

**GenMe are Coming: Book Review of *Generation Me: Why today's young Americans are more confident, assertive, entitled - and more miserable than ever before* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 2014) by Jean M. Twenge**

In 2014, Jean Twenge published a revised and updated edition for her controversial book from eight years earlier. In the second edition, Twenge (2014), a professor of psychology from San Diego State University with over two decades of experience in social science and generational psychology, provided further support to her case for the troubling state of Millennials in America (i.e., GenMe individuals, born in the 1980s and 1990s) and the gap between their expectations and reality. In this book, Twenge (2006, 2014) offers an empathetic view for GenMe'ers, who were "dealt a bad hand" and will likely face incongruence between their expectations and the reality in America in upcoming decades, which will likely make them angry and frustrated.

The 2014's edition of the book resolves some of the flaws in the first edition, a version Arnett (2008) called "disappointing". The new edition makes a much stronger case (yet not free of bias or concerns) including new data from 19 additional studies that Twenge and her colleague published since the 2006's edition. According to Twenge (2014), the main difference in the revised edition is "*much* more data". These data confirm conclusions made in the first edition and explore new trends in "religious belief, tolerance, trust in others, attitudes toward work, and even names given to babies" (p. xiii). The new edition, which includes a new preface section and a new chapter - *Generation Me at Work*, presents generational differences from 11 million people (as opposed to 1.2 million from the 2006 edition). These additions make some of the arguments by Twenge (2006) about social change in America stronger and allow her to

collect small victories for predictions she made correctly in 2006. For instance, in 2006, Twenge predicted the hard transition of GenMe'ers to adulthood, which was enhanced by the financial crisis of 2007-2008 and became a harsh reality. Gay marriages, which are now legal in the US, were also projected by Twenge (2016) based on the tolerating views towards homosexuality and diversity by GenMe'ers. The latter happened much faster than Twenge had anticipated – she wrote it may take decades in 2006, but it took only a few years. Similarly, the selection of an African American President (twice - 2008, 2012) occurred much faster than what Twenge had anticipated when the first edition of the book was written.

Twenge (2014) uses the second edition to respond to her critiques by repeatedly defending her methodology for data collection and describing the efforts of comparing people at the same age at different points in time, which eliminates the possibility that the differences are due to age. Twenge (2014) pushes away criticism against “stereotyping” or “labeling” of generations, but acknowledges the focus of the data is on averages, which is problematic (but unescapable in this scientific field). In the updated appendix, Twenge (2014) responds to an argument that using averages creates *ecological fallacy* that overestimates effect sizes, a claim made by many including Trzesniewski and Donnellan (2010). She defends her statistical methodology of using standard deviations of individuals and not of means and adds, “it is puzzling that some still make this patently false claim” (p. 323) when referring to ecological fallacy.

Although Twenge (2006, 2014) attempts to remain somewhat objective and avoid making one-sided conclusions about the perils of the situation of GenMe'ers, it is obvious she is concerned as a professor, a parent, and a researcher from the clash

between expectations and reality by GenMe'ers. According to Arnett (2008), Twenge's bias is obvious even though she fails to see it; even the term "GenMe" she chose to describe this cohort is derogatory and brings little doubt that she considers this generation spoiled and selfish. Ironically, Arnett (2008) may have fallen to the trap of his own generational bias as a Baby Boomer, a bias seen when he discusses at length how older people have been complaining about young people for generations. In his critique of the first book edition, Arnett (2008) ignored the fact that most research presented by Twenge and her colleagues was based on GenMe'ers own experience and not the perception of others such as older generations about them (Twenge, 2008).

Arnett (2008) presented several additional concerns with the first edition of Twenge's book. Only some of those concerns were fully resolved in the 2014 edition. First, he argued that although some evidence is presented in the book about high confident level, assertiveness and entitlement of young Americans today, the notion that young Americans are more miserable than ever before is questionable and hardly supported in the book (Arnett, 2008). Second, he reasoned that the book used unrepresentative sample for emerging adults between the ages of 18 and 25 by focusing mainly on college students without indicating the limitation in using such methodology. Twenge's (2008) response to this claim that those college students are likely to be a subset and include future leaders does not resolve the issue. Third, Arnett (2008) complained about the use of Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) and its ability to have criterion (predictive) validity and measure negative behavior. Fourth, he emphasized on the failure of Twenge to recognize heterogeneity in the GenMe cohort, a perspective she discussed and acknowledged in the 2014's edition. Finally, Arnett

(2008) complained about the grouping of a large group of people born between 1970 and 2005 into one generation instead of a typical 20 years used for generations. To remedy this, although not discussed in detail, Twenge (2014) limited the GenMe generation in the second edition to those born in the 1980s and 1990s, which makes a better sense. One must wonder how much of the disagreement between Arnett (2008) and Twenge (2008) can be explained by their own generational biases. In her attempt to consolidate disagreements with Arnett and his 2006 book on emerging adulthood, Twenge (2008) states correctly that:

The generational trends of emerging adulthood, such as later marriage, parenthood, and job stability, go hand in hand with the psychological changes described in *Generation Me*, such as the rise of individualistic traits and the increase in anxiety and depressive symptoms. The two approaches not only peacefully coexist but symbiotic (p. 684).

Other challenges of both book editions (Twenge, 2006, 2014) include its lack of logical fluency and numerous repetitions of content throughout. Although the framework of intermixing actual data and statistics with myths and non-empiric opinions from popular culture is problematic and erroneous and comes at the expense of the book's academic credibility (Arnett, 2008), it helps make the book engaging and often funny. Occasionally, it feels as though the attempt to link a song or a story to a concept in the book is a bit forced, which may help explain the defensive attitude of Twenge when discussing non-empirical anecdotes in the preface of the 2014 edition - "the examples are meant to illustrate, *not* replace, the data" (p. xvi).

