



## Gen Z, Social Media, and Envy

*(Editor's note: This essay was submitted to us by a student at a large U.S. state university who wishes to remain anonymous.)*

**M**y generation, Gen Z (born between 1996 and 2010), finds itself in the throes of individual depression, pessimism about the future, and a strong tendency not to take personal responsibility. As a 20-year-old college student, I have witnessed this firsthand. I believe much of the problem can be traced to social media and its creation of a make-believe world, a world defined by pronounced social envy.

Only 39 percent of Generation Z aged 18-29 believe that achieving the American dream is still possible, while 60 percent do not.<sup>1</sup> It is disheartening, to say the least, that a large majority of our youth do not believe in the American tradition of achieving success through hard work and determination.

Gen Z has grown up in a different world from previous generations—an online world, one that immerses them in fantasy. Fantasy leads inevitably to disappointment as this made-up online world creates unrealistic expectations for the real world.

Abundant research shows that social media is harmful to youth. Social media use is correlated with rising instances of self-harm and suicidality in boys and girls.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, American girls use social media far more than boys.<sup>3</sup> While boys are off playing videogames or consuming online porn, girls succumb to toxic self-comparison at a time when they are most confused about their identity. This allows them to be taken advantage of by predators, by influencers espousing extreme ideology, and by other women who tell them to prioritize themselves above all others.

The results of this gender gap are ominous for the future of America. More young men than young women report

wanting to have children.<sup>4</sup> At a time when America's birth rate continues to plummet below replacement,<sup>5</sup> Gen Z is dropping the ball on family formation. It is not just apathy towards having a family. Gen Z is growing more anticapitalist, more antinatalist and more callous about the deaths of others. Reactions on social media in the wake of Charlie Kirk's horrific assassination come to mind.

*Social media causes desensitization to things that should disturb us and hypersensitivity to things that should not disturb us. It afflicts Gen Z with a toxic culture of envy.*

### The Inside View

**G**eneration Z's ailments are clear from the outside, but even more so from the inside. It is important to note that the author is a member of Gen Z himself, born just a few years after the turn of the millennium. I have been spared the despair of my generation because of my family.

Raised in a large family with close bonds with my siblings, I was never alone in the sense that many Gen Zers report themselves feeling. My parents ran a household that was strong in moral teachings and founded upon family values. Furthermore, my parents had the foresight to withhold social media from my siblings and me far longer than most of our generation. We were not subject to the culture of envy that we watched our friends endure. I made it all the way to my 19th birthday before I became curious, suspecting that social media might prove useful or practical as an adult in college.

I deleted all my accounts in less than a year. My experience on social media was far from anything I had expected. Perhaps I was naive to expect pictures of pleasant scenery and the occasional post about a family trip. But I could not have foreseen the extent to which

*social media is riddled with depravity, dishonesty and delusion.* What I saw as an outsider to my own generation made plain precisely why my close friends and peers seemed so distant and anxious. It was clear why they had lost faith in themselves, their communities and the American dream.

The reason social media has had such a horrendous effect on American youth is that, fundamentally, social media is not what it seems. The photos and videos that are posted online are often edited into an unrecognizable version of the truth. What is presented as a casual selfie is often an hours-long commitment that requires professional equipment, painstaking attention to detail and constant revision. Instead of honest photos, our youth sees perfection. But it is perfection presented as something attainable. Or rather, something that seems attainable, but isn't attainable in reality. This is the root of Gen Z's envy.

### **Incessant Comparison**

**S**ocial media's inherent culture of envy is bad enough. But what makes it particularly dangerous to Gen Z is that members of my generation are obsessed with comparing themselves to their peers. *Gen Zers average about nine hours of screen time every day.*<sup>6</sup> It is not unusual to have a screen time of 10 or even 14 hours a day. Some of my friends can spend 20 hours a day looking at screens.

Social media takes up a significant amount of these appalling screen times. Sixty percent of Gen Z spends at least four hours a day on social media, and 22 percent report spending seven or more hours a day.<sup>7</sup> Time spent on social media is time not spent socializing, working, exercising, reading, spending time with family, and more. Rather than engage with the real world as much as possible, a sizable majority of Generation Z spends the greater part of their day in an online fantasy.

