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BREAKING THE SILENCE: THE MODERN STRUGGLE OF GENERATION Z

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Breaking the Silence: The Modern Struggle of Generation Z

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ABSTRACT

The swift pace of modernity presents unique challenges to Generation Z. These challenges range from economic and social to political and ecological issues. Inflation, a changing job market, and high educational costs have economically stressed this generation. At the same time, the impacts of the internet along with social media platforms have altered interaction, affecting mental health. Political issues such as inequality and social justice persist and often intersect with ecological concerns, including climate change and environmental degradation, shaping ideological perspectives. Through personal narrative, social analysis, and statistical representation, this study aims to contextualize and shed light on how Generation Z adapts to and simultaneously shapes their future amidst adversity.

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Introduction

Being born in the United States, specifically California, I realize my inherent privilege. Growing up using the most modern technology like computers, video games, and smartphones while accessing ample food, housing, medicine, and quality education is a blessing. This might seem representative of the encapsulated American dream to many, especially considering I am a first-generation university student from a low-income background with foreign grandparents. Indeed, these accomplishments took years of persistent preparation and labor to create such a moment. Nevertheless, despite my progression and lucky geographic upbringing, I have found an intense dissatisfaction with what has become of modernity. Now, I do not write such glum words lightly. Instead, I portray with the reflection that there is needless suffering and exploitation presently existing, which is consequently impacting various subgroups at disproportionate rates. Broadly, from a generational perspective, Generation Z, that of my own, is inheriting an immensely complicated world. This world, which I admittedly barely know myself, has signs of deep structural flaws causing a great divide and influencing the experience of countless.

Modernity and Its Discontents

Beginning with modernity, the term is subjectively used in this instance to reflect the “self-definition of a generation about its own technological innovation, governance, and socioeconomics” to explore concepts of technology and trends toward urbanization in relation to Generation Z, which presumably are together significant impacts on our given course throughout the progression of modernity based on historical trends (Sharon L. Snyder, Britannica). These patterns of urbanization and technological progression often entail unintended consequences associated with economic growth and productivity outcomes, yet inequality and mental health

challenges as well. At the time of writing, modernity entails technological advancements such as computers, phones, and the internet. Additionally, there is the expansion of wealth, and generally speaking health.

Consider the following: “Globally, life expectancy has increased by more than 6 years between 2000 and 2019” - from 66.8 years to 73.4 (World Health Organization). Also, “since 1900, the average lifespan of persons in the United States has lengthened by greater than 30 years” (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). Identifiably, these indicators suggest a positive trend in what the world has offered in comparison to, say, the 20th century, as health and life expectancy have improved dramatically since then. Nevertheless, mental health has hardly improved in the same way. Frankly, it almost seems as if depression has worsened. Well, that might be because the pandemic has indeed boosted worldwide anxiety and depression rates. Yet, even before, related stress factors caused Generation Z to be labeled as the anxious generation. As evidence, the “generation is significantly more likely (27 percent) than other generations, to report their mental health as fair or poor” (APA). Thematically, Generation Z has a deeply tied relationship with adapting to adversity in the face of economic challenges, technological influences, and societal pressures.

Reasonably, Generation Z’s anxiety is a reaction to the stress factors that existed growing up. Born roughly between the 1990s and the mid-2000s, Generation Z may have some recollection of the aftermath of 9/11. However, not all members were old enough to comprehend the full extent of its impact. Despite this, the repercussions, including heightened fear, social stigmatization, and expanded surveillance, continue to influence the collective consciousness. For instance, having been witness to prolonged military engagement and Islamophobia, activism against global conflict and discrimination has thankfully dominated the makeup of Generation Z

members as opposed to hate-filled politics or discriminatory attitudes. A similar sentiment is observed within social justice movements and conceptual propositions towards policy. For most members, witnessing political divisiveness and turmoil within authoritative structures is not foreign, especially with instantaneous sharing or viewability from media applications. Due to this, there is a keen distrust of corporations and even the government despite primarily being progressive and pro-government in many areas for most.

