Are younger generations truly weaker than older ones?

Younger cohorts are often stereotyped as being lazy, entitled or self-obsessed – and have been for centuries. Is there something to this perception?

From being branded ‘snowflakes’ to being accused of prioritising buying avocados over houses, younger generations are enduringly maligned as somehow weaker, less hard-working or less resilient than their older counterparts. This isn’t a new phenomenon; after all, people have complained about ‘kids these days’ for decades. But is there really any truth in the idea that millennials and Gen Z are weaker than Boomers or Gen X?

Evidence shows newer generations do, indeed, measure highly on traits that their older counterparts might consider as a sign of weakness. Yet experts also believe that Baby Boomers (born roughly between 1946 and 1964) and Gen X (born between 1965 and 1980) might be judging the generations that succeed them much too harshly, and measuring them against standards that have long ceased to be the norm.

Generational context could be key to narrowing divides between decades – yet looking down on young adults is such a long-established and innate instinct that it might be impossible to undo.

Myth versus reality

People have complained about younger generations for [thousands of years](https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20171003-proof-that-people-have-always-complained-about-young-adults). In fact, looking down on the generation that comes after you could simply be human nature. “The tendency for adults to disparage the character of youth has been happening for centuries,” says Peter O’Connor, a professor of management at Queensland Institute of Technology, Australia.

He points out the stereotype remains alive and well, with research showing thousands of Americans believe that [‘kids these days’ lack](https://www.science.org/doi/pdf/10.1126/sciadv.aav5916) positive qualities that participants associate with older generations. But this wasn’t necessarily because the youths of today actually did lack these qualities – the researchers argued that this was because we project our current selves onto our past selves. By doing this, older people are unconsciously comparing who they are today to today’s young people, giving an impression that today’s youth is somehow on the decline, no matter the decade we’re living in.

In early February, British property guru Kirstie Allsopp [incited rage](https://www.newstatesman.com/comment/2022/02/kirstie-allsopp-victim-blaming-young-for-broken-housing-market) after saying it was young people’s own fault they couldn’t afford to buy a home. Allsopp, who [purchased her own first house with family help in the 90s](https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/of-course-young-people-can-afford-a-home-just-move-somewhere-cheaper-says-kirstie-allsopp-dpt9q3v3c), suggested today’s wannabe-buyers spent too much money on ‘luxuries’, such as Netflix and gym memberships, instead of saving for a deposit.

Allsopp’s words were the latest in a string of high-profile remarks about how young people today aren’t prepared to make the same sacrifices that older generations did, or aren’t as tough as their parents or grandparents once were.

In 2017, Australian real estate mogul Tim Gurner similarly suggested youngsters spent too much money [on avocado toast](https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2017/may/15/australian-millionaire-millennials-avocado-toast-house) instead of homes (in spite of house prices in many parts of Australia [doubling in the last ten years](https://www.moneyquest.com.au/news/house-prices-in-australia-last-ten-years/), while wages have [only risen](https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-11-01/fact-check-have-wages-grown-steadily-over-the-past-decade/10447492) by 30%). In 2016, the phrase “Generation Snowflake” was added to the Collin’s English Dictionary to describe adults born from 1980 to 1994 who were ‘less resilient and more prone to taking offence than previous generations’. And think-pieces are [already emerging](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/28/business/gen-z-workplace-culture.html) about the Gen Zers refusing to work [nine-to-five](https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20200317-the-evolution-of-the-modern-workday), or questioning why they [need to be in the office](https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20210729-why-younger-workers-want-hybrid-work-most) full-time – an echo of the ‘entitled millennial’ trope [of the 2010s](https://time.com/247/millennials-the-me-me-me-generation/), which is only just beginning to fade from view.

An outdated standard

Older generations might still suspect they’re hardier than today’s youth – but can this even be measured?

Some experts think so. One 2010 study that examined millennials graduating university between 2004 and 2008 showed that they had [more traits associated with low resilience](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/230683045_Comparing_Millennials_to_pre-1987_students_and_with_one_another) than people who graduated before 1987. Other research has demonstrated that [neuroticism](https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2006-21634-012) and [a need for recognition](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/kpm.298) have increased in younger generations, while one 2012 study suggested that youth are [more self-centered](https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2012/03/fame-giving) than they were in the past.

Yet for many experts, these measures don’t point to younger generations being weaker than older ones. Instead, they are simply ways of judging a generation shaped by a modern and technologically-focused society by the standards of decades ago.

“Prior generations were taught to repress instead of express, but for newer generations it’s the other way around,” says Dr Carl Nassar, a mental health professional at LifeStance Health, who regularly works with adolescents and families struggling with generational divides. “That’s caused a perceptual rift, with older generations seeing this expression as a sign of weakness, because they were taught that vulnerability is a weakness and not strength.”

