

***iGen* by Jean Twenge**

Summary by Brad Bursa

Sociologists have given the name Generation Z, Gen Z, or iGen, to anyone born between 1995-2012, or anyone from roughly 7-24-years-old. The name “Gen Z” comes as what would follow Gen Y (Millennials) and iGen seems to capture the smartphone-driven youth culture (e.g. iPhone). Jean Twenge, a professor of Psychology at San Diego State University, in her recent book *iGen*, notes that in her experience of researching generations and generational shifts, she had grown accustomed to statistical trends and line graphs illustrating gradual shifts over long periods of time. However, she says:

Around 2012, I started seeing large, abrupt shifts in teens’ behaviors and emotional states. All of a sudden, the line graphs looked like steep mountains – rapid drop-offs erased the gains of decades in just a few years; after years of gradual inclines or hollows, sheer cliffs suddenly brought traits to all-time highs. In all of my analyses of generational data – some of it reaching back to the 1930s – I had never seen anything like it.¹

Twenge goes on to note that the major shifts in statistical patterns began to emerge in 2011 or 2012, after the Great Recession which spanned from 2007-2009. “2011-2012,” she says, “was exactly when the majority of Americans started to own cell phones that could access the Internet, popularly known as smartphones. The product of this sudden shift is iGen.” Twenge goes on to note that, “These changes have affected young people in every corner of the nation and in every type of household. The trends appear among teens poor and rich; of every ethnic background; in cities, suburbs, and small towns. Where there are cell towers, there are teens living their lives on their smartphone.”²

In her book, Twenge grapples with current psychological and sociological data regarding this generation and provides ten descriptors as a way of categorizing the data. They are as follows:

- *In No Hurry: Growing Up Slowly*³ – iGen teens are in no hurry to grow up. These youth are less inclined to go out without their parents and the sense of freedom that comes with it, less likely to have their driver’s license by age 18, and have a job while in high school. “Eighteen-year-olds now look like 14-year-olds once did and 14-year-olds like 10- or 12-year olds.”⁴
- *Internet: Online Time – Oh, and Other Media, Too* – iGen youth spend exorbitant amounts of time online and using social media. In fact, compared to GenXer’s, iGen teens have 33 more minutes of leisure time (i.e. time outside of school, homework, paid work, volunteer work, and extracurriculars),⁵ but seem more anxious and busy. Why? All signs point to the use of new media (i.e. texting, Internet, social media, and gaming) during leisure time. “iGen high school seniors spent an average of 2¼ hours a day texting on their cell phone, about 1 hour a day on the Internet, 1½ hours a day on electronic gaming, and about a half hour on video chat in the most recent survey...Eighth graders...were not far behind.”⁶

¹ Jean Twenge, *iGen* (New York: Atria Books, 2017), 4.

² Jean Twenge, “Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?” in *The Atlantic*, September 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/09/has-the-smartphone-destroyed-a-generation/534198/>.

³ Twenge, *iGen*, 19-ff.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 32-33.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 51.

- *In Person No More: I'm with You, but Only Virtually* – With the Internet taking over, youth are staying in more often and spend less time interacting with their peers face-to-face than any previous generation.⁷ Even though they stay home, it does not mean they are spending that time with their family members in person. Instead they spend that leisure time alone. Twenge asserts, “Online friendship has replaced offline friendship.”⁸
- *Insecure: The New Mental Health Crisis* – The isolation resulting from everything taking place online has resulted in huge increases in teens expressing feelings of loneliness,⁹ depression and anxiety,¹⁰ and increases in self-harm and suicide.¹¹
- *Irreligious: Losing My Religion (and Spirituality)* – Millennials are known for being “spiritual but not religious.” iGen is becoming known for neither being spiritual, nor religious. Sociologists suspect that this is due, in part, to the generational decline over time of participation in organized religion. Others suggest that it also has to do with the postmodern culture’s emphasis on individual choice and the privatization of religious beliefs.¹²
 - “When asked at what age they no longer identified themselves as Catholic, 74 percent of the sample said between ages of 10 and 20, with the median age being 13 years old.”¹³
- *Insulated but not Intrinsic: More Safety and Less Community* – iGen teens, generally speaking, avoid risk and danger and are more likely to make the safe choice.¹⁴
- *Income Insecurity: Working to Earn – but Not to Shop*¹⁵ – iGeners are less concerned about material wealth and are not as concerned as having to “keep up with the Joneses.” Rather than being concerned about not fitting in, they are more likely to buy products that other people don’t already use. iGeners do not want to hate their jobs, they have a more substantial work-ethic than the previous generation, and are, generally speaking, safer with their money.
- *Indefinite: Sex, Marriage, and Children* – Twenge says, “iGen’ers’ drumbeats of growing up slowly, individualism, and safety all manifest themselves in their exceedingly cautious attitude toward relationships.”¹⁶ This does not necessarily mean that iGen youth aren’t “hooking up,” but not within a committed relationship. “As late as 2006, about 50% of 18- to 29-year-olds believed that sex between two unmarried adults was ‘not wrong at all’ – about the same as in the 1970s. Then approval of premarital sex shot upward, with 65% of young people in 2016 declaring it ‘not wrong at all.’ . . . iGeners are just less willing to label anything as ‘wrong’ – it’s all up to the individual.”¹⁷ This said, iGen, generally speaking, are less sexually active than previous generations.¹⁸
- *Inclusive: LGBT, Gender, and Race Issues in the New Age* – iGen expects equality with regard to the LGBT movement, which Twenge links with their innate individualism. Gender “fluidity” is on the rise with the idea that gender is not only changeable, but also not containable with two

