

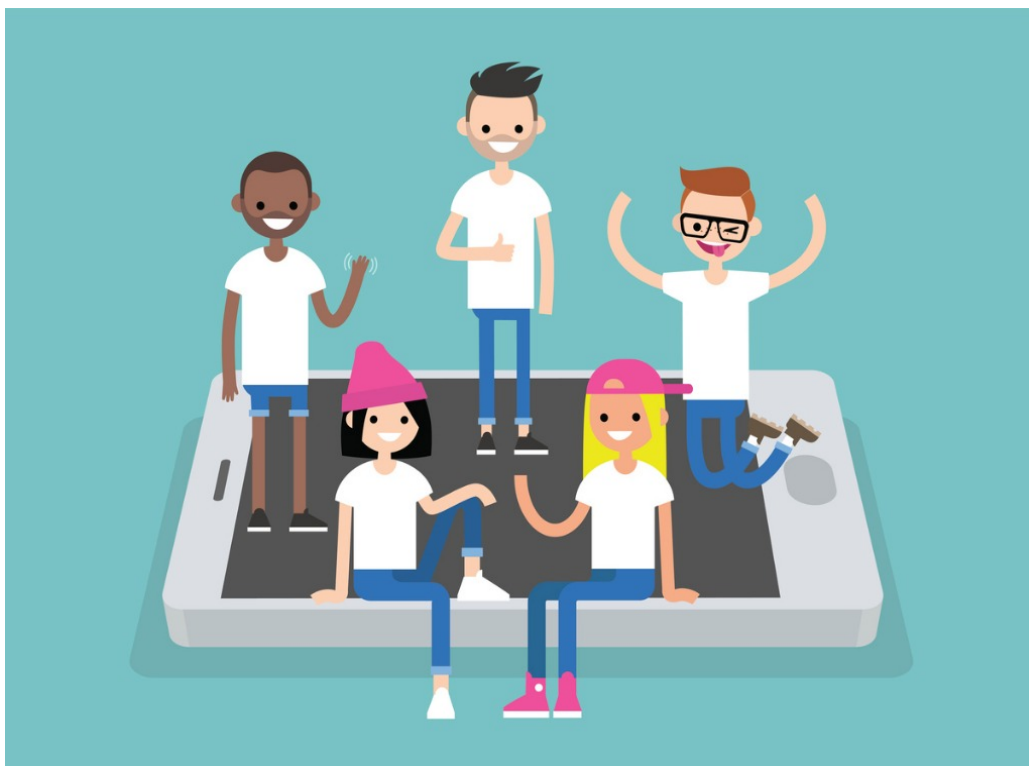


Does “Generation Me” Really Exist?

I am about to do what old people have done throughout history: call those younger than me lazy, entitled, selfish and shallow. But I have studies! I have statistics! I have quotes from respected academics! Unlike my parents, my grandparents and my great-grandparents, I have proof.

— Joel Stein, *TIME*, “Millennials: The Me Me Me Generation,” May 20, 2013

The term “Generation Me,” which refers to millennials who were born in the 1980s and 1990s, has been widely adopted by the public. This, in large part, is due to work by Dr. Twenge and colleagues on generation value differences^{1,4} and their bestselling book, *Generation Me*^{2,3}. One distinguishing character of “Generation Me” is that younger generations in America are increasingly experiencing the so-called “Narcissism Epidemic,” such that younger individuals are more narcissistic, entitled and self-concerned than older generations.



These results were based on a series of meta-analyses and empirical studies on college students' narcissistic personality inventory (NPI) scores across a time span of several decades. NPI measures individual narcissistic levels by asking participants to choose between a narcissistic alternative and a non-narcissistic alternative for each item with a total of 40 items. One's narcissism score will be the total number of narcissistic items one endorsed. For example, in one study Twenge and colleagues⁴ found that college students' NPI scores were positively related to year of data collection, and that since 1982, NPI scores increased 30% (15.44 vs. 17.65 out of 40). It was also concluded that the average college student now endorses about two more narcissism items than his or her predecessors did in the early 1980s, and it should be a sign of rising narcissism levels in today's young generation.

Following the increasing popularity of social networks among today's youth and these young people openly sharing personal information about themselves on these platforms, many felt the term "Generation Me" was well vindicated. However, several subsequent meta-analyses and research studies that disagree with Twenge's findings never attracted much public attention. These publications thoroughly pointed out issues existed in studies that portrayed younger individuals as narcissistic and entitled — and countered such findings with further research evidence. Two major issues were discussed in these articles: 1) the generalizability of the samples used in Twenge and colleagues' articles; 2) the complication in interpreting the narcissism measurement through which the conclusions were drawn.



Trzesniewski, Donnellan and Robins⁵ argued that the samples used in Twenge et al.'s studies are not necessarily nationally representative, but are rather convenience samples. (A convenience sample is a sample that consists of people who are easy to reach, in this case, four-year college student samples.) When using a convenience sample to represent all young Americans today, the results can be dangerously biased. They failed to replicate Twenge et al.'s¹ results using a nationally representative sample, such that no difference in college students' narcissistic levels were found over time. This finding was also supported by several other studies. Trzesniewski et al.⁶ found no generational difference in narcissism from 1996 to 2007 with a large California college student sample. Donnellan, Trzesniewski and Robins⁷ found in a sample of 30,073 participants that narcissism only weakly correlated with year of data collection (1996 to 2008), and it is not enough to make collusion on a secular increase in narcissism over time. They then tested generational narcissism difference within different ethnic groups. Twenge et al.¹ suggested that the reason that studies with college student samples from California found no generational narcissism difference is

because that there are more Asian Americans than in other samples. They claim that Asian students should be significantly less narcissistic than white students and less likely to have increased narcissism levels over time. However, Donnellan et al. failed to find a significant relationship between narcissism and data collection year by race, which was supported by a study conducted by Wetzel and colleagues⁸. In another study, Roberts, Edmonds and Grijalva⁹ found no difference in college students' narcissism levels from 1982 to 2009 by adding more data to the original Twenge et al.'s¹ sample. Their results also indicate that change in narcissism levels with aging is much more significant than generational change in narcissism. "Every generation is generation me," they concluded.