Living in the fictional world of social media is a major cause of Gen Z's pessimism, and Gen Z's members know it. About 83 percent of America's youth have tried to limit their social media use, albeit largely unsuccessfully.<sup>8</sup> Gen Z recognizes the harms of social media as a group. But while 48 percent of teenagers agree that social media is harmful to people their age, just 14 percent believe that social media affects them personally.<sup>9</sup>

What these statistics reveal is an element of denial. The youth culture's expectation of perfection requires hiding imperfections. But upon a closer look, it becomes clear that this perfectionism is a symptom of envy. The desire to be as affluent, powerful, attractive and popular as influencers on social media comes from spending too much time in the online world. Carefully curated posts that are funneled to the right audiences create an infinite network of nested mini-worlds in which our youth have become lost. The resulting lack of direction is part of why Gen Z feels so pessimistic. Generation Z's pessimism expresses itself in many ways: class resentment, heteropessimism, apathy and sensitivity.

Class resentment is the byproduct of economic forces on social media. Online sites kick consumer culture into hyperdrive. It begins with extravagant displays of wealth. Influencers who advertise perfect dress, flawless appearance, ideal travel experiences, luxurious homes and fine dining inevitably attract viewers for the simple reason that wealth is desirable. Considering that Gen Z is significantly more dissatisfied with their economic situation than other generations, it is no surprise that young people are drawn toward such content in large numbers.<sup>10</sup> Much of Generation Z sees what they want but cannot have, for hours at a time each day.

### **Displays of Unrealistic Wealth**

**I**ndividual envy is then amplified into pessimism. Social media algorithms recommend to users what they are most likely to click on. The more outraged users are, the more likely they are to become even more outraged and to be connected to other users who reinforce their indignation. Since Gen Z is uniquely susceptible to economic pessimism, they are at a greater risk of falling victim to this outrage. As time passes, young social media users fall farther down the rabbit hole, becoming more radicalized and more pessimistic.

The consequence is a strong current of anticapitalism and economic pessimism that views the American system as fundamentally unfair. And so long as they remain isolated in their online echo chambers, my peers will continue to be overexposed to the shortcomings of American capitalism and underexposed to its many benefits.

The hyper-individualization of Gen Z encouraged by social media applies to dating and family dynamics as well as economic concerns. Just as algorithms radicalize

the youth into anticapitalism, they do the same for hyper-feminism.

Recent surveys continue to show that young women are ranking their career and individual interests ahead of starting a family.<sup>11</sup> This is unsurprising given the prominence of anti-male trends on social media. As of late, a proliferation of social media posts with the hashtag #childfree suggests that childlessness as an identity is growing.

There are also movements encouraging women to become “boysober” and swear off all emotional and physical relationships with men.<sup>12</sup> Some women online are using the term “mankeeping,” which is primarily used to complain about the burdens of supporting their partners through hard times. Popularized in 2016, the #MenAreTrash movement swept social media platforms and gained rapid popularity for disparaging men and heterosexual dating in any way possible.

### Toxic Feminism

The online environment culminates in a general pessimism about dating and family called “heteropessimism.” Originally coined in 2019, heteropessimism refers to a movement where women are ashamed of being straight and view “heterosexuality as a prison within which they are confined against their will.”<sup>13</sup> Gen Z women are especially vulnerable to trends like heteropessimism.

Again, considering the radicalizing nature of social media algorithms, it is easy for girls to fall for ideas that promote individualism and the prioritization of self over pair-bonding or community. As a result, teenage girls sometimes enter the dating scene with unrealistic expectations because of exposure to fake relationships on social media. Young men who encounter such women are then treated to a rude awakening where they are expected to act as an accessory to a woman who is more interested in superficial pleasures and material wealth than true partnership.

It is worth pausing to emphasize that this is a somewhat extreme characterization of a complex phenomenon. Not all young women who use social media are anti-male. Yet, anti-male sentiment weaves itself into social media in various ways.

