

The Costs of overprotecting the young - iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy--and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood--and What That Means for the Rest of Us
by Jean M. Twenge (2017)

In her latest book, Jean Twenge (2017), a professor of psychology from San Diego State University with over two-and-a-half decades of experience in social science and generational psychology, shares generational research from four large national surveys of 11 million respondents. With her ongoing fascination for extremely-long-book-titles and a new allure for the usage of graphs and figures, Twenge focuses this time on individuals born between 1995 and 2012, whom she has been calling iGen'ers since 2006 – an analogy to Apple's famous iPhone, iPad, iWatch, etc. The letter "i" can be also considered a code for the Internet (and/or individualism). As she did with *Generation Me* to much criticism (see Arnett, 2008), Twenge supplements empirical survey data and dozens of graphs with myths and non-empiric opinions collected through interviews, online questionnaires, newspaper articles, and arbitrary class discussions. While doing so, she adds materials to shape her story (and "humanizes" the young people behind the data), but at the same time loses some of the book's academic credibility.

The *iGen* book is a natural progression from Twenge's first book *Generation Me* (2006, 2014), on which I wrote about before (Zoller, 2018). Some of the social trends described by Twenge with GenMe'rs (i.e., Millennials) have spiked upward with iGen'ers since 2011-2012. The hypothesis presented by Twenge is that the main change in those specific years was of smartphones becoming a dominant household item enabling

a stronger focus on technology (mainly, the Internet) and individuality. Throughout the book, alternative possible variables that may be in-play are presented so that they can be rejected by Twenge and the case made for causation, but these attempts are so repetitive and non-scientific that they lose their charm after a while. According to Quinn (2017), Twenge commits “deceptive spin” by presenting her conclusions first and support for it later and by ignoring data that does not support her case. In addition, many of the y-axes of the book’s graphs (specifically, 91 of the 124 images), are misleading and do not start at zero, as indicated by Verbruggen (2017). This is known as ‘truncated graphs’ or ‘torn graphs’. Since the reader is not informed about it, these graphs can create an impression of a substantial change when the change is modest (Utts, 2013). Thus, when discussing generational trends in this review, one must remember that substantial changes described by the author may be modest and not robust. In several occasions, trends in the data seem to emerge, but are not yet robust enough to present the full picture of a generational change quite yet.

Ethics is also a concern in this book. One must wonder what was Twenge thinking when plugging in the book a reference to her consulting firm, *iGen Consulting* (Quinn, 2017). This is especially concerning when tips on how to market to iGen’ers are presented in chapter 7 (in short, focus on individuality and safety and security) and the concluding chapter focuses on how to turn the data presented in the book into practical knowledge that may be useful for parents, educators, and employers. Most of the content in the book is descriptive and consequences and solutions are not fully developed. As a reader, I was left with the feeling that I have been tricked and given many problems, but not enough reasons or solutions. The question of “why?” hovers

over the book so profoundly that explanations such as the emergence of smartphones or increased screen-time seem plausible, but not convincing. One may wonder if reading the book made me think like an iGen'er by focusing on practicality and favor logic over emotions... Like Quinn (2017), I am also concerned that helping teenagers and selling to them present an ethical dilemma. Should I consider Twenge an expert in selling things to teenagers and hire her for her consulting services? Probably not... But I have little doubt a revised version of the book in a couple of years will answer most of my questions, as was done by Twenge in 2014 with the second edition of *Generation Me*.

In *iGen* (2017), Twenge demonstrates she reads reviews on her writing and adapts accordingly. For instance, when discussing boxing generational cohorts in groups with a set number of years, a position criticized by Arnett (2008), she acknowledges that “any generational cutoff is arbitrary” (p. 6). Another example is her move away from assigning blame to parents, technology, media or educators, which was indirectly implied in *Generation Me*. This time, she admits that “using words such as *fault* or *blame* doesn't really make sense” (Twenge, 2017, p. 14). Another tool used by Twenge in this book is 48 pages of appendices which appear on the publisher's website (and on her own website) as supplemental material for the book. In those appendices, she includes additional information on the four main data sources used in the book, explains why percentages were preferred over means, and includes additional graphs.

As with *Generation Me*, Twenge advocates in *iGen* that the only true methodology to study generations is by comparing people at the same age at different

points in time. While American iGen'ers are technology-savvy, open-minded, forward-thinking, tolerant and safe, they are also more anxious, avoid responsibilities, and have unique views on religion, sex, and politics (Twenge, 2017). In a cute gesture, Twenge characterizes iGen'ers using ten i-starting features which offer a nice summary to the book: in no hurry to grow-up, Internet, in person no more, insecure, irreligious, insulated but not intrinsic, income insecurity, indefinite, inclusive, and independent.

My favorite chapter of the book by far is its first chapter, in which Twenge provides a fascinating view for how iGen'ers' cocoon mentality makes them in no hurry to undertake adult pleasures and responsibilities and results in a tendency of growing-up at a slow rate. iGen'ers tend to go out less with their peers (and more with their parents) than previous generations; they date each other less; and they are less likely to have sex, work, own a driving license, or drink alcohol (but they do smoke more marijuana, as many of them consider it safe). These trends raise questions about the readiness of these teenagers to act as adult members of society anytime soon.

