
Kids These Days: An Analysis of the Rhetoric against Youth across Five Generations

JESSICA KITT

Produced in Adele Richardson's Spring 2013 ENC 1102

Today, there is a trend in popular media condemning a generation of young adults. Generation Y—also known as the Millennials, Generation Y, and less affectionately Generation Me—describes individuals born between 1975 and 1995. Disgruntled adults and academics alike decry Generation Y for being narcissistic, lazy, self-entitled, and having unrealistic expectations about life, among other unfortunate characteristics.

Current research is divided on whether or not each generation is truly unique. Some researchers assert that Generation Y is not unique because they observed no change in values through different generations (Trzesniewski and Donnellan; Payne, Summers, and Stuart; Rotolo and Wilson; Treuren and Anderson). Kali H. Trzesniewski and Brent M. Donnellan, through their data collection, “found little reason to conclude that the average member of Generation Me is dramatically different from previous generations. Today’s youth is no more egotistical than previous generations...” (69-70). Other researchers use empirical data to claim that there has been a change in values across generations and therefore Generation Y is distinct from previous generations (Fogarty; Twenge et al.; Spinney; Greenberger et al.) Timothy J. Fogarty and Laura Spinney both claim that Generation Y has higher amounts of self-esteem than any other generation (Fogarty 370-371; Spinney).

Generational Cohort Analysis, a method of measuring changes between generations by examining the same age cohort at different periods of time, has been employed by several researchers who found that Generation Y is unique from previous generations (Twenge et al.; Twenge). Others attribute apparent differences in morals and values in youth to the Life Cycle Effect, which holds that perceived differences between youth and adults is a result of young adults normally behaving the way young adults do, not necessarily generational differences (Males; Payne, Summers, and Stewart).

The issue with previous research on generational differences is that it does not account for why researchers and commentators view Generation Y distinctly negative when it seems like common sense that elders have always criticized youth. Whether or not values really have changed across generations—as most data proves it has, although not as dramatically as critics of Generation Y would have us believe—is irrelevant. If every youth generation in the past one hundred years has been the target of the same rhetoric by their elders, there would exist a continuity that would dwarf any observed generational differences.

This paper attempts to show the continuity between five generations by showing how similar the rhetoric against youth is in the medium of news articles, online and in print. The purpose is to prove that Generation Y is no worse than previous generations, because, despite

different historical and social contexts, they face the same criticism their parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents faced.

Generation Y

To examine the similarities in rhetoric in newspapers, articles about each generation in the last century will be compared to articles on Generation Y. There are limitations to this research method for examining generational differences. One is the lack of available data. While there are numerous mediums for news today, newspaper articles are the primary medium for data for 1900-1990. For that reason there is far more rhetoric to examine against Generation Y than rhetoric for any other generation. A greater amount of data can mean either Generation Y is truly more awful than any other generation or more people are able to voice their opinions with technology today.

The prevailing view of Generation Y in media and popular culture is that they are essentially a group of spoiled brats. Rapidly advancing technology means this Generation Y is more connected

The prevailing view of Generation Y in media and popular culture is that they are essentially a group of spoiled brats.

than ever before. Social media and websites like YouTube allow them to broadcast themselves to the world. They are educated, ethnically diverse, ambitious, and the largest generation in American history. Among the origins of the prevailing negative view of Generation Y is psychologist Jean M. Twenge, who coined the label "Generation Me." Author of *The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement* and *Generation Me: Why Today's Young Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—and More Miserable than Before*, her work is often cited by journalists and bloggers. She supports her negative stereotypes of "Generation Me" using data that shows increases in characteristics such as assertiveness, self-liking, narcissistic traits, anxiety, poor mental health, and less self-reliance (Twenge). Included here is a sample of the rhetoric against today's young adults.

Among those citing Twenge is Dr. Keith Ablow of Fox News. He talks about the effects of social media outlets like Twitter and Facebook, which he believes have led to a rise in narcissism in young adults. He warns that, "The bubble of narcissism is always at risk of bursting. That's why young people are higher on drugs than ever, drunker than ever. . . because it makes them feel special, for a while. They're doing anything to distract themselves from the fact that they feel empty inside and unworthy" (Ablow). A *Wall Street Journal* article titled "The 'Trophy Kids' Go to Work" criticizes the Millennials in the workplace: "millennials feel an unusually strong sense of entitlement. Older adults criticize the high-maintenance rookies for demanding too much too soon" (Alsop).