Generation Z's Challenges

As an active unit of change, members of the youth cohort have relied less on older generations, considering their distrust in older generations to bring about change. Following crucial events such as Black Lives Matter, the Parkland shooting, and the #Me-Too movement, participation and expression of political voice have substantially marked the activism landscape, deploying a rather engaged stance. Primarily, topics of climate change, racism, gun violence, police brutality, and pollution are central conversations discussed amongst the youth community. However, these attitudes and expressions are not merely reactionary but adaptive responses to the challenges and uncertainties that Generation Z has faced in a fear-filled world. Remarkably, there has been a trend towards prioritizing educational and career achievements with a lower marriage rate, while generally, the dynamics of relationships and religious commitments have also been influenced. This raises the question: are these changes primarily the result of individual preferences or a response to societal and economic pressure?

Young adults are navigating the complexities of housing insecurity and economic instability while trying to keep up with learning curves. For college students, the burden is hefty, with soaring tuition costs and limited high-paying job opportunities due to barriers to entry and

scheduling conflicts. The combined effect leaves saving for emergencies or retirement seemingly unattainable for countless individuals. Altogether, the implications of pressures can be detrimental to individuals. Yet, there is an opportunity for congressional leaders to establish policies that enable fair housing while limiting corporate control of ownership. To give an example of a significant increase in median single-family home price, consider that in San Jose-Sunnyvale-Santa Clara, CA the home price rose “approximately \$1,172,300 from 1990 to 2021,” which is “an average of \$37,816 per year” (Sophie Anderson, NAR.Realtor). For a fair explanation, that is a more extreme case. However, such an example demonstrates the excessive unaffordability in popular cities and states within America. Potential learning and arguably life are lost by placing a high financial burden on the youth during early career developmental periods. Consider returns on education, accordingly, “the average global rate of return on education is about 9% per year” (World Health Organization). More importantly, investment in education or early development training programs can expand choice.

For definitional purposes, social consciousness relates to both the collective society and awareness of the impact we humans have on one another, while digital literacy is the “ability to use digital tools and technologies to find, evaluate, and communicate information” (Office of Information Technology Policy). Digital literacy has provided outlets for expanded learning, creation, and communication. Yet, I believe delving too far into the internet without proper awareness of the nature of such can be dangerous. Despite the obvious of online hackers and predators, there is the risk of the exacerbation of poor mental health habits, influences on perception, and addiction. Our collective consciousness has gradually been molded by screens, their corresponding inputs, and algorithmic functions. It might sound strange, but there is particular truth in the statement considering advertisements or media and their targeted nature of

knowledge transfers. To expand, social media, video games, and other forms of entertainment have influenced the youth tremendously along with their mental health. “It has been reported that 95% of Gen Z individuals have access to a smartphone. In a study of 1000 Gen Z individuals aged 13 to 25 years, more than half spent 4 or more hours online compared with just 28% of all US adults who spent 4 or more hours online” (National Library of Medicine). In a world where it is nearly impossible to socialize, work, and get an education without technology. Gen Z individuals are “always on,” and this is associated with higher rates of depression, attention deficit disorder or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and technology addiction” (National Library of Medicine).

Social and Digital Dynamics

Notably, Generation Z does not know of a world without phones or the internet, at least that is what is typical for those living in geographic locations where such technology rapidly took control. In brief, the evolution of the internet from 1961 to the present has existed in three major phases: innovation (1961-1974), institutionalization (1975-1995), and commercialization (1995- present). The beginning phases consisted of fundamental building blocks and the progression of funding from large institutions. Coincidentally, the commercialization phase initiated roughly near 1995 is aligned with the early birth years of Generation Z. This phase had developments in wi-fi, social media, and e-commerce that eventually shaped our communication methods, economy, and social consciousness forever.

As someone who grew up believing in the concept of the American Dream, I’ve begun to question its terms and ability for representation. Certainly, the dream exists. However, who it exists for is not entirely clear. In the United States, wealth inequality has surged, leaving many

youth and Generation Z members on weak footing amidst shaky ground. As depicted by the Great Gatsby Curve, minorities and low-income individuals bear the brunt of this growing disparity. The path to financial security appears increasingly elusive as the gap between the wealthy and the rest widens, leaving a generation grappling with uncertainty and economic insecurity. Respectfully, this is not a critique of the country's politics but rather a suggestion that there is more work to do to evolve our individual self, country, and world. Depending on who you are, life may look like flying around on private jets and enjoying elegant vacation stays or desperately clinging to any opportunity to afford rent and necessities. Most obviously, there is a wealth and income gap. Yet, there is also this key consideration of consumption, which markedly highlights such unequal experiences when relating to access to resources or opportunity.

