

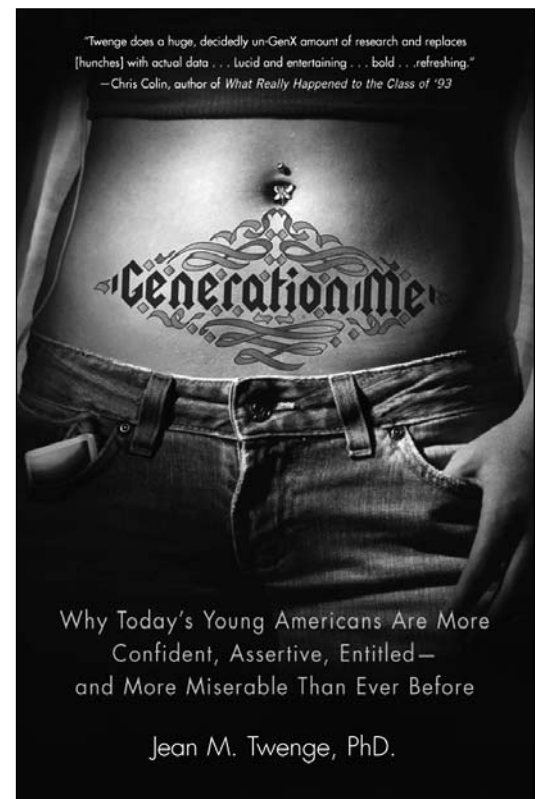
Marketing to the Me Generation

With Dr. Jean Twenge

CER Editor Michael Cooney and Mitch Talenfeld of MDT Direct together conducted the following interview with Dr. Jean Twenge.

CER: We all know about Generation X and Generation Y, or we think we do. Who is Generation Me?

JT: I define Generation Me as people born in 1970 and afterwards. So it includes some of Gen X and some of what's sometimes called Gen Y or iGen or the Millennials, depending on the day and the reporter. The important thing to keep in mind is that the trends I describe in my book grow over time. So although I put somebody born in 1970 into Generation Me, someone born in 1990, 20 years later, is going to show some of these traits even more strongly, because the traits keep increasing over time. Even the 1970 cutoff is somewhat arbitrary, because most of these are fairly linear trends that grow slowly over time, and so it's best to think about them in that way, instead of these "generation" labels that lump people into groups. Two people born in 1979 and 1980, for example, might be considered Gen X versus Gen Y; but are they really that different? Of course not, they were only born a year apart. So you've got to think about this in terms of younger people as a whole, in comparison to



Dr. Jean Twenge's book cover.

older people as a whole, regardless of the exact year they were born.

Another caveat is that there are many, many, many things that explain differences among people, and generation is only one of them. There are always going to be exceptions. These are changes in averages so it is *on average* that younger folks are going to behave a certain way compared to older folks. I do know that it's generation and not age, because the data samples that I draw from are all young

people, so the comparisons are based on people from the same age group over time—whether that’s college students, high school students, or middle school students.

I found that Generation Me tends to be more self-focused and individualistic. So, for example, they rate higher in self-esteem, in individualistic traits like assertiveness and independence, and in want-

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ing to be leaders. On the dark side, they’re also higher in narcissism, and a whole other cluster of traits involving cynicism, anxiety, depression and mental health prob-

lems. Those traits are all higher in Generation Me. Members of that group report higher levels of worry, stress, and depression than earlier generations. The medical journal articles also find that there’s a higher rate of diagnosed depression and that it’s more likely to happen at a younger age. A couple of generations ago, depression was a disease of the middle aged; now it’s a disease of the young.

There are a lot of differences I’ve looked at, but those are some major ones. Those are kind of the two big points where the younger generations are showing differences from previous ones.

CER: *Do marketers and others who want to reach Generation Me need to craft our messages differently than in the past?*

JT: Yes. On average, the people in Generation Me are going to have different preferences and catch phrases that appeal to them based on this psychological profile. You might have noticed, for example, the trend in advertising toward slogans that include words like “you” and “my.” That goes right along with the trend toward self-focus, individualism and even narcissism. You have all these slogans that are about “my” whatever: “my” Coca-Cola, “my” Subaru. Or like Time Warner Cable, “It’s the power of you.” All of these slogans send the message, it’s all about you. Some of them cross the line into entitlement, such as “you deserve the best,” and “this is just for you.”