Yahoo! news commentators have also joined the conversation. One article about a poll revealing that a majority of Gen Y are worried about the affordability of homes, prompted a user to write, "Gen Y doesn't want to buy any house, they feel they should have them given to them. Remember this is the same generation who prefers to have an iPhone [sic] to an automobile." Another article reports on a high school commencement speech where a guest speaker told the graduates that they are not special (Vongs). An article about the speech inspired comments such as, "Kids now days seem to have a vision of entitlement instead of earning everything in life," "Today's young generation is coddled and spoiled as a majority that is [sic]," and, "The (me generation) gave birth to the next generation of even worse self-centered, impatient, tantrum-throwing brats" (Vongs) Entitled, spoiled, self-centered, and narcissistic seems to be the general consensus about today's young adults, but how do they compare to past generations?

The Greatest Generation

The G.I. Generation, more affectionately known as the Greatest Generation, describes American individuals born between 1901 and 1925. These people survived the Great Depression of the 1930s and would go on to fight for their country in World War II. The Greatest Generation, a term coined by journalist Tom Brokaw, is so named for the united willpower toward the greater good of humanity not only displayed by men in the military, but also by the millions at home who contributed to the war effort. However, this generation had not always held such favorable views in the eyes of the public. This so-called "Greatest Generation" had been slammed with much of the same criticism that is now leveled against Generation Y.

The August 13, 1927 issue of the *Southeast Missourian* reads: "Modern Youth on Down Grade." Dr. Stagg, director of athletics at the University of Chicago declares, "It is [youth] guilty of more violations of morality and honesty than ever before" ("Mothers Blamed by Dr. Stagg" 1). Inez Haynes Irwin, a renowned feminist, is also abashed by the perceived lack of morals of the Greatest Generation. She protested youth in the August 21, 1927 issue of the *Milwaukee Journal*, "They are frightful, terrible, horrible. They have no manners. They have no morals. They race around in automobiles all day, and they dance in cabarets all night. They smoke. They drink." They are also guilty of a lack of social responsibility (Irwin), an observation entirely inconsistent with a generation that would later fight genocide. "New Generation of Lazy Youths Roaming Nation" reads a title in the July 28, 1934 issue of the *Spokane Daily Chronicle*. A columnist complains about "shiftless boys...growing into manhood with no more ambition than to rove around the country" ("New Generation of Lazy Youths" 15). These boys would be fighting a war in just a few years and might have been "roaming" the nation because of the collapse of world economies that left thirty million Americans jobless.

Another disgruntled adult, George J. Chandler wrote to the *Milwaukee Sentinel* in October of 1940 lamenting youth with their "gambling, drinking and erotic pastimes." He also accuses them of the horrendous crime of dancing the Jitterbug as opposed to ballroom and preferring swing over classical (Chandler). Also writing to the *Milwaukee Sentinel* in October 19, 1941, is an actual member of this godless generation who finds fault among her peers when she ponders, "What is wrong with America's young people?" She expresses her rage at how they "expect the world to be brought to them on a silver platter" (Creed). While little empirical data exists on the characteristics of this generation, one does not need a fancy graph to know these statements sound familiar.

The Silent Generation

The Silent Generation refers to an age cohort born between 1923 and 1944, during the Great Depression and World War II. They are neither the war heroes of the Greatest Generation nor the freethinkers of the Baby Boomers, so they are largely overlooked. They were the first to experience the new world order following World War II. Yet their low status did not armor them from the reproach of their parents and grandparents.

Like the generation before them, the Silent Generation has questionable morals. The *New York Times* June 15, 1959, features an article, "U.S. Urged to Act on Youth Morals." The morals of the youth include an increase in unmarried mothers and venereal disease since 1940 ("U.S. Urged to Act" 17). The number of unmarried mothers has risen steadily since 1940 to this day; it appears every generation has become less and less observant of "morals." In September 1948, the *Milwaukee Journal* has a similar opinion on youth morals, "The modern college graduate is a man without morals, riding across the earth in a cap and gown with an electronic computer. . ." ("College Graduates of Today" 40). Not only does this generation lack morals but also, in "Grown-Ups Claim Today's Youth Is Rude," the author wonders why "youngsters" are so much "fresher" today (Robinson). Similarly Marsha T. writes to the *Toledo Blade* December 26, 1949, "What's wrong with modern young people?" (Crane), which is the exact question the woman writing to the *Milwaukee Journal* asked about the Greatest Generation in 1941.

One young member of the Silent Generation contested in a youth forum discussing the “under-discipline” of children saying that, “There is no difference in the children of these generations. Our parents were flappers...we do the boogie-woogie and wear booby-socks” (“Under-Discipline’ of Children” 77). His argument demonstrates the Life Cycle Effect: the wildness of youth is a result of typical behavior of youth no matter what generation they belong to.

