

Feature

Growing up with Social Media



More connected.
More educated. More
social. We look at how
Gen Z teenagers are
growing up in the age
of the Internet.

GROWING UP WITH SOCIAL MEDIA

Text: Stephanie Francesca Pereira Images: Courtesy of iStockphoto

Generation Z teenagers are also known as the iGeneration—for a reason. A cohort which demographers usually define as teenagers aged 13 to 19 years, they have never grown up in a world without Internet and spend an average of three hours a day on social media according to the Global Web Index. Let's look at what makes them tick and how social media is affecting their lives.

WHO ARE GEN Z TEENAGERS?

Gen Z teenagers are growing up, and they're ripe for profiling. While Millennials were characterised by their quest for self-identity in the early days of Internet-driven globalisation, this generation just wants to connect. In a study in Brazil headed by McKinsey, researchers identified four core Gen Z behaviours anchored around one element—a search for truth. These are:

Undefined identity, or a need to express individual truth

They are not interested in labels, but rather in carving out their own personal brand or identity. "For Gen Zers, the key point is not to define themselves through only one stereotype but rather for individuals to experiment with different ways of being themselves and to shape their individual identities over time," the paper says. "Gen Zers are always connected. They constantly evaluate unprecedented amounts of information and influences. For them, the self is a place to experiment, test, and change."

'Communaholics' who connect to different truths

Online communities, the kind found on sites like Facebook, Reddit, and Tumblr, are built around causes and interests—makeup, fandoms, fashion, sports, movements—rather than economic backgrounds and education levels. Forget the old jock-cheerleader-rebel-nerd group dynamics; just like their identities, Gen Zers have a more fluid approach to friendships. "Gen Zers are radically inclusive. They continually flow between communities that promote their causes by exploiting the high level of mobilisation technology makes possible...[and] have no problem with moving between groups."

'Dialoguers' who seek to understand different truths

Gen Zers are able to accept and engage with individuals and institutions that don't share the same beliefs without abandoning their own values. "Rather than spurn an institution altogether, Gen Zers would rather engage with it to extract whatever makes sense for them," the McKinsey study says. And this has given rise to a generation that can now take that baton and lift serious conversations further.

Realists who believe in unveiling the truth behind all things

Because this generation was raised in a time of global economic stress—and was exposed to this stress because of the Internet—they are more pragmatic and analytical of their

PROS AND CONS of Social Media for Teens

Pros

- Learn about new cultural and societal ideas and issues
- Bond and share their own ideas with friends
- Develop real world skills to help them become more independent

Cons

- Spending too much time online and being disconnected from the real world
- Being the victim of online bullying or harassed by someone they do not want attention from
- Having their personal information shared online

decisions. They're a generation of self-learners who value knowing what is going on around them and being in control. This is an approach they bring to all aspects of their lives, whether it's career, relationships, or personal happiness.

THEIR NATURAL HABITAT

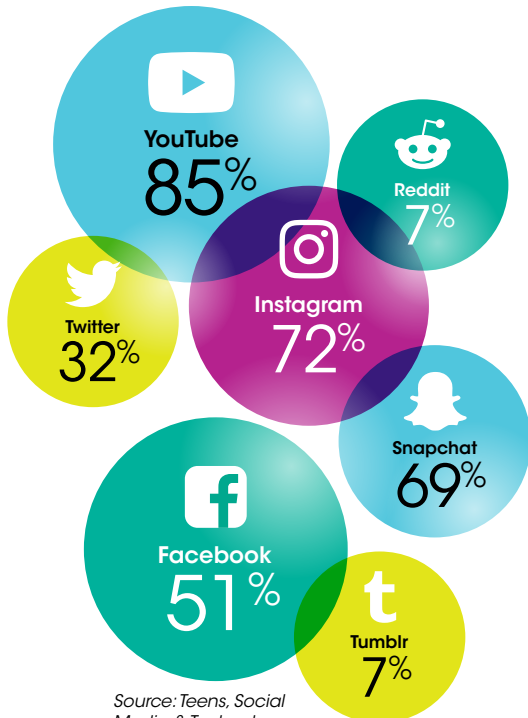
"While Millennials and Gen Xers might seem glued to their screens, Gen Zers view their digital gadgets as an extension of themselves," says Sybella Ng, a certified child development specialist and the founder of training and consulting company, THINKIT. But what are they doing on those phones?