In the 2006's version, Twenge used personal stories, scenes from movies, magazines, TV shows, songs, and anecdotes from popular culture. In the 2014's version, she added personal experiences with her three young children (all born after 2006), analyses from Google Books Ngram viewer tool to demonstrate changes in language, and new anecdotes and stories from popular culture. These are well-presented in the language of the generation it is written about, a generation obsessed with the media. New quotes from HBO's hit series *Girls*, which were added to the 2014 version are especially entertaining, as their creator Lena Dunham, a GenMe individual (born 1986) who can both represent and laugh at her own generation. As indicated by Arnett (2008), Twenge "shows great potential as a writer and social scientist" (p. 681) and her writing is humorous, lively and fresh.

The brand-new chapter 8 (*Generation Me at Work*) of the 2014's version is useful in separating common beliefs and perceptions from actual empirical data by comparing actual work attitudes across generations. Its content can help managers recruit, retain, motivate, and understand young employees better. One of the most interesting studies discussed in the chapter is a study by Twenge, Campbell, Hoffman, and Lance (2010), which used measurements of work attitudes across generations to conclude that GenMe'ers want more leisure and better work-life balance than GenX'ers or Boomers and have high preference for extrinsic values such as status and money (as do GenX'ers). However, contrary to popular beliefs, GenMe'ers showed neither higher altruistic values of helping others nor interest in result-oriented meaningful jobs than previous generations. Adding to this laziness, unrealistic hopes, extremely high self-esteem, decline in work ethic, expectation to work outside the office when desired, and

a sense of entitlement, and the road to work failure may be inevitable for GenMe'ers. To combat it, Twenge (2014) offers tips that managers can use to keep GenMe'ers engaged and satisfied at work. These include tapping into the unique skills of GenMe'ers, offering flexible work hours, giving feedback often, praising employees when warranted, and creating more opportunities for career advancement so promotions occur more often.

Although Twenge (2006, 2014) argues for the support of use of generational studies to describe continuous societal processes, her methodology of cross-temporal meta-analysis remains controversial. While comparing generational cohorts can be catchy and simplistic, Both Arnett (2008) and Twenge (2008) acknowledge that social changes are a long-term continuous process that last years. One may look at social change as a continuum in which case, GenX generational cohort sits as a "hybrid" in between Boomers and GenMe with a good ability to understand both generations. Twenge (2014) comprehends this about herself. As GenX'er, she feels capable analyzing and explaining both sides as an observer of generational change with the best view in the house and the career experience (and parenthood skills) to prove it. To balance her critical view of the GenMe cohort and her worrying forecasts about its future, Twenge (2006, 2014) indicates GenMe'ers are engaging, honest, opportunity-driven, and open-minded, but the reader still gets the sense that things are not going to be pretty for this generation or to the people surrounding them in upcoming decades.

### *A Personal Note About What this Book Means to Me*

The title of this book caught my eye when I was looking for a way to improve my teaching of business courses to GenMe'ers, a challenge faced by many other educators. As a GenX instructor (born in 1975) who is a novice in the academic teaching world, I have found myself in the last couple of years struggling with teaching undergraduate students or understanding the ways GenMe individuals expect to study, be graded, and perform in class (and outside class). The book offered remedies to my struggles. Realizing that I am not the only instructor who faces such problems was comforting and made me empathetic to the challenges faced by GenMe'ers. Although several GenMe'ers disrespected me as a professor, challenged my authority in class with no real argument to support it, expected to earn maximum grades with minimal effort, and had such high self-esteem and beliefs in their abilities which had little to do with their actual performance, after reading the book I am now much more sympathetic to their reasons and their circumstances. I view them as victims of their upbringing and the contextual environment they were born into. At the same time, I am much more critical to their Boomer parents who put them in such a tough spot.

To my surprise, the book transformed the way I view the GenMe generation far beyond my expectations. Some GenMe'ers are miserable, angry and/or depressed because they were raised in a way that did not prepare them to the challenges they are likely to face in life and career. Many of them lack social skills, expect rewards with little effort, distrust politics, avoid religion, and are focused on themselves (hence the increasing levels of narcissism). Many GenMe'ers are isolated in the cocoon of individuality which will likely affect the future of families, companies, and our American

society in decades to come. It gets even worse for young children who show signs to enhance further the focus on individualism.

If like me, you are skeptical for the efforts by social scientists to group people into “generations” or attempt to group large numbers of people into supposedly-homogenous groups to compare them, you may gain respect for the field of generational research and the vast amount of data gathered and analyzed in the past six decades in this field after reading this book. If you already read the 2006 edition, I recommend you read the second edition to learn how the discussed social trends continue to evolve as a self-fulfilling prophecy towards an unavoidable societal crisis in America. The book has important learning lessons for individuals, educators, even policy makers, and parents (note to parents: beware of chapter 6 about sexual behavior, which is likely to make any parent stunned).

GenMe’ers are here to stay and succeed. If you plan to be around in the upcoming decades, now is a good time to learn about them as they are becoming a bigger part of the workforce. They will be your colleagues and eventually your bosses. According to Twenge (2014), the “organizations that can find this balance between want and need will be the most successful in the coming years as Generation Me comes to dominate the workplace” (p. 282). Is your organization ready for it? Are you ready? Reading this book can help you prepare.

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