JEAN M. TWENGE, Ph.D. is Associate Professor of Psychology at San Diego State University and the author of more than 40 scientific journal articles and book chapters. She is also author of the book *Generation Me: Why Today’s Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—And*

More Miserable Than Ever Before, and, more recently, co-author of *The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement*.

Jean has made numerous media appearances to discuss her research, including: *The Today Show*, *Dateline NBC*, NPR’s *All Things Considered*, CBS radio’s *The Osgood File*, KPBS radio, San Diego TV stations (KUSI, XETV, KNSD, KFMB, KGTV); and has been written about in *USA Today*, *Time* magazine, *Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *Newsweek*.

She received a BA in sociology and psychology, and an MA in social sciences from the University of Chicago in 1993, and a Ph.D. in personality psychology from the University of Michigan–Ann Arbor in 1998. She then completed a post-doc in social psychology at Case Western Reserve University.

She lives with her husband in San Diego, and enjoys swimming, reading, sitting in the sun, or reading and sitting in the sun—though usually not swimming while reading and sitting in the sun.

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Those kinds of slogans have become more common over the last couple decades, and for good reason, because they work really well with the younger generations. That language is second nature to them.

Mitch Talenfeld (MT): *It seems to me as though people today of any age are more self-focused, not just the younger people.*

JT: What you're saying is it could be a time period effect instead of a generational effect. So it could be that everybody of all ages from the period of, say, the 1970s to now has become more focused on themselves. That is possible. More than likely there is some of that going on, but there are also clearly some generational differences.

The phrase that captures it the best is, it's hard to teach an old dog new tricks. Marketers know this. The attitudes, brand preferences, personality traits and so on that people form when they're young—say adolescence and into young adulthood—can stick with them their whole lives.

Baby boomers and the folks older than baby boomers have, since the '70s, shifted to being more self-focused. There are a couple of studies that show that. But for them it's a second language, not a first language. They didn't grow up getting "believe in yourself" fed to them with their baby food; it was something they learned later on in life. So it's not as pure for them, it's more learned rather than innate. So those personalized types of marketing messages can work for them, too, but it's often spun a little bit differently. For baby boomers, at least, it's more likely to be framed in terms of a personal journey, more like self-actualization and looking inward. With the younger folks, it's more like, "I don't have to journey, I'm already there."

CER: *Does your data primarily include white, middle-class folks? What's the effect of the influx of Hispanics and a sizable black community; is this descriptive of them as well?*

JT: The way to answer that is to try to look at data samples that are more diverse. I've drawn data recently from a survey called "Monitoring the Future," which is a nationally represented sample of high school students, and it shows many of the same effects. It doesn't measure exactly the same stuff, but there are things that are similar about, for example, having unrealistically high expectations for your future performance, or liking yourself and being satisfied with yourself. All of those things have gone up in that data set, too. Even in my own data collection I've looked at samples of middle school students and elementary school students—those tend to be pretty diverse in terms of race and socioeconomic status.

The other thing I've found is that when I've been able to take the data and break it down by, for example, race and ethnicity, what tends to happen is there are race and ethnic differences, but the differences aren't necessarily what you'd expect. It's not that all the minorities are lower; in a lot of cases, they're actually higher in these individualistic traits. Asian Americans, however, tend to be lower. These ethnic differences can be understood as cultural differences—something other than generation that explains it—but when you look at the pattern over time, everybody is going up. If you think of it on a graph, you'd

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have four lines, and they're kind of separated due to these ethnic differences, but all those lines are going up. The changes over time are still, as far as I can tell, affecting all the ethnic and socioeconomic groups fairly equally. Even though they start out with differences and they end with differences, they're all changing in the same direction.

There is diversity, not just in race and ethnicity, but in terms of the parents, and the schools, and so on, so there's going to be some variation. I have talked to some young people who have said, "I came into this without high expectations at all; nobody in my neighborhood went to college." What I've heard more often, though, is that the schools in the urban areas will say the same stuff about everybody in the class going to college, and believe in yourself, and anything is possible—that's all it takes. In the book I talk about this Web site for disadvantaged youths, and it uses all of this language in the same way. The belief seems

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to be that these children must have low self-esteem because they're disadvantaged, and, thus, they need to be encouraged to

believe in themselves. Unfortunately, all of these assumptions are wrong.

