role in driving cultural revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s and are now transitioning into retirement, impacting healthcare and economic systems.

Generation X (1965-1980): Often referred to as the "latchkey" generation, Gen Xers were marked by rising divorce rates and parents working longer hours. They are known for their independence, resilience, and adaptability. This generation witnessed the rise of personal computing and the beginning of the digital age. Gen Xers are characterized by a pragmatic approach to life and work, valuing work-life balance and scepticism towards authority.

Millennials (1981-1996): Also known as Generation Y, Millennials grew up during the turn of the millennium. They experienced rapid technological advancements, including the internet and social media. This generation is known for being tech-savvy, valuing diversity and inclusion, and prioritizing experiences over material possessions. Millennials have faced economic challenges, such as the 2008 financial crisis, leading to delayed milestones like home ownership and marriage.

Generation Z (1997-2012): As digital natives, Gen Z has never known a world without the internet. They are characterized by their fluency with technology and social media, which shapes their communication and consumption habits. This generation is highly diverse and socially conscious, with a strong focus on individual expression and mental health. Gen Z faces unique challenges, including climate change and economic uncertainty, yet they are also seen as innovative and entrepreneurial.

Today's Concerns

Although the measurements vary, as do the causes, the utter conviction with which older individuals speak about the issues facing youngsters does not alter,

Today, in the 2020s, older generations hardly discuss unemployment, rock music, marijuana, free sex or television. However, although they agree that the youth the youth of today are in such a mess, they disagree on the reasons why.

Today's youth are from the Gen-Z generation. They are seen by some as *"the anxious generation"* – afflicted with previously unheard-of degrees of mental illness. One-fifth of American Gen-Z students have received a diagnosis or treatment for depression, compared to one-tenth ten years earlier. The number of suicides among American girls aged 10 to 14 has more than doubled since 2010.
Social media and smartphones are the main bad guys.

It is a fact that young people are joining virtual communities instead of tiny, stable real-world ones, where they are immersed in *"a daily tornado of memes, fads, and ephemeral micro-dramas, played out among a rotating cast of millions of bit players."*

According to a recent study, the older generation believes that this lure of smartphones makes people less interested in anything else; even that today's teens are sluggish to get out and have sex (Haidt, 2024). This is quite a contrast to the hippie *"make love not war" slogan of the 1960s!*

According to Haidt (2024) the young people issues start much earlier than in their teens due to overly cautious parenting; and makes the case for (1) prohibiting phones in classrooms, (2) keeping young readers off social media, and (3) allowing kids to run amok more frequently. Every recommendation seems reasonable. Some even have a playful sound.

The Case Against Smart Phones

Haidt (2024) supports the popular view of the older generation is that the attention spans of the younger generation are shorter than a goldfish's due to the influence of digital devices. Our sleep is disturbed by the blue light they emit. The most concerning thing about smartphones in the older generation's view is that these devises are negatively affecting young people's mental health, especially adolescent girls. When all is said and done, digital technologies are a curse on civilisation.

Is this world-view correct?

Professor Pete Etchells a professor of psychology and science communication at Bath Spa University in the U.K., thinks otherwise. In his previous works, he has dispelled the myth that children who play violent video games become zombies. He is now focusing on screen time, which is an even more widespread social concern. Etchells contends that, in contrast to popular belief, there is less evidence linking digital gadgets to a number of negative effects, including poor mental health, sleep deprivation, and shorter attention spans (Etchells, 2024).

Etchells notes that the majority of research use information from big observational surveys to investigate if individuals who reported engaging in screen-based activities more frequently had lower mental health. But observational studies such as these, he claims, suffer from the basic experimental problem: *correlation does not establish causation*.

He suggests that rather than time spent on a smartphone causing mental health concerns, it's possible that mental health issues drive people to spend more time on their phones, or that a third factor, like loneliness, could be the source of both phone usage and bad mental health.
E
ven if you do not agree with his arguments (and instead support the view of Haidt), Etchells (2024) is still a good Read. In just over 200 pages, he evaluates a host of other topics, including whether or not digital devices actually shorten our attention spans and interfere with our ability to sleep (he contends that they probably don't), and whether or not screen addiction is real. Honest personal accounts of his and his family's experiences with technology intersperse dense discussions of experiments and data.