In chapters 2 and 3, Twenge describes how iGen'ers connect and communicate less with friends in person and more through social media and texting. As such, iGen'ers party less with friends, go on fewer dates, and hang-out less time at shopping malls, the cinema, or in bars and nightclubs. It seems as if Internet communications have replaced traditional media formats of books, newspapers, magazines, and TV with social media (especially Instagram and Snapchat), texting, watching online videos, and playing video games (mostly males). Those Internet activities account for a large portion of iGen'ers' leisure time, i.e., 5-6 hours a day. Potential outcomes for these trends include decrease in writing levels of iGen'ers (as displayed through lower SAT scores),

as well as inferior social skills and an unhealthy mental state associated with unhappiness, loneliness, and even depression.

When discussing the mental state of iGen'ers in chapters 4 and 6, Twenge demonstrates a growing mental-health crisis with iGen'ers and a wave of increased rates of anxiety, depression, loneliness, exclusion, sleep deprivation, cyberbullying, and suicide accompanied with an obsession with safety. In Twenge's words: "iGen is on the verge of the most severe mental health crisis for young people in decades" (2017, p. 93). This predicament has been caused, according to Twenge, by increased screen-time by iGen'ers as well as less in-person social interactions. The obsession of iGen'ers with safety, that is both physical and emotional safety, contrasts with traditional inclinations of youngsters to be associated with risk taking. Yet, such focusing on safety has both upsides and downsides. While it helps shape iGen'ers as a timid and over-protected generation, it also has its benefits with positives trends toward safer drivers, reduced levels of binge drinking, and less involvement of youngsters in fighting.

The mental-health crisis of iGen'ers and the over-emphasis on emotional safety of college students are used by Haidt and Lukianoff (2015, 2017) and Twenge (2017) to argue that over-protection from words and ideas may be detrimental to iGen'ers mental health and future employment. According to Haidt and Lukianoff (2015, 2017), censoring class content or banning lectures of ideologically-offensive speakers on college campuses can restrict the ability of iGen'ers to withstand stress or cope with adversity as adults. This also has political consequences. Shielding students from potential stress associated with radical speakers and treating "free speech" as dangerous acts of violence may serve small and dangerous political (and violent)

groups. In a polarized democracy such as America, telling youngsters that ‘words are violence’ can lead to conflicts and real physical violence when the ability to argue or exchange ideas is lost (Haidt & Lukianoff, 2017). Instead, the target goal should be finding a balance between freedom of speech and making all students welcome.

Haidt and Lukianoff’s solution is to better separate words and actions and educate people to have fruitful debates without reaching violent actions (2015, 2017). This is especially important in universities, which should be leaders in fostering a climate that separates true ideas from popular but deceptive ones. By avoiding exposure of students to ideas different than theirs, “schools may be training students in thinking styles that will damage their careers and friendships, along with their mental health” (Haidt & Lukianoff, 2015, para. 30). Twenge adds that while students expect university administrators to protect them at all costs and support their feelings of comfort, universities should help fragile iGen students learn to solve problems on their own instead of reducing their independence and creativity (Twenge, 2017).

It is possible that shielding iGen’ers from danger creates more danger in the long-term rather than the established short-term safety. As an undergraduate student a decade ago, I wrote an essay about how society’s anti-drug education was failing. In that essay, I argued for more clarity and honesty in describing the drug problem and its solutions to youngsters. Instead of telling them not to use drugs because drugs are bad, parents and educators can state instead that drugs make some people feel great, but can be dangerous and addictive. Maybe the statement of “don’t fall in love with drugs” should be replaced with “don’t fall in love with drugs even though they make you feel

good!" Masking a danger in the name of protection may not be an ideal cope mechanism. Exposure and discussion may better serve youngsters here.

A discussion of the relationship between iGen'ers and religion is provided in Chapter 5. Twenge explains why the iGen generation is the least religious generation in US history. Specifically, details are provided to demonstrate how iGen'ers are less religious and less spiritual than previous generations. As such, iGen'ers show reduced rates of prayer or attendance of religious services, and diminished beliefs in God, afterlife, or that the bible is the word of God. Twenge attributes part of this generational change to increased level of individualism and focus on equality. To conclude the chapter, Twenge makes a bold prediction about the future of religion in the US: "religion will survive, but it will be a flexible, open, equal religion that gives people a sense of belonging and meaning and that reaches less than half of Americans" (p. 142). She is likely to be correct here.