In some school districts the kids get an even stronger dose of this, because it's believed that they need it more. So the kids are growing up with these high expectations. Just as one example, there was a survey sponsored by the University of Chicago a few years ago in which they looked at kids in the Chicago Public Schools—a pretty urban, disadvantaged, minority group—and 80 percent of the kids said they expected to graduate from college. So

they have these high expectations, too. It's not necessarily wrong, but it is somewhat unrealistic. There are advantages and disadvantages to high expectations, and I always want to emphasize that. I'm not saying it's bad for kids to think they're going to go to college. It's not. It's a good thing to have high goals. The problem is, a lot of them are going to end up disappointed and really shocked at how difficult it's going to be, both academically and financially, to meet that goal.

CER: *And their complete rates are terrible.*

JT: Exactly.

CER: *So not only have they dropped out, but now they have financial obligations.*

JT: It's a very, very sad story.

MT: *Did you find major differences between male and female attitudes, and how these have changed over time?*

JT: The second to last chapter in the book discusses how women have changed so much in terms of roles and attitudes. There have been huge, huge changes over the last several decades, and that's really reflected in that chapter. A lot of the traits that I look at, I try to analyze the data to see if the changes are the same for men and women. Overall, the changes seem to be pretty similar. The one place they differ for women is in those individualistic traits over time, which is exactly what you'd expect given the social changes for women in that time period. Women used to be told that they shouldn't be assertive, and now they're told that it's just fine. That's changed for women a little more than it's changed for men in recent dec-

ades. Everybody is getting more assertive today, but women had farther to go, so their change is bigger.

MT: *You write in the book about the higher levels of depression and anxiety now. When I grew up, it was thought that a person was weak if he or she had a nervous breakdown, or were depressed. Today, it seems like everybody is on medication for depression. So it's a whole different outlook in my generation of baby boomers. But, given the earlier stigma, is it possible that some of the studies on the topic of depression are unreliable, because respondents from that time period would not have wanted to admit how depressed they were in a survey?*

JT: This is a classic question. The questionnaires that people fill out are anonymous, and they've always been anonymous. And they don't ask people directly if they are depressed. They ask about symptoms, like, "Are you feeling sad?" or "Do you worry?" They ask about physical symptoms, like stomach aches and other things that are correlated with anxiety and depression. So that's the first thing that helped.

I just completed this study on a psychological measure called the MMPI, the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory. It's very well known and has been used since the 1930s. What's great about it is the questions on it are kind of odd, so that you (the test taker) would never really guess what the test is measuring. You would know that the questions were a little bit strange, but you wouldn't necessarily know that a particular item was measuring depression, for example. Plus, it has these two scales on it that measure people's tendency to try to look good and their tendency to be defensive about any kind of symp-

toms. So I was able to look at the changes in depression, anxiety and all of those things. The change is still really strong toward more people with more anxiety and depression. It looks like that might make a little bit of a difference, but it's not most of it.

CER: *In terms of reaching out to Generation Me, what kind of messages would be most effective? Are there ways of talking to them that are both honest and, from a marketing perspective, effective?*

JT: I actually think there's a real opportunity that career colleges have. It's a fantastic opportunity, because there are going to be some kids for whom abstract

learning is just not their thing. You know what? That's totally fine, because those kids can go to a career college and learn skills that will help them get a really good job,

instead of wasting their time in four-year or community college, taking more academic subjects. It gives them a concrete path to success, which is exactly what many of them need, to be able to find a career that will be well fitted for them, for all kinds of reasons. It gives them that path to learn a skill and make a better living than maybe their parents ever dreamed of, even without a four-year college degree.

This is the thing that needs to be recognized. We've moved to this model of four-year college degrees for everyone. Not only is that not realistic, it's not the best fit for everybody. It's not what everybody is going to want to do—have a desk job and push papers. It's the cynical way to look at it, when these kids could have a more

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dynamic career doing something else that they maybe learned at a career college. So I think that's a good opportunity, and that's the thing to emphasize; that you offer them a clear path to end up in a good career. So the messages about the high expectations and believe in yourself and so on—that type of language might work for marketing, but the better message overall is that realistic, clear path.