According to a survey by New-York based Upfront Analytics, Gen Z teens receive over 3,000 text messages every month. They prefer Snapchat and Instagram to other more public social media platforms

“Parents and educators can guide and encourage young people to be more mindful of how they use their gadgets”

Most Popular Social Media Platforms Among Teens

Social media is a way for teenagers to stay in touch with their friends. Here are some of the most social media platforms among teens:



Source: Teens, Social Media & Technology (Pew Research Center, 2018)

like Facebook where they have better control over who has access to their personal life and don't leave a digital trail behind. Ng also notes the recent 'Finsta' or 'Fake Insta' phenomenon where users have a secret, private secondary Instagram account where they post non-filtered content as opposed to the more

full time jobs and 72 per cent want to start their own business someday.

NATURE VS INTERNET NURTURING

It may seem like this strive-hard generation has it all figured out, but a study published by the American Psychological Association found sharp increases



curated experience on their real account.

A secret, private existence may seem like cause for alarm for most parents but drug use, alcohol consumption, smoking, and teen pregnancy are at their lowest level for decades. In fact, Upfront Analytics recommends that brands promote themselves to Gen Z with more positive, uplifting storytelling as 60 per cent of Gen Z want to change the world compared to just 39 per cent of millennials. Many are thinking ahead: 75 per cent of Gen Z teens want to convert their hobbies to

in the number of teenagers and young adults experiencing negative psychological symptoms—the biggest spike happened in 2011, just as social media was bursting onto the scene. No such spikes were reported in older adults.

Social media as a whole has been shown to be associated with symptoms of social anxiety, social isolation, and feelings of loneliness but these are amplified among younger people who may not have the maturity or stable social lives of older generations.

Peer pressure is part and

parcel of being a teenager but it's so much harder when it's on such a large, digital scale. Referencing Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development which chronicles the eight stages of a person's development from infancy to adulthood, Ng notes that this is a crucial period of self-realisation for many teenagers.



"The development of Ego identity, one of the main elements in Erikson's framework, posits that teens begin to address the major question of 'Who am I?' as they interact with their ever changing social world, often filled with new experiences and information. It can be a daunting task for teens to discover how they fit into society, especially in our day and age where our lives are intertwined with social media, which explains why their self-awareness is amplified given their early exposure to the digital world."

Ng talks about an experience

she had with a young girl she met during one of her student consultations who would get anxious anytime she looked at her phone. She revealed that she had recently switched her account to private because she'd been receiving anonymous comments about her weight and looks.

This student had spent most of her teen years curating the perfect Instagram profile with all the right angles and filters, but still felt ugly and unworthy of attention despite thousands of likes. Ng's student had been spending almost seven hours a day on social media and her stress levels were off the charts. It was only when she failed the same subject twice that she realised something had to change.

American writer Anne Helen Petersen's think piece 'How Millennials Became the Burnout Generation', which made waves early this year, talks about how Millennials were raised to be 'optimised' for success and how this blurring of lines between our private and public selves has taken a toll on our identities and crippled us with anxiety.

'Branding' is a fitting word for this work, as it underlines what the Millennial self becomes: a product. And as in childhood, the work of optimising that brand blurs whatever boundaries remained between work and play. There is no 'off the clock' when at all hours you could be documenting your on-brand experiences or tweeting your on-brand observations.

It's even more difficult today when it's no longer about

choosing the right hashtag or mastering the right selfie angle; what's key is developing a unique, singular narrative that is also authentic to who you are. That speaks your truth and connects to a larger truth. All this pressure at an age when most people are just starting to figure out who they are? It's a lot.

BLURRED LINES

The social media train has left the station, and there's no holding it back. Ng acknowledges that social media can be beneficial too; she cites a Pew Research Center survey of 743 Gen Z teens from November 2018 which found that 81 per cent of respondents viewed social media as a platform for connectivity to their friends and communities, 71 per cent of teens used social media to display their creativity, and a majority of teens found social media to be helpful to diversify their networks, broaden their viewpoints and provide access to get involved in issues they care about.

Instead, parents and educators can guide and encourage young people to be more mindful of how they use their gadgets. Jean Twenge, lead researcher on the American Psychological Association paper cited earlier, advocates that parents limit their teen's digital media usage to two hours a day or less. It also helps to cultivate real friendships—whether offline or online—that are built around interests and connection rather than passive consumption. The Internet isn't inherently bad and that seems to be the sweet spot for mental health and happiness. ■