After the Fact | The Next Generation
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TRANSCRIPT

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Dr. Jean Twenge, professor of psychology at San Diego State University: Popularity is now quantifiable. It can now be counted, in number of followers and number of likes. And it just takes the pressure to a whole new level.

Dan LeDuc, host: That's Jean Twenge talking about the pressure on many teenagers who spend so much of their day on social media. Will their friends like their pictures or posts on Facebook or Snapchat or Instagram? Twenge has been looking at the data for a while now and seen a dramatic shift in how these young people interact with each other and how happy they are. For years, we've been talking about millennials as the youngest generation. But Twenge, a psychology professor at San Diego State University, says people born since about 1995 represent a new generation to start talking about. She calls them the iGen.

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Welcome to "After the Fact" from The Pew Charitable Trusts. I'm Dan LeDuc, and 1995 is our data point for this episode. It represents a significant mark on the generational timeline. This new generation is joining with millennials, Gen Xers, baby boomers, the silent generation, and the greatest generation—giving us six distinct groups in our nation today. Jean Twenge has been interested in generations for a while. In fact, she's written two books about them.

Dan LeDuc: So you've studied generations for a long time. Written a couple of books about them. And in the course of some research, you were telling me, of a few years ago, you started to see some changes in people's attitudes, and how they worked back around, that started around 1995. And that means we now have this new generation among us, right?

Jean Twenge: Yeah. So I've been studying generations for about 25 years and got used to seeing slow, steady changes that built over time into big ones. And then, you know, I usually draw from these very large, national surveys of teens—usually about 13 to 18 years old—that are done every year. And have been for decades. And around 2011, or 2012, I started to notice some large and sudden changes in how teens are spending their time, and how they said they were feeling.

So if you trace that back, with that shift happening around that time, that means there is a pronounced generational break between millennials and those who come after them right around the birth year of the mid-1990s. And I settled on 1995, partially because that's also the year the internet was commercialized.

Dan LeDuc: So that means, as we think back over the generations, we've got six pretty distinct generations in this country right now. And that seems like about a first, right? Thanks to—you know—

improved science and longer life spans and everything, I'm not sure we've really seen that in modern history before.

Jean Twenge: I think there are two factors. First is that people are living longer. The second is that the generational turnovers are happening faster.

Dan LeDuc: Oh, that's interesting.

Jean Twenge: So the baby boom generation is usually considered to be those born, basically, 1946 to 1965. So what does that work out to, 19 years? And then Gen Xers—it's usually 1966 to—there's disagreement, but maybe around 1980, '81. So that's a little shorter.

And then, with millennials ending in the mid-'90s, that's even shorter. So there's this turnover that's happening, probably just because of the pace of cultural change. For a number of factors, but prominent among them is technology. And how technology has changed things so quickly and has such a big impact on our lives.

So this post-millennial generation, I call them iGen, after iPhones and iPads, because that technology has had such an outsized impact on their lives. They're the first generation to spend their whole adolescence with smartphones. And smartphones were adopted faster than any other technology in history. So the period from when they were introduced to when half the population—at least here in the U.S.—owned them was only about five years. And that process took a lot longer for other technologies, like radio or TV.

Dan LeDuc: And, of course, every generation sort of is defined by what's occurring around—the circumstances around it. I mean, the greatest generation is sort of known for being born before the Depression. And the silent generation—

Jean Twenge: World War II.

Dan LeDuc: Yeah, they won World War II for us, right? And the silent generation was born during the Depression and sort of came out of those years. Boomers have been shaped by this optimistic age that we're in.

Jean Twenge: And the counterculture revolution of the '60s.

Dan LeDuc: So let's pause for a minute and just talk about—some of those names are pretty cool. And I know you're in the midst of—you named this latest one in your latest book. And it'll take a while for that to all shake out and then get decided on. But how do those names come about?

Jean Twenge: At least in recent decades, these generational names get kind of bandied around for a while. And there's often several for the same group, which is nice and confusing for everyone. And then eventually, through various media outlets and research outlets and so on, there becomes a consensus around one name.

Dan LeDuc: And eventually, over time, I guess it's like science and demographics, and it's also probably a little bit of business and marketing that play roles in how the society settles on these names. But a lot of it has to do with the influences around them. But for this newest generation, you started seeing how they

acted and noticed that they were different. Let's talk about what makes the new ones different than the ones before them.