Another issue with the conclusion that led to the term "Generation Me" is embedded in the narcissism measurement used in these studies — the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) — and how we interpret NPI scores.

As was mentioned previously, one of the findings that led to the stereotype of "Generation Me" is that the average college student now endorses about two more narcissism items than his or her predecessors did in the early 1980s. But let me explain what these two more items (out of a total of 40 items) may represent. There are seven main components of NPI: authority, self-sufficiency, superiority, exhibitionism, exploitativeness, vanity and entitlement¹⁰. Below are the definitions and example items of NPI:

Authority

- A preference for leading, influencing, and having authority over other people (e.g., I see myself as a good leader).

Self-Sufficiency

- The tendency to be independent, self-sufficient and confident in the way one does things (e.g., I rarely depend on anyone else to get things done).

Superiority

- The belief that oneself is special and extraordinary, and should be complimented and admired (e.g., I am an extraordinary person).

Exhibitionism

- Describes someone who likes showing off and being the center of attention (e.g., I like to be the center of attention).

Exploitativeness

- The belief that oneself can easily read and manipulate other people (e.g., I can read people like a book).

Vanity

- Describes someone who loves and appreciates one's own physical appearance (e.g., I like to look at myself in the mirror).

Entitlement

- The need for being respected, being in power, and being treated specially (e.g., I will never be satisfied until I get all that I deserve).

Unlike other NPI facets, authority and self-sufficiency were found to be strongly positively associated with adjectives such as self-confident and assertive by research subjects¹⁰ and in some other studies were grouped together as one factor: leadership/authority¹¹. Moreover, Trzesniewski et al.⁵ found that negative traits such as aggression, anger and hostility are majorly driven by only some narcissism subcomponents: entitlement, exhibitionism and exploitativeness. It seems like not all traits measured by NPI are socially toxic; some, like authority and self-sufficiency, are even seen as socially desirable. The changes in NPI scores, albeit small, can be driven by the desirable traits rather than the toxic traits.



“...not all traits measured by NPI are socially toxic; some, like authority and self-sufficiency, are even seen as socially desirable.”

Meanwhile, as societal values shift over time, individual values change too. With our society calling for more young leaders and entrepreneurs nowadays, leadership/authority can be more desirable than it was in the past. Having leadership skills and competencies, high self-confidence and independent problem-solving abilities are what today's recruiters are looking for in college graduates¹². Such transformation in value desirability can lead to different interpretations of NPI items. Therefore, choosing NPI items that fall into these categories should not necessarily carry the negative connotation that the term narcissist does for today's youth. Therefore, merely comparing NPI score differences across time may not be sufficient evidence for the "Narcissistic Epidemic." Wetzel et al.⁸ supported this argument by finding that college students in different time periods interpret NPI items differently (measurement inequivalence). After controlling for such inequivalence, they found a small *decline* in overall narcissism levels and its subdimensions from 1990s to the 2010s. What is more, the psychometric properties and the factor structure of NPI have constantly been questioned by social/personality psychology researchers¹¹. We should be more cautious when drawing conclusions solely based on this measure.

But how about all the social network posts? Aren't they a sign of narcissism? Bergman and colleagues¹³ found no link between narcissism and social network activities and frequency of usage. Some

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other studies suggest that the frequency one uses Facebook and Twitter to provide self-focused updates may be more of one's attitude toward being open about sharing information about oneself¹⁴, and there is no generational difference in using Facebook as a means to satisfy one's social needs or need for affection¹⁵. Using social networks is just a sign of the times¹³, rather than a sign of the "Narcissism Epidemic."



“Bergman and colleges ¹¹ found no link between narcissism and social network activities and frequency of usage”

If the younger generations are not more narcissistic than the older generations, what about other traits of the so-called “Generation Me”? One study¹⁶, using data collected from 477,380 U.S. high school seniors from 1976 to 2006, failed to find any meaningful change in egotism, self-enhancement, individualism, self-esteem, locus of control, hopelessness, happiness, life satisfaction, loneliness, antisocial behavior, time spent working or watching television, political activity, the importance of religion and the importance of social status over the last 30 years. Another study showed that between generational differences in work-related outcomes, such as job satisfaction and organizational commitment (one’s feelings of affection and obligation toward the organization), are moderate to small, essentially zero in many cases¹⁷. Therefore, the term “Generation Me” does not seem to hold true for describing today’s young people.

Every young generation is important to a society’s continuous development. What we think about them and how we treat them can profoundly affect how they come into being in the future. Before making any conclusions, especially for an entire generation, we should constantly question any existing assumptions and consider facts from various sources to balance ideas from different aspects. It is fairly inaccurate to stereotype the young generation as arrogant, narcissistic, unruly and entitled without well-supported evidence. Yet, many will continue to spew rhetoric that society will be overrun by this “Narcissism Epidemic,” which detracts them from searching for possible meaningful ways of managing and working with these young adults.



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