CER: *Then once we have them in school, isn't there always some disconnect between the realities of education and their expectations that they're all going to be professionals?*

JT: In high school and before they've been brought up to have these very high expectations, and somehow the message that was lost, that wasn't emphasized enough to

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them, is that believing in yourself isn't enough, and that the world doesn't owe you anything, and that it's going to take a lot of hard work to succeed. That's a tough thing to hear, but

the realistic message is the one that will help them succeed in the long run. That's another piece of advice I often give, that the idea of success has been emphasized to them so much, so if you tie something to their success, their ears perk up and they really start to listen. If you say, "To be successful you need to do X, Y and Z," they'll listen a lot more than if it's prefaced by another phrase.

CER: *How can schools improve their retention rates with Generation Me?*

JT: My general advice is that the straight lecture teaching style doesn't work as well with this generation as it did for previous generations. Learning by doing, which is what a lot of career colleges focus on anyway, is a big hit. Generation Me kids are going to be responsive to learning styles that get them involved, rather than being passive recipients. Discussion, projects, student presentations, lab activities—these types of activities are more likely to engage the student, and if they are not bored, they are more likely to stay in school.

As far as retaining them, I assume you have student advisors, or folks who help students plan their courses and their career goals? Those folks are going to become even more important in the coming years, because that's what a lot of young people have trouble with. They've been given these platitudes by their baby boomer parents and teachers about believing in yourself and you can do anything, and so on, but people aren't telling them how to get there. So if students can have someone tell them exactly how to get there...sometimes you've really got to hold their hands.

That's the somewhat paradoxical thing; despite all this individualism, sometimes they're not taught how to go out there and do it themselves. At some point, obviously, they've got to take over that responsibility, but you can start by really showing them that path and just emphasizing the hard work it takes to get to their goals. I hear over and over from the students that I teach at San Diego State, both undergraduates and graduates, that they have these goals that are very, very important to them, but they're often very confused about how exactly to reach them.

Some people say this generation should be called, not Generation Y, but

Generation Why? Because that question comes up with this group over and over: *Why* is this important? *Why* do I need to know this? *Why*? Simply following orders doesn't make any sense to them at all. They want to know how it's relevant and how it's relevant to them. So if they can be shown that in order to get this degree you need to take this class, and here's how this class will help you, and so on, it's much more motivating if they know exactly why they're doing it.

CER: *You wrote about how today's students often want to argue with you over the correct answers (to exam questions, for example). How do you deal with that?*

JT: It's easier with technical disciplines, because then you can say unequivocally what is the right answer. In psychology, which I teach, and with writing, which I grade sometimes too, that's where you run into really big trouble. The problem is, of course, that even in psychology and in writing there really are right or wrong answers, and though students often think they can argue about it more, they're wrong. It just makes it a little bit more difficult.

You almost have to be two different people as a professor. When you're doing the class projects, videos and the discussions and so on, you're going to have the best classroom atmosphere if you're warm and you're really interested in what they have to say and their thoughts and feelings and so on. But then when they argue about the exam, or when they want to take the exam at a time that is convenient for them instead of when it's scheduled—this comes up a lot—you have to say no and stand your ground and be really firm.

It's tough to play those two different roles, but that's what I've found works the best in dealing with Generation Me

students. You want their learning to be fun, but you also have to have standards and you have to be fair. Every time I feel bad about holding to standards, I remind myself that a future boss is not going to be very pleased when their young worker says, "I can't give that big presentation, that's not a convenient time for me." They have to learn sooner or later that this is how the world works.

MT: *Many of our schools today seem faced with this challenge: A new student enrolls, and they are excited at that moment, but when it comes to starting class, they don't show up. Are there things that can be done in between those two points to try to encourage them to stick with it?*

JT: Do you have any idea why they're not showing up?

MT: *Many times it is due to difficult life issues, e.g., family obligations, employment obligations.*

JT: In those cases, sad to say, there's probably not a whole lot you can do. In the cases where it's just some kind of lack of direction, then I would think that meeting with their student advisor in the interim would help, so that they understand their path and so on. But it sounds like you're doing that.