Nassar believes that the trope of younger generations being weaker is largely anecdotal, and is based on a mismatch between how different generations express their problems, which could skew data on how resilient they really are. This is an idea echoed by Jennifer Robison, a senior editor at US analytics and polling company Gallup.

## The tendency for adults to disparage the character of youth has been happening for centuries – Peter O’Connor

“Gen X and Boomers have troubles, too, but voicing them feels unprofessional,” she says. “So, what appears to be needy or ‘snowflake-y’ in the young may actually just be the social norm of transparency.”

The oft-cited idea that millennials and Gen Z act in selfish ways that prevent them from getting on the property ladder is one example of how difficult it is to judge a generation by a decades-old standard. Homeowning Boomers, who were in early adulthood in a period of [widespread economic prosperity](https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/employment-and-growth/talkin-bout-my-generation), probably remember scrimping and saving to buy their first house. Now enjoying the [spoils of homeownership](https://www.theguardian.com/money/2015/aug/04/homeownership-the-generation-that-had-it-so-good), they begin to believe that young people who are unable to do the same are weaker than them. This ignores the problem of [rocketing house prices](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-59906222" \l ":~:text=Prices%2520increased%2520by%25209.8%2525%2520during,a%252012.5%2525%2520rise%2520in%25202004.), [stagnating wages](https://www.oecd.org/employment/rising-employment-overshadowed-by-unprecedented-wage-stagnation.htm) and the rise of [insecure work](https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20170918-how-the-gig-economy-creates-job-insecurity), all of which prevents people getting mortgages.

Similarly, older generations might point to the fact that Gen Z are [the most depressed and anxious generation](https://www.apa.org/monitor/2019/01/gen-z) as a sign of their lack of resilience, forgetting that this is a generation coming to adulthood during a global pandemic, in a period of [unprecedented loneliness](https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/2yzhfv4DvqVp5nZyxBD8G23/who-feels-lonely-the-results-of-the-world-s-largest-loneliness-study) and widespread [economic insecurity](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-59946302). The different generations, and the challenges that they face, are not comparable.

“The reality is that Gen Z is coming of age facing a variety of challenges that other generations have not faced at the same life stage, most notably the Covid-19 pandemic and the always-on pressure of social media directly to their smartphone,” says Jason Dorsey, president of the Center for Generational Kinetics, a generations research firm based in Austin, Texas. “Add in the mental-health challenges of social distancing and isolation during the pandemic, distance-learning challenges and all the formative elements of young adulthood, and it's easy to see why the generation is feeling like it’s a challenging time.”

A product of their time

Each generations’ actions and beliefs are shaped by their own unique problems and challenges. Boomers and Gen X might have grown up without the convenience of smartphones, but they also didn’t have to battle with the complexities of growing up online – likely prompting the need for recognition and self-centered traits uncovered in some studies.

Similarly, older generations might not have had the same access to education as younger generations, but they were also more likely to [obtain a middle-class job](https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2014/02/11/the-rising-cost-of-not-going-to-college/) without a college degree, and aren’t saddled with crippling levels of [student debt](https://eu.usatoday.com/story/money/personalfinance/2021/08/19/student-debt-one-third-americans-cant-cope-financial-shock/8177533002/).

And, on the other side of things, Gen Zers might believe that their parents’ or grandparents’ generation did not fight hard enough against social issues, such as climate change and financial inequality (an argument which prompted the viral rise of [‘OK Boomer’](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/29/style/ok-boomer.html), a phrase intended to disparage their older counterparts).

## Prior generations were taught to repress instead of express, but for newer generations it’s the other way around – Carl Nassar

Yet they also may forget that many of them had to battle against other societal problems, such as starker forms of sexism and racial inequality. After all, when some older Boomers were in early adulthood, women still had to get a man to co-sign a credit application to buy a house in many countries, and interracial marriages were still banned in some US states – laws that people had to fight hard to overturn.

The truth is older generations have been accusing their predecessors of being lazy, entitled and self-obsessed for centuries. We seem almost compelled to judge people who grew up in a different time to us – and the ability to share memes poking fun at overly-woke Gen Zers or wealth-hoarding Boomers only deepens divides.

Dorsey believes that there is a way around this – but that generational context is key to debunking the persisting weakness myth.

“It’s awareness of what these different generations have gone through, why they are the way they are,” he says. “The best way to get older generations to stop dumping on younger generations is to create a dialogue that simply does not exist right now. Instead of having candid conversations across multiple generations, we have viral memes that say younger people are snowflakes and older people are dinosaurs. But the truth is that we’re all human.”