Presumably, comparing high and low-consumption lifestyles through simple text is complex, yet there is room to imagine. For context, "rising wage inequality and slow and uneven growth in real (inflation-adjusted) hourly wages for the vast majority of workers have been defining features of the U.S. labor market for most of the last 40 or so years" (Economic Policy Institute). However, what is unique to the situation now is that the "share of earnings for the bottom 90% fell 11.2 percentage points between 1979 and 2021 to its lowest level on record. Over the same period, the share of revenues for the top 5% grew 10.5 percentage points" (Economic Policy Institute). Indeed, corporate profits are up, while the bottom percentile of earners' share has declined, leaving worsened conditions and disproportionately affecting Generation Z.

Nevertheless, why is Generation Z so disproportionately affected?

Intersectionality and Structural Barriers

Since Generation Z entered the workforce near the pandemic and the resulting political instability, grappling with the demands of the fluctuating job markets has often required multiple

jobs to afford basic expenses. The effects of the pandemic on Generation Z's financial circumstances are more complex when considering that in some instances, stimulus checks boosted income or credit temporarily, yet while inflationary periods struck most, wages fell behind resulting in many using credit cards or debt to cover expenses. A 2023 survey suggests, high cost of living is the top societal concern for both Gen Zs and millennials, ahead of unemployment and climate change (Deloitte). Understandably, unemployment and climate change are relevant. Yet, the cost of living has become most pressing with median home prices within the United States being, for some entirely unaffordable on a typical wage. For instance, in "March 2024, home prices in California were up 10.1% compared to last year, selling for a median price of \$816,000" (RedFin), while the average income amounts to \$73,220 (Forbes). However, another primary concern is the rental market where the median rent is \$2,800 in my state of California. Nevertheless, considering an individual's or family's economic condition based on such simple figures is not straightforward when considering other variable factors like the cost of raising a family, car or insurance expenses, and necessary work, medical, or technologically related expenses. There is the feeling that unless course correction occurs soon, society is doomed to burnout as leisure hardly fits into productive scheduling demands commonly required for earning a livable wage.

To expand, let's briefly recap the experience of a pre-and post-COVID-19 pandemic timeline and critical moments of economic or technological change with a focus on the United States. The economic downturn caused by the Great Recession of 2007-2009 resulted in a housing market collapse that had lingering effects throughout the 2010s. The recovery saw slow but steady growth, with significant government interventions to stabilize the economy. Before the onset of COVID-19, the U.S. economy was experiencing steady growth. GDP growth rates

hovered around 2-3% annually, with unemployment rates reaching historic lows of around 3.5% by the end of 2019. Key industries such as technology, finance, healthcare, and manufacturing were major drivers of economic growth. Consumer spending was robust, and business investments were on the rise. However, the immediate economic fallout of the pandemic led to widespread business closures, a sharp increase in unemployment, and significant stock market volatility. By April 2020, unemployment rates soared to nearly 15%, the highest since the Great Depression. Many small businesses struggled to survive, while large corporations faced disruptions in supply chains and operations. The U.S. government responded with unprecedented fiscal and monetary measures, including stimulus packages totaling trillions of dollars and Federal Reserve policies to maintain liquidity in financial markets. It should be noted that programs like the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) are important in supporting businesses and workers. Undoubtedly, the pandemic accelerated trends towards remote work and the gig economy. Many companies adopted flexible work arrangements, and digital freelance as well as contract work platforms gained popularity. Illustrating the impact of the pandemic, critical differences in economic indicators from the pre-and post-pandemic periods indicate fluctuating GDP growth and unemployment rates. Recognizably, the accelerated pace of technological adoption has reshaped industries and consumer behaviors.

In my attempt to shed light on the challenges faced by Generation Z, I recognize the need to blend personal narrative with broader societal analysis. While I acknowledge that my circumstances may not perfectly mirror those of my peers, they offer a tangible example of the dichotomy between privilege and struggle that characterizes our generation's experience. Growing up in the early 2000s, I had access to gaming consoles and computers—a privilege that not all children shared. Yet, despite these material comforts, my family often relied on

government assistance to make ends meet. I'm not resentful; I'm deeply grateful for my mother's sacrifices as our family's sole provider. However, the reality of living in California and economic pressures meant that luxuries were out of reach, and financial stability remained elusive.