I know that a lot of colleges and universities are moving more in the direction of online classes. That helps with some of the employment and family issues, and the schedule conflicts and all those issues that come up. There are big downsides to online courses, but if some courses are done online and some are done in person,

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that can help. If you're a single parent, for example, you may not be able to get to class in the evening while your kid is sleeping, but you can get on the computer. In five to ten years I predict that we're going to have a lot more courses offered online. I don't know whether that's a good thing or bad thing, but it's what the market wants and it's what works for a lot of students.

CER: *How do the economic realities of the current recession impact your findings?*

JT: I've been thinking about this a lot so I'll give you a couple of thoughts. Obviously when I wrote *Generation Me*, economically the country was doing pretty well, and even then one of

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harder. There's going to be even more of a reality check on the part of young people when they graduate either from high school or college. So that's the first point.

Now, does that mean that parents and teachers are going to back away from the high self-esteem messages when these kids are younger? No; they're convinced this will help kids succeed in a competitive world. Things are more competitive now? Let's tell them to believe in themselves *even more*. It's based on this false premise that hasn't changed, and I don't see it changing any time soon, despite my best effort. There may be even more of this 'everybody needs to get a college

degree' talk, in this economy. I don't see those messages changing. If anything they might even get stronger.

MT: *We talk about the Depression Generation that pinched every penny, that worried about everything they did; do you think this generation now experiencing this down economy, with not being able to get jobs like they thought and things being so awful, will start changing? Is there maybe a new Depression Generation in the making?*

JT: What made the Great Depression unique was that it went on for so long and shaped a whole generation, because it basically lasted from 1929 to more or less when World War II ended. So the people growing up in that era had a lot of time to absorb those attitudes. How much of an effect this will have on young people depends on how long it lasts. It's hard to give an exact cutoff, but anybody who's already reached, say, age 60 or so, has attitudes about material stuff and expectations that are already fairly well formed. They already have the attitudes kind of formed that are more economic boom times of the past couple of decades and they're just going to have that kind of crash to reality.

Are we ever going to go back to the days when people really were pinching pennies and wearing their clothes until they wore out and stuff like that? If this goes on for 10 years, yes. But if we come out of it after a couple of years, those old attitudes will come right back. Those attitudes never even went away completely in the Great Depression. The song "We're in the Money" was written during the Great Depression. People go to movies during recessions and depressions at an even higher rate than they do during boom times.

There's still that desire for money and the easy life and escapism.

MT: *Do you have any thoughts as to how employers should be dealing with employees from Generation Me? That's a recurring conversation with people in our industry.*

JT: I've thought about the issue a lot more, and I've talked to a lot more people about it, since the book came out. Some of this is going to shift a little and probably has shifted a little bit already, because what the data shows, and also anecdotally what people talk about, is that Generation Me walks in the door not saying, "Here's what I'm going to bring to the company," but, "What can you do for me?" Often they expect all the perks, like having the gym, but also kind of the leisure things, like how much time off can I have? These are stories that managers tell about some of their young hires, and that is actually reflected in the real data. So that is going to make this generation somewhat challenging to manage, because there are these somewhat unrealistic expectations about leisure time.

Now, how to deal with that? What I often say is, you're going to have to have somebody kind of show them the ropes. As the boss, that usually can't be you, so get somebody who's been at the company maybe a few years more than that young person, someone who is still young enough to understand the language and the expectations, but old enough to have a little more of a realistic view on the topic. That's a good approach to clue them in to how the world works.

Again, these attitudes were formed at a fairly early age; they are ingrained and are going to be awfully hard to change.

Entering the workplace was a tough adjustment for this generation, even before this recession. The stories I heard—for example: my job isn't fulfilling, my boss doesn't care about my feelings, I've been here six months and I haven't been promoted yet—this type of thing comes up over and over, and that's just going to get worse.

CER: *Where are you going with your research now? What other areas are you going to explore?*

JT: I think one question I get all the time, because most of the data is from the U.S., is what would it look like around the world? So I have a grad student working on that, to see if we can find that. There are a couple of researchers in China who've already started to do that, and they're finding very similar trends in self-esteem going up and anxiety going up. So trying to see how it's playing out around the world is a big question.

I have another project that's specifically about generational differences and attitudes toward work. I think it's a really understudied area; there's a lot of talk about it, but there's very little data. So I went and tried to find some good data on how attitudes toward work and leisure have changed over the generations. I'm working on that paper with some folks who have expertise in business psychology.

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