The Baby Boomers

The Baby Boomers, born between 1945 and 1964, came of age in the tumultuous decades of the 1960s and 1970s. The Civil Rights Movement, the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr., John F. Kennedy, and Robert Kennedy, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Vietnam War, the Cold War, and Watergate among other events, shaped the identity of this cohort. As the generation that brought us counter-culture, they were the recipients of harsh criticism by their elders. The Hippie subculture was the target of the majority of attacks.

The *Free Lance Star* presented differing views of Hippies: “They’re practitioners of the worst sort of hypocrisy. . . lazy, immature, irresponsible, immoral, and smelly,” proclaims one professor (“What Is a Hippie?” 2). His opinion is not unique for the *Leader-Post* quotes one adult speaking against hippies as “dirty, long-haired people who go down the streets in smelly clothes waving their dirty locks in the air. I feel like grabbing a pair of scissors to shear the locks from these people who are making a mockery of our way of life” (“Dirty, lazy louts” 20). An archbishop of a Greek Orthodox Church calls the youth revolution a revolt “against every moral law-written and unwritten” (“Youth Revolution Termed Revolt”). And finally, “You kids today are a bunch of bums,” says a middle-aged man to a young man dressed like a hippie (“College youth makes discovery” 12). According to data collected by Sam Payne, David A. Summers, and Thomas R. Stuart, moral judgments have become less severe with each generation (Payne, Summers, and Stuart). So while expressing that youth has lax morals is not a wild claim, this weakening of morals have occurred in every generation showing that each generation is not unique.

One individual who recognizes the continuity between youth generations is an ex-slave Charlie Smith who, at the self-proclaimed age of 132, declares that the younger generation, “is going to hell and has been for the past 100 years. The younger generation, both white and colored—there ain’t nothing to them. I’ve been saying that for 100 years” (“Ex-Slave Find Youth” 19). Although condemning one hundred years of young adults to hell, Mr. Smith at least fairly acknowledges that *every* younger generation is going to hell. Exhibiting the Life Cycle Effect, Reverend Leo McLaughlin advised graduates against “damning youth.” He states that, “every older generation had been absolutely sure that the younger generation was headed for destruction” (“Graduates Warned” 17). These words made news in 1967, so what would make people today think that Gen Y is so different?

Generation X

Generation X is so called for its lack of distinguishing characteristics. Born between 1961 and 1981, they are much smaller in number than their Baby Boomer predecessors. They experienced the beginnings of the Age of Technology with the Internet, personal computers, cable television, and videogames. They are the most diverse in terms of race and social class, and witnessed important events such as the Dot-com Bubble, the Iran Hostage Crisis, the launch of the Hubble Telescope, the 1990s economic boom, and the Persian Gulf War.

Like every generation preceding them, young Generation Xers were the bane of society. A woman wrote to the *Portsmouth Daily Times* on January 8, 1986, complaining, “kids today never stand up and offer a seat to an older person on the bus” (“Today’s Children” 8). Speaking on more grave matters, a concerned citizen wrote to the *Pittsburgh Press* in April of 1987, “America cannot produce world leaders if its youths continue to be plagued by moral degeneracy” (Gladney). The

Schenectady Gazette November 21, 1989, reports, “America’s youth are alarmingly ill-prepared to keep democracy alive in the 1990s and beyond.” Included were the results of surveys showing the decline of awareness for world affairs (“Young Americans Ill-Prepared” 17). Generation X is continuing the decline in morals and values as evidenced by a study published in *Star-News*, “An unprecedented proportion of today’s youth lack commitment to core moral values like honesty, personal responsibility, respect for others, and civic duty” (“Moral Decay” 63).

A quick scan of popular media’s opinion of youth today will lead anyone to believe that Generation Y is the first group of young adults in history to be considered spoiled, narcissistic, and self-entitled. However, an article in the *Milwaukee Sentinel* dated 1990 finds, “These selfish young adults insist they are entitled to a good job, all the money they want and the gratification of their every wish” and that “They act as if the world owes them” (Driscoll).