Entering college, I had little saved money but was determined to succeed. Utilizing computers for educational purposes, I progressed academically, albeit with significant financial strain. Despite receiving federal grants and working part-time, the cost of living on campus and covering educational expenses forced me to turn to credit cards to make ends meet. The debt accumulated rapidly, impacting my credit score and exacerbating the cycle of financial instability. While my educational achievements may signify privilege on paper, the reality is far more nuanced. High levels of student loan debt, coupled with rising living costs, have eroded any sense of financial security and mental well-being. Personal necessities like dental care, technology upgrades, and car repairs have become financial burdens, pushing me further into debt and diminishing my quality of life. The struggle isn't unique to me; it's emblematic of a broader trend amongst Generation Z. Despite our access to technology and opportunities, structural barriers and economic pressures limit our ability to thrive. The promise of upward mobility feels increasingly out of reach, particularly for marginalized communities who face additional obstacles. In sharing my story, I hope to illuminate the complexities of our generation's experience. We exist in a world of privilege and struggle, where success is often measured regarding financial stability and educational attainment. Yet, beneath the surface lies a deeper truth: despite our best efforts, the odds are stacked against us. Only by acknowledging these challenges and working together to address them can we hope to build a better future for Generation Z and beyond.

As a low-income minority and first-generation university student, I've recognized the relevance of the dimensions of intersectionality. Respectfully, identities and experiences ranging from gender, race, and socioeconomic status affect outcome. As a country, these structural issues must be addressed to create a life that is more balanced for everyone allowing for not only necessities, but opportunities for a taste of luxury, at least that is my belief. With advancements in medicine and technology, the goal must be set on practical developments in resource allocation. It should not be the case for necessities not to be met or for this mass trend in Generation Z living with parents. Reasonably, land is abundant, especially with the possibility of tiny homes costing an average of \$30,000 to \$60,000. Additionally, food waste in America "is estimated at between 30-40 percent of the food supply" (Dr. Jean Buzby, USDA). These interconnected problems troubling the youth, housing, and food insecurity do not have to be this widespread if only social programs are immensely supported with fairness for all participants.

Moving Forward

Modern technology offers numerous conveniences and efficiencies that simplify daily tasks and allow for new opportunities. However, an undeniable shift in the collective consciousness has emerged alongside these benefits, which cannot be solely positive. Instead, with technological advancements come inherent trade-offs. One notable example is the altered nature of interpersonal interaction, particularly in the wake of the pandemic. Life or in-person interaction can sometimes feel increasingly disconnected despite the enhanced digital connection. From my perspective, there's a sense that face-to-face interaction and human connection have been fundamentally changed since the onset of widespread digital communication and remote work practices. Despite my generation being born in a time of smartphones, I enjoy recalling when smartphones were not as important or at the forefront of

what I believed was necessary. Even more, I remember when social media was in its early stages and had more to do with fun or connection than monetization of identity alongside data collection schemes. Not to exacerbate, but the internet has reimagined possibilities in both magnificent and maleficent ways.

With advances in banking technologies, social media, and e-commerce, marketing has become more personal and targeted, allowing users efficiency, and even crossing realms of uneasiness regarding privacy. Withstandedly, the frightening concept of behavior modification and psychological manipulation is worth studying as it leaves room for further knowledge acquisition not only of how technology is influencing us but also of how technology companies are using their influence and collection of data. A question to ponder is, will Generation Z forbid personal privacy or risk in favor of technological features, or will there be an eventual opposition to the unintended consequences of technological advancement?

With rising educational rates, Generation Z is on track to becoming the most widely educated generation. Still, as someone who has gone through the process, I will admit it certainly comes with risk. Nevertheless, the temporary losses are usually foregone by the opportunity for high income later. Yet, despite suggesting it as an excellent general rule of thumb, I can not confidently suggest the traditional university path for everyone in modernity. In fact, with exorbitant university tuition prices, there is room to ponder the path to the absolute lowest stress and highest earning potential. For example, “the average tuition and fees for the 2023-2024 school year at private colleges are \$42,162, while out-of-state students at public universities pay \$23,630” (Kerr and Wood, USNews). These fees can constrain early career developments, creative pursuits, and the possibility for exploration, arguably necessary for quality of life and educational purposes. Simply put, the solution must be to expand programs that return the

highest shared distribution to the most vulnerable groups, or simply by providing further funding directly to students and assisting programs.