In chapter 7, Twenge analyzes the income insecurity of iGen'ers and their preference for extrinsic over intrinsic forms of motivation, i.e., their focus on hygiene factors of salary and benefits rather than motivators such as responsibility and recognition when considering a job (Herzberg, 1968). With the reduced importance of social attributes of a job and the increasing levels of student debt combined with the difficulty to obtain stable jobs, it is hard to blame iGen'ers for this preference. While many iGen'ers are practical and have high work ethic, they are in no rush to enter adulthood or find a job. They often display external locus of control in which they see external factors as determining their destiny rather than their assuming control in shaping their own future. Many iGen'ers postpone finding a job into their late twenties

while depending financially on their parents longer than previous generations. While fully aware of the importance of job to one's success, iGen'ers are less inclined to start their own business and are less optimistic about becoming professionals or managers. While they are financially aware and practical, they still choose to delay starting their own professional careers and take advantage of the financial protection of their parents.

The topics of sex, marriage, and having children are tackled in chapter 8. iGen'ers are less likely to date or have sexual relationships. Ironically, although many iGen'ers admit they want love in relationships, when they have sex it is often through "hookups", which are non-committal sexual relationships when little emotions are involved and the word "love" is to be avoided. Through hookups, teenagers can avoid "catching feelings", a derogatory term used to describe faulty sexual relationships where emotions are involved (but shouldn't be). iGen'ers often stay away from relationship responsibilities, intimacy, or the chance to be influenced by others. It is very problematic in preparing them to adulthood, but it results in positive trends in recent years such as lower prevalence of STDs (sexual transmitted diseases) and unwanted pregnancies in teens. The likelihood to get married early (or at all) is also declining while the likelihood to live with a partner is increasing. Chances of having children outside marriage are lower today and typically happen later in life than with previous generations. The popular urban legend of promiscuous young adults today having non-protected sex often seems to be far from reality with iGen'ers.

When discussing gender and race (chapter 9), it is easy to see that iGen'ers have been progressing towards inclusivity and equality (which are linked to their innate individualism), but are not fully quite there. While many of them accept gays and

lesbians, they are still struggling with acceptance of transgenders. Their views of traditional gender roles are also progressing towards equality and diversity, but these attitudes are often accepted, but not desired. iGen'ers are less supportive than previous generations to affirmative or reverse discrimination in America. Continued discrimination towards races (including towards whites) provides hints, according to Twenge, to the return of American white nationalism. At the same time, iGen'ers are quick to be offended when comments about race or gender are made, and are more likely to support restrictive speech and censorship over defending the First Amendment of freedom of speech.

Twenge offers fascinating analysis of trends in US politics in chapter 10, which helps explain some of the factors leading to the success of Bernie Sanders and the win by Donald Trump in the 2016 Presidential election. Specifically, she describes how the discontent of iGen'ers with the two main political parties (Democrats and Republicans) resulted in support for those two "independent-like" candidates and their social (Sanders) and national (Trump) views. She associates this with low interest and low trust of iGen'ers in government and their preference to focus on social issues. What is somewhat surprising is that the iGen generation, which is considered having liberal views, is becoming more conservative and less moderate or liberal in its political views. As party divisions in US politics increase, iGen'ers are in the forefront of a mixture of political views which are of libertarian and include small-government-philosophy in nature. For instance, many iGen'ers support liberal views such as the right to abortion (pro-choice) and the abolishment of death penalty, but at the same time they oppose limits on handgun sales, are less likely to support a national healthcare plan, and are

more likely to oppose governmental environmental regulations. Individualism, financial concerns, and freedom of choice likely stand behind many of those views. It is no wonder that these views are complemented with a desire for free education and free child care by iGen'ers, but little desire for actual involvement in political actions. What does it mean to the US political system? We are likely to find out in upcoming years.

The concluding chapter of the book is titled 'Understanding - and saving – iGen'. Twenge, as a parent and an educator, offers actions to help the iGen generation. Specifically, her approach calls for "striking a balance between solutions and acceptance" (p. 290). However, her recommendations are palpable and mostly repetitions of early sections in the book. Once again, one must wonder if she kept some recommendations from being reported to protect her consulting firm rather than lay it all out in the book. Her key recommendation is to moderate the use of smartphones by teens (especially for young teens). When wearing the parent hat, she recommends teaching children to be independent and encouraging face-to-face communication to build their social skills. She goes as far as suggesting relaxing curfews and rules for children going out with friends, encouraging children to get a driving license early, and cheering teenagers to work or even take a gap year to learn life lessons. To beat anxiety and depression, Twenge recommends lifestyle changes including increase in physical activity, sleep, and social interactions as well as diet, therapy and medications. Twenge's ideas are of common sense, including the need for American society to relax about safety. After all, the world may be becoming safer and less violent (Pinker, 2011). As an educator, Twenge commends developing critical thinking in students and keeping lectures to iGen'ers engaging while mixing lecture, discussion, videos, quizzes/polls,

and demonstrations. For employers looking to hire iGen'ers, Twenge highlights the need to provide such employees with constant feedback, setting clear career paths, and offering safety and flexibility.

iGen is a good read and an interesting attempt to understand a new generation many of us know little about. As more data and research on iGen'ers become available, so will our ability to separate truths from fiction, truncated graphs from valid ones, and anecdotes and stories from scientific data.

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