Discussion

This search through newspaper archives has revealed that each generation, despite different social and historical contexts, has been the target of criticism by older adults. It is possible critics of youth are aware of this continuity and that is the reason why many articles published use the word “unprecedented,” as in an “unprecedented” rise in narcissism or an “unprecedented” decline in morals. Statistics published by Twenge claiming Generation Y has an unprecedented amount of narcissism can seem damning (Twenge), which is why her work is appealing to journalists. However, even if these surveys are accurate and the Millennials really are more self-entitled, ill-prepared for the world, and lazy, any of the articles in this paper could have been published in any other decade and would still hold true about youth in the eyes of adults. This demonstrates that even conclusions drawn from Cohort Analysis techniques cannot necessarily be used to determine if a generation is “better” or “worse” than another. Twenge et al. used cohort analysis to determine that twenty-year-olds today value leisure time more than twenty-year-olds in 1976; however, there are news articles from both periods complaining about the laziness of youth. Researchers who took into account the Life Cycle Effect seem to have the greatest grasp on generational differences because the Life Cycle Effect was demonstrated repeatedly in my research. Payne, Summers, and Stewart affirmed that conflict between parents and children is not unique because with each generation they surveyed, moral judgments were less severe. Children had less strict morals than their parents every single generation (Payne, Summers, and Stewart 27-30). Their research is clearly reflected in the rhetoric in newspapers with morality being the most common complaint about youth for every generation.

While we hail the Greatest Generation today, many adults did not foresee them as such. Generation Y could very well be the next Greatest Generation, but we won’t know until they are past the age of throwing house parties that wake the whole neighborhood and weaving through traffic as if they can never die.

While it may be true that today’s young adults are more self-entitled because they have been handed trophies for everything they do (Alsop), it is evident that every generation has had their defining negative characteristics, whether it be the counterculture of the Baby Boomers or the rap music Generation X enjoyed.

Conclusion

Hopefully this research will enlighten those who believe that today's youth is sending America on a path towards destruction, because members of every generation before you predicted similar doom, and yet we are still standing. Only time will tell what becomes of Generation Y. The grave prophecies of Jean M. Twenge may very well come true. Generation Y could face an epidemic of depression because life was a lot harder than anticipated. Generational stereotypes can be helpful when trying to paint an image for history, but not very useful when used to insult and belittle people. For every young adult texting at work there are far more hard working ones trying to survive in the world.

While we hail the Greatest Generation today, many adults did not foresee them as such. Generation Y could very well be the next Greatest Generation, but we won't know until they are past the age of throwing house parties that wake the whole neighborhood and weaving through traffic as if they can never die. The fact is one day Millennials will call the cops on some youngster's party and shake their fists at the teenager weaving through traffic all while muttering, "kids these days."

Works Cited

- Ablow, Keith. "We Are Raising a Generation of Deluded Narcissists." *Foxnews.com*. Fox News Network, 8 Jan. 2013. Web. 8 Apr. 2013.
- Alsop, Ron. "The 'Trophy Kids' Go to Work." *Wall Street Journal*. Dow Jones & Company, 21 Oct. 2008. Web.
- Alsop, Ron. *The Trophy Kids Grow Up: How the Millennial Generation is Shaking Up the Workplace*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008. Print.
- Chandler, George J. "Running Wild." *Milwaukee Sentinel* 13 Oct. 1940. *Google News*. Web. 8 Apr. 2013.
- "College Graduates of Today Lacking in Morals." *Milwaukee Journal* 28 Sept. 1948 *Google News*. Web. 8 Apr. 2013.
- "College Youth Makes Discovery: Appearance Is Great Difference." *Windsor Star* 19 Jan. 1971. *Google News*. Web. 8 Apr. 2013.
- Crane, George W. "Manners of Modern Youth Indicated: No Respect For Others." *Toledo Blade* 26 Dec. 1949. *Google News*. Web. 8 Apr. 2013.
- Creed, Betty. "What is Wrong with America's Young People?" *The Milwaukee Sentinel* 19 Oct. 1941. *Google News*. Web. 8 Apr. 2013.
- "Dirty, lazy louts." *Leader-Post* [Regina] 21 Sept. 1967. *Google News*. Web. 8 Apr. 2013.
- Driscoll, James G. *Milwaukee Sentinel* 20 Oct. 1990. *Google News*. Web. 8 Apr. 2013.
- "Ex-Slave, at 132, Finds Youth 'Going to Hell.'" *New York Times* 5 July 1974. *Google News*. Web. 8 Apr. 2013.
- Fogarty, Timothy J. "The Millennial Lie." *Issues In Accounting Education* 23.3 (2008): 369-71. *Education Source*. Web. 26 Feb. 2013.
- Gladney, Fred Sr. "Today's Youth Weak." *Pittsburgh Press* 26 Apr. 1987. *Google News*. Web. 8 Apr. 2013.
- "Graduates Warned On Damning Youth." *New York Times* 10 Jun. 1967. *Google News*. Web. 8 Apr. 2013.
- Greenberger, Ellen, et al. "Self-Entitled College Students: Contributions of Personality, Parenting, and Motivational Factors." *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 37.10 (2008): 1193-204. *FRANCIS*. Web. 26 Feb. 2013.
- Irwin, Inez Haynes. "Inez Haynes Irwin Takes Stock of 'Conquering' Young Generation." *The Milwaukee Sentinel* 21 Aug. 1927. *Google News*. Web. 8 Apr. 2013.
- Males, Mike A. *The Scapegoat Generation: America's War on Adolescents*. Monroe, Me.: Common Courage, 1996. Print.