Regarding stereotypes, Generation Z has often been described as lazy. At the same time, countless people are working multiple jobs to afford rent and other necessities barely. This language revolving around the cohort does not improve the scenario for youth populations battling their unique battles. To the older generations, although it might be true that a reasonable number of youth workers are not motivated to work, there is light in the awareness that this must indicate that systemic conditions are not aligning correctly with a vast number of individuals. Considering the intricate interplay of conditions, it is reasonable to detest these negative stereotypes. Moreover, leaders should present opportunities to those who need them most by recognizing circumstantial struggle, equitably rewarding contributions, and consequently shifting structural barriers.

To improve upon the modern struggles facing Generation Z, policymakers and respective employers who are primarily not composed of Generation Z members yet, should begin by attempting to get to know this cohort, rather than judging stereotypically with phrasing of laziness or entitled for what has been a previously made poor commentary of the group. Instead, understanding the complex structural issues that are apparent, and assisting in skills-based job training empowers and enables young individuals to take control of their destiny. As César E. Chávez eloquently said, “We cannot seek achievement for ourselves and forget about progress and prosperity for our community...our ambitions must be broad enough to include the aspirations and needs of others, for their sakes and our own” (Archives.gov). Relevantly, this quote can be abstracted to conceptually touch upon dynamics of inequality and the need for further understanding and career development programs for the youth to ensure collective

success. Taking a different approach, good riddance, to saying good riddance, it is indeed necessary for employers to retain quality relationships with employees for the purpose of maintaining long-term loyalty. Unfortunately, short-term hiring has gained popularity along with a job market that makes positions feel transitory either by exemplification from the massive 2023 layoffs across tech, media, finance, and retail industries or by exemplification of reduction of meaningful compensation.

Expanding on the context of modern workplace struggles, Generation Z has been forced to find employment in a market that has reduced quality entry-level position opportunities. Julia Pollak, the chief economist at ZipRecruiter, suggests that “there has been a shift over the past few years towards skills-based hiring, with employers far more concerned about employee’s experience and skills than their degrees” (Jack Hillyer, CNBC). Moreover, that information “shows up in hiring trends. Less than 61% of human resources leaders said in 2023 that they are hiring for entry-level and less-specialized positions, down from 79% in 2022, according to a PwC survey” (Jack Hillyer, CNBC). There was a spike at the start of 2020, with a comedown until mid-2021 in U.S. job openings and labor turnover. Nevertheless, job openings and labor turnover only reduced to 3.5% in March 2024, which is still slightly higher than in 2020. Although many indicators of unemployment and turnover show signs of improvement from the worst of the post-pandemic, the environment of the labor force has yet to benefit the youth, with low-level positions being eliminated most frequently. As interest rates rise, a growing number of youth populations will be at risk given their high debt and credit usage, which could have compounding effects on the ability to own a home or make future large purchases.

In addition to grappling with economic and technological hurdles, Generation Z faces significant environmental challenges that demand urgent attention. The swift acceleration of

climate change and worsening ecological degradation leave younger generations with a planet of uncertain future. The impacts of environmental neglect, from severe weather events to biodiversity loss, are becoming increasingly apparent. Fortunately, Generation Z knows the critical need for sustainable practices and policies to address these threats and protect the planet for future generations, as evidenced by a study indicating that Gen Z is “more active than older generations addressing climate change on- and offline” with 67% agreeing to the suggestion that climate change is a top concern to address (Tyson, Kennedy, and Funk, Pew Research Center).

Final Words

In conclusion, more analysis will be required to know if emerging economic, technological, and ecology trends are sustainable for future generations, which is the most relevant point in discussing such topics. Undeniably, pinpointing unsustainable systems like disproportionate costs to wage ratios or unequal opportunities dependent upon geographic location is vital to creating a better life for Generation Z and those after that. Connectedly, protecting vulnerable groups and minority subgroups within is crucial to preventing structural decay while optimizing returns on outcomes. Navigating the challenges Generation Z faces is no simple or easy task and will require a collective effort, addressing both structural issues and personal accountability. Even still, while circumstances might feel out of our control, our reaction and courageous adaptation to the situation will define who we are amongst our collective legacy.

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