Jean Twenge: There are these similarities mostly revolving around having an individualistic outlook rather than a more collectivistic or group-oriented outlook. iGen has continued many of the trends in that area in terms of distrust of institutions instead. You know, relying on the individual, valuing equality, valuing tolerance. In that way, iGen and the millennials are very similar.

But there's a few pronounced breaks. I would say there's three of them. In two cases, iGen has continued, but really accelerated, trends that were started by the millennials. So one is in taking longer to do adult activities, so things like driving, having a paid job, drinking alcohol. That started to go down, let's say among high school seniors, with the millennials starting around the late 1990s. So millennials kind of got that trend started. But then those trends really accelerate with iGen.

There was also the trend away from in-person, social interaction with friends among teens. So hanging out, going out without your parents, and driving around in a car, going to the mall. All of these things. So those things started to decline among teens around the 2000s.

Dan LeDuc: As a parent, I really like a lot of what you're telling me here.

Jean Twenge: Oh yeah, there's some great things about it. But there are some downsides, too, because they're just not getting as much social interaction face-to-face with their friends, and that has potential consequences.

And that brings us to the third difference between millennials and iGen, and the one that's the most pronounced. Which is, all of a sudden, around 2011, 2012, more teens started to say that they felt useless, that they felt like they couldn't do anything right. These are classic symptoms of depression. More started to say that they felt lonely and left out. Fewer said that they were happy or satisfied with their lives.

And then other researchers found very similar trends, again, right around that same 2011-2012 time span. The rate of clinical level of depression among teens started to spike, and the rate of self-harm. So things like cutting, and taking pills, started to spike. And the suicide rate started to spike.

So for both lower-level and much more serious mental health issues, there's a really big break. Millennials compared to iGen are much more optimistic, less prone to depression and mental health issues. And then iGen, that's the challenge that they face is these much higher rates of anxiety and depression and self-harm.

Dan LeDuc: Well let's talk about those a little more deeply. But first, since this is a program about data, let's let listeners know how you know this stuff. What are the studies you look at? And when you draw these conclusions, how are you able to do that?

Jean Twenge: Yeah. So I draw from these large, nationally representative data sets, most of which are federally funded. So their data is publicly available. So one of them is called “Monitoring the Future.” And it's a survey of eighth-graders, 10th-graders, and 12th-graders. It's done every year. It is intended primarily to look at drug and alcohol use. But it asks a bunch of other very interesting questions about how teens spend their time and how they're feeling. Then there's other surveys I draw on as well. One is

administered by the CDC. And then the General Social Survey, which is one of the best-known surveys in sociology, that goes back to 1972. And that's of adults, 18 and up.

Dan LeDuc: So you started seeing these changes. You're a parent yourself. Do you start getting worried? There is some serious stuff that's happening to this new generation.

Jean Twenge: Absolutely. It is very, very concerning. So that was sort of my thought process in looking at this, was seeing these pronounced breaks and just saying, what is going on? What could have caused this? So that's why I think it's so important to try to make sure that it's known that these trends are happening. And try to figure out how to address them, to get teens the help that they need.

Dan LeDuc: What about some of the other attributes? You mentioned earlier trust in institutions, and work ethics, and some of those things. Tell us a little bit more about that, because these are the bubble that are just starting to enter the workforce, right? Some of them are in their early 20s. That means, in another decade or two, they're going to have a real influence in the workplace.

Jean Twenge: Yeah, absolutely. So iGen was also shaped by the Great Recession. So the oldest of them were—if I'm doing my math right—about 13 when the financial crisis hit.

Dan LeDuc: Old enough for them to look around and see what was going on. Yeah.

Jean Twenge: Yeah. So depending on exactly where they are in the generation, they spent their adolescence or late childhood witnessing this cataclysmic economic event. And that seems to have had some consequences for how they see the workplace, and their attitudes toward the workplace.

So as just one example, they say that they're more willing to work overtime than millennials were, say, 10 years before, at the same age. They have a pretty practical view of the workplace. They really want a job that's stable, and they're more interested in stable industries. They're less interested in being entrepreneurs and working for themselves. Which is contrary to popular belief. But if you look in these national surveys, what teens themselves are saying, iGen is very risk averse.

Dan LeDuc: So as this is going on, you mentioned, of course, that one of the triggers is the internet becomes a pervasive part of everyone's life back around the time these people were being born. So they've grown up not knowing what it means to be disconnected. That's got to be influencing, then, some of what's going on. I guess as a researcher, you got to be careful about drawing cause and effect. But how should we look at that?