⁷ Ibid., 71.

⁸ Ibid., 75.

⁹ Ibid., 97.

¹⁰ Ibid., 99-ff.

¹¹ Ibid., 107-ff.

¹² Ibid., 126.

¹³ McCarty, Robert J. and John M. Vitek, *Going, Going, Gone: The Dynamics of Disaffiliation in Young Catholics* (Winona, MN: St. Mary’s Press, 2018).

¹⁴ Twenge, *iGen*, 152-ff.

¹⁵ Ibid., 179-ff.

¹⁶ Ibid., 204.

¹⁷ Ibid., 205.

¹⁸ Twenge includes a compelling section about the correlation between pornography and lack of sexual activity. Cf. Fight the New Drug’s “How Porn Kills Love,” May 4, 2017, <https://fightthenewdrug.org/how-porn-kills-love/>.

categories.¹⁹ Finally, iGen is more supportive of racial equality, though, as Twenge points out, there is still a long way to go.

- *Independent: Politics* – Like Millennials, iGeners were Independent in 2016 and likely will be in the future, eschewing traditional categories, political parties, etc.

¹⁹ Ibid., 235.

Evangelizing Today's Youth

A Few Considerations

- Parents are Key:
 - The National Study on Youth and Religion found that the faith practices of parents were the single greatest indicator of faith practice continuing for adolescents into their emerging adult years.²⁰
 - With the tech onslaught, parents often find themselves far behind their children in tech usage and know-how. Simply put, many parents do not know what their children are doing online.
 - Help parents address pornography with their children (e.g. *Good Pictures, Bad Pictures*)
- Youth Need Additional Mentors:
 - The Fuller Institute recently reported findings from a national survey that highlights the need for intergenerational relationships to the tune of 5:1. Each youth needs to be surrounded by a “team” of five adults during their adolescence...in addition to their parents.²¹
 - “It takes a village to raise a child.”
- Examine and Renew Our Structures:
 - The Pew report “U.S. Religious Landscape Survey” of 2008 identified the fastest-growing religious demographic in the US to be “unaffiliated” (aka “nones”). These are people who no longer affiliate with an institutionalized form of religion.
 - In 2008, 24% of 18-to-24 year olds were “unaffiliated,”²² and by 2014, the number had risen to 35% of Millennials (born between 1981-1996).²³
 - Knowing that iGen is even less likely to be “religious” than Millennials, one must ask the question: If our evangelizing and catechizing structures were ineffective in cultivating the faith of Millennials, and the next generation is even less likely to continue practicing their faith, then what are we doing structurally and with regard to personnel to bear more fruit? What needs to be pruned (cf. Jn. 15:1-ff)?
- Consider Driving Intentional Youth Evangelization Initiatives Younger:
 - Both in terms of the disaffiliation statistic listed above, and...
 - In terms of the findings of neuroscience and the pruning that happens in puberty:
 - “In the earliest stages of brain development, primarily before birth, there are many more brain cells and connections formed than can possibly survive. A process of competitive elimination, or “pruning,” follows this vast overproduction. Those cells and connections that are used survive; those that aren’t used wither. This process occurs in all species possessing a central nervous system. In humans, a second bout of overproduction of connections occurs just before puberty, followed by “use-it-or-lose-it” pruning through the teen years, as

²⁰ For the overview of the study, see <https://youthandreligion.nd.edu/>.

²¹ See <https://fulleryouthinstitute.org/stickyfaith>.

²² See note in Sherry Weddell’s *Forming Intentional Disciples* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2012), 19-20.

²³ Michael Lipka, “A Closer Look at America’s Rapidly Growing Religious ‘Nones,’” *Pew Research Center*, May 13, 2015.

connections are shaped and refined. These changes have important implications for a teen's ability to become an independent and successful adult, to manage an environment that offers conflicting choices, to understand cause and effect, to plan for the future, and to manage impulses and reject temptations that are not consistent with mature, long-term goals."²⁴

²⁴ Weinberger, D.R, B. Elvevag, and J.N. Giedd, "The Adolescent Brain: A Work in Progress," (Washington, DC: National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 2005). See also Gary Wilson, *Your Brain on Porn* (London: Commonwealth, 2014), 81.