- "Moral Decay? The Me Generation." *Star-News* [Pasadena] 13 Oct. 1990. *Google News*. Web. 8 Apr. 2013.
- "Mothers Blamed By Dr. Stagg: Modern Youth on Down Grade." *The Southeast Missourian* [Cape Girardeau] 13 Aug. 1927. *Google News*. Web. 8 Apr. 2013.
- "New Generation of Lazy Youths Roaming Nation." *Spokane Daily Chronicle* 28 Jul. 1934. *Google News*. Web. 8 Apr. 2013.
- Payne, Sam, David A. Summers, and Thomas R. Stewart. "Value Differences across Three Generations." *Sociometry* 36.1 (1973): 20-30. *JSTOR*. Web. 26 Feb. 2013.
- Robinson, Elsie. "Grown-Ups Claim Today's Youth is Rude." *Toledo Blade* 6 Apr. 1952. *Google News*. Web. 8 Apr. 2013.
- Rotolo, Thomas, and John Wilson. "What Happened To The 'Long Civic Generation'? Explaining Cohort Differences In Volunteerism." *Social Forces* 82.3 (2004): 1091. *JSTOR*. Web. 19 Mar. 2013.
- Spinney, Laura. "All About ME." *New Scientist* 214.2862 (2012): 44-47. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 26 Feb. 2013.
- "Today's Children Need To Be Taught Manners." *Portsmouth Daily Times* 8 Jan. 1986. *Google News*. Web. 8 Apr. 2013.
- Treuren, Gerry, and Kathryn Anderson. "The Employment Expectations of Different Age Cohorts: Is Generation Y Really That Different?" *Australian Journal Of Career Development* 19.2 (2010): 49-61. *ERIC*. Web. 26 Feb. 2013.
- Trzesniewski, Kali H, and Brent M. Donnellan. "Are Today's Young People Really That Different from Previous Generations? A Skeptical Perspective On 'Generation Me.'" *Jury Expert* 21.3 (2009): 1-11. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 19 Mar. 2013.
- Twenge, Jean M., et al. "Generational Differences in Work Values: Leisure and Extrinsic Values Increasing, Social And Intrinsic Values Decreasing." *Journal Of Management* 36.5 (2010): 1117-1142. *Social Sciences Citation Index*. Web. 26 Feb. 2013.
- Twenge, Jean M. "Teaching Generation Me." *Teaching of Psychology* 40.1 (2013): 66-69. *Education Full Text (H.W. Wilson)*. Web. 26 Feb. 2013.
- "'Under-Discipline' of Children Is Due To More Freedom, Youth Forum Decides." *New York Times* 15 Dec. 1946. *Google News*. Web. 8 Apr. 2013.
- "U.S. Urged to Act on Youth Morals." *New York Times* 15 Jun. 1959. *Google News*. Web. 8 Apr. 2013.
- Vongs, Pueng. "'You're Not Special' Graduation Speech Sparks Buzz." *Yahoo! News*. Yahoo!, 8 Jun. 2012. Web. 8 Apr. 2013.
- "What Is a Hippie? Definitions Differ." *Free Lance Star* [Fredericksburg] 30 Sept. 1968. *Google News*. Web. 8 Apr. 2013.
- "Young Americans Ill-Prepared to Back Democracy." *Schenectady Gazette* 21 Nov. 1989. *Google News*. Web. 8 Apr. 2013.
- "Youth Revolution Termed Revolt Against Morality." *Lawrence Journal-World* 3 Jul. 1970. *Google News*. Web. 8 Apr. 2013.

Jessica Kitt

Jessica Kitt is a sophomore majoring in Advertising and Public Relations with a minor in Writing and Rhetoric. She aspires to be a Public Relations professional working for an agency. She hopes that strengthening her writing skills will help her realize this dream. In her spare time, she enjoys watching copious amounts of television and movies, playing board games, and reading.