Jean Twenge: Yeah. So I do not think it's a coincidence that loneliness and unhappiness and depression started to spike right at the time that smartphones became common. So—the Pew Center's own data is where I'm getting this—that the percentage of Americans who owned a smartphone crossed 50 percent, looks like late 2012 to early 2013, that's when that transition happened.

So that seemed to be a tipping point. That's when smartphones became not just something somebody—a few people had, a minority of people had, but something that everybody had. And you can see that trend, and then the things people are doing on their smartphones, too. So for teens in 2008, 2009, about half of teens went on social media sites every day. But these days, it's pretty much everybody. It's 85, 90 percent. So that’s a real shift.

Dan LeDuc: And it's not just like once a day, it's like almost constant or something.

Jean Twenge: Yes, it's a lot. So if you add up just social media, texting, and time spent online, including gaming, for 12th–graders, that ends up at six hours a day, during their leisure time.

Dan LeDuc: Wow.

Jean Twenge: And that's just three activities. So other researchers, say, Common Sense Media and other places, have looked more comprehensively, and they settle on a number more like eight or nine hours a day. So this is a lot of time spent online. And there's potential direct effects of that. But because it's so much time, it seems to have crowded out the time teens used to spend with each other face-to-face, sleeping, and other beneficial activities.

So even if we can think about the effect of screens—is it good, is it bad, is it neutral? Even if we just call the debate, okay, it's neutral. If that amount of time means that teens are not spending as much time with each other in person, that could be the cause, potentially, about why these mental health issues are showing up.

Because it's tempting to say, oh, you know, teens, they're just communicating with their friends. That's what teens have always done. But that assumes that communicating through a screen is just as good as communicating face-to-face for mental health. And it's not, it's just not. Popularity is now quantifiable.

Dan LeDuc: Wow, that's a great way of looking at, isn't it?

Jean Twenge: I mean, popularity has always been a big deal in high school.

Dan LeDuc: Sure, it matters, but quantify it, you can now count it,

Jean Twenge: It can now be counted, in number of followers and number of likes. And it takes the pressure to a whole new level. And it might also not be a coincidence that these mental health issues spiking—that trend is much more pronounced among girls than among boys. It is the high school girls who tend to be the most concerned with those things. And they spend more time on social media than boys do. Boys spend their electronic time on gaming more prominently than girls.

Dan LeDuc: And the numbers show that, right?

Jean Twenge: Absolutely, yes. In, for example, in the “Monitoring the Future” data.

Dan LeDuc: You hear about so many parenting tips about—limit screen time, make sure your kids aren't doing stuff. Or adults, for that matter. Don't look at the screen for an hour before you go to bed. Sounds like there's something to that that we're hearing from the medical community.

Jean Twenge: Well absolutely. And so that's something else that my co-authors and I looked at, was there was also a sudden spike in teens not sleeping enough right around 2012, right around the time that smartphones became popular. And in that same paper, we also found that link between—the teens who spent the most time on electronic devices were also those who were the most likely to not get enough sleep.

Dan LeDuc: You had mentioned that these folks are hardworking and practical. Maybe moving a little slower towards the—sort of—more traditional signs of adulthood, like getting that first driver's license and things. What are some of their other attitudes about societal institutions?

Jean Twenge: The book is about 10 different trends. So there's a lot to cover, it's certainly not just the smartphone and its effects. There's also these trends that have been going on for a while. And one of those is the movement away from large institutions and trust in large institutions. So that means things like government and religion. And it can even be the news media, or colleges and universities, or even the medical community.

And it's just down across the board, among both teens and adults. And that trend just continues. So the one that surprised me the most was that there was a decline in trust in the medical community. That, even there, people are just less willing to trust hospitals, to trust doctors to do what's right.

And I think some of that is this overall cultural trend of individualism. The internet might have something to do with it. But still, it is a breakdown of the system. Which that's, in some ways, you know, the canary in the coal mine.

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Dan LeDuc: Jean Twenge also writes about how generations got their names in the latest issue of Pew's *Trend* magazine. This edition of this annual journal of ideas is all about generations—with essays from a range of experts who write about how the world is aging, how millennials are changing the American opinion landscape, and the opportunities available for making the world a better place as people live longer and give back. You can read it at pewtrusts.org/trend.

And you can hear previous episodes of this podcast at pewtrusts.org/afterthefact. For the Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Dan LeDuc—and yes, this is "After the Fact."