Cure for Loneliness? Cultivate Real Friends

Undoubtedly, loneliness does plague a lot of young individuals. In a world where most Gen Zs are immersed in conversations with 1000's of virtual friends, when they emerge to the real world, they find it difficult to strike a conversation with a stranger next to them on a bus, train, plane or any public place. This is because attitudes towards talking to strangers typically fit into a pattern.

Youngsters are taught not to talk to strangers, and even relatives if their parents consider them untrustworthy.

The advent of adolescence and early adulthood is accompanied by a burgeoning desire to engage with a wide range of people. The ensuing interactions, often by 'chance' provide an exhilarating sense of release, regardless of whether they are sexual or social. However, societal approval, from parents, relations and even religious groups often place restrictions and curb this enthusiasm where real humans are concerned. The virtual world and the anonymity it provides, gives limitless possibilities for pursuing multiple chance interactions.

Storytellers have always been drawn to this element of the promise and peril of strangers, from the exhilaration of *"Brief Encounter"* and *"Before Sunrise"* to the disaster *of "Strangers on a Train."* The understanding that this will be a unique exchange can allow for a deliciously raw candour. Clearly, interacting meaningfully with a new person can bring huge rewards—but it is a skill that must be cultivated and can easily be lost.

As far back as 44 BC *Marcus Tullius Cicero*, a Roman statesman, taught us the following rules of conversation:

- never criticise others behind their backs;
- stick to topics of general interest;
- avoid talking about yourself;
- speak clearly; be courteous;
- deal seriously with serious matters and gracefully with lighter ones;
- don't interrupt; and,
- most importantly, never lose your temper.

Cicero's list of cardinal laws can be summarised to two things: (1) remember people's names and (2) listen well. Cicero's rules of conversation seem to have been fairly common across cultures as well as time,

In more recent times *Dale Carnegie*, a public speaking instructor, determined in 1936 that Americans needed a broader education in *"the fine art of getting along."* Seventy years later, his book *"How to Win Friends and Influence People"* is still in print and has sold 15 million copies. Carnegie lists listening comprehension and name recall as two of *his "six ways to make people like you."* It is the responsibility of the others to show genuine interest in other people, smile, converse about their interests, and make them feel significant.

Societal Pressures

However, this may be easier in theory than in practice for Gen-Zs. Yates (2021) worries that there are significant rifts in Western society that make it impossible for people to reach, even casually, between classes, religions, ethnicities, and generations. Yates says that the self-segregation of modern Western societies means that, for many people, conversing with some fellow citizens seems pointless, undesirable or outlandish.

In Asian societies these rifts appear be less. Buckingham (2021) describes how, following the death of his life partner, he found comfort in travelling and conversing in places like Myanmar, which are very different from his home country of England. However, Buckingham focuses on the delights and perils of encounters in remote locales where the stakes are lower since the acquaintanceships are guaranteed to be fleeting. Further, it is unclear if he conversed with a Gen-Zs with a smartphone in Myanmar.

However, observing the behaviour of university students in America, Britain, and Australia, it is clear that racial, political, and religious divisions have solidified into tribal ones. Such social pressures ensure that chance encounter with strangers outside the tribe is remote. It is no wonder that Gen-Zs turn to virtual friends, as these tribal pressures are then avoided.

Summary

The fact is that Generation Zs outperforms previous generations in many societal metrics. Fighting, juvenile crime, drug use and teenage pregnancy are all retreating in America, and the rest of the western world. The current tensions of the worlds are caused by 'Baby Boomer' (1945-1965) and Gen-X (1965-1980) national leaders.

The current young generation will eventually mature, find employment, establish relationships, and create families. Its members will go on to produce books and articles criticising youth, if history serves as any guide. The youth were viewed as threats to public order in the 1930s and as rapidly maturing adults in the 1980s. They are unhappy and growing up too slowly these days. What condemnation lies ahead for an unborn generation?

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