More widespread than heteropessimism is the creation of echo chambers by social media algorithms that amplify and radicalize opinions and perspectives.

Consider the recent assassination of Charlie Kirk. In the era before social media, it may be true that the victim of such a horrific and violent act would have received near-total sympathy from the American public, including its youth. Regardless of whether this was the case in the past, it is certainly not true now.

Apathy—and in some cases jubilation—from the left over the murder of Charlie Kirk is not originally because of inherent cold-heartedness and cruelty. It is because of desensitization. This is an important distinction. Desensitization by social media is what leads to cold-heartedness and cruelty when left unchecked. Such apathetic and jubilant individuals did not express sympathy because that is not what they were shown. Social media algorithms likely predicted that such viewers, especially some progressive youth, would not have clicked on such content. Instead, they were fed increasingly extreme posts that dismissed or mocked the death of Charlie Kirk. And in viewing such posts, their views were validated and radicalized instead of moderated.

The condoning of Kirk’s assassination that spread across the internet is emblematic of a growing apathy towards the plight of persons outside each individual’s social media bubble. Within these anonymous echo chambers, algorithms supercharge this apathy into a callous joy that is not just inappropriate, but dangerous.

### The Tyranny of Online Policing

Online policing of political correctness reached a fever pitch during the Covid-19 pandemic, when American society was as far from the real world as it had ever been. This had a detrimental effect on Generation Z, given that they came of age around the use of chosen pronouns, progressive terminology like “safe spaces,” and leftist ideology that accused most social and economic institutions of being inherently bad. So rather than work to develop empathy for those different from them, Generation Z was immersed in a ruthless online culture that focused on the faults of those who were different from them, instead of what we have in common as Americans.

Generation Z is steeped in a fabricated version of reality that amplifies outrage, promotes individualism and heightens our differences. The culture of envy engendered by social media has made our youth so pessimistic that many of them no longer believe in the American dream. Who can blame them? Because of social media, much of Gen Z is entering adulthood unchallenged, un-self-aware, and unable to see that they are part of something greater than themselves.

As a member of Gen Z, I place my hope in those of us who are strong enough to stop looking at our screens and start looking at all that is happening around us. For when we do so, we begin to see that *the beauty of reality is far more rewarding than any online illusions of perfection.*

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/07/02/americans-are-split-over-the-state-of-the-american-dream/>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC6278213/>.

<sup>3</sup> <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9176070/>.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/02/15/among-young-adults-without-children-men-are-more-likely-than-women-to-say-they-want-to-be-parents-someday/>.

<sup>5</sup> See *Mindszenty Report*, May 2025, for an in-depth discussion of falling birth rates around the world.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.hiddengemsaba.com/articles/average-screen-time-statistics>.

<sup>7</sup> <https://theharrispoll.com/briefs/gen-z-social-media-smart-phones/>.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2025/04/22/teens-social-media-and-mental-health/>.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.mtlc.co/how-to-handle-the-optimism-pessimism-paradox-of-gen-z-at-work/>.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/02/15/among-young-adults-without-children-men-are-more-likely-than-women-to-say-they-want-to-be-parents-someday/>.

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/03/style/boysobser-celibacy-hope-woodward.html>.

<sup>13</sup> <https://thenewinquiry.com/on-heteropessimism/>.

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The Cardinal Mindszenty Foundation was proud to host a distinguished speaker from Hungary, Márk Erszegi, on September 29 at CMF's office building in St. Louis, Missouri, as part of a four-city U.S. tour to commemorate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Venerable Joseph Mindszenty's death in 1975. Mr. Erszegi discussed Mindszenty's heroic life and cause for canonization.

Pictured below are Mr. Erszegi (center), Religious Advisor to the State Secretary for the Aid of Persecuted Christians at the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, along with Bálint Bakondi, Deputy Chief of Mission of the Consulate General of Hungary in Chicago, and Liza Forshaw, president of CMF. For more information about the event, see the CMF website Speaker Series page at [www.mindszenty.org](http://www.mindszenty.org), or our Facebook page.



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