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***iGen: why today's super-connected kids are growing up less rebellious, more tolerant, less happy – and completely unprepared for adulthood***, by Jean Twenge, Atria Books, New York (2017).

Review by Sonia Livingstone, LSE, for *Journal of Children and Media*

This book burst on the market a few months ago amid an avalanche of both eulogistic and critical reviews. Its subtitle signals the sweeping nature of its claims, and the headline of its author's article in *The Atlantic* answers the 'why' question by asking, rhetorically, *Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?* At last, some declared with relief, an explanation for what's wrong with today's youth – and a solution too: ban the smartphone. Or as Fox News put it, 'Smartphones have turned us into tech-addicted zombies. Here's why we should ban them for kids' (11 November 2017). But others declared, more wearily: will the moral panics over youth and technology never end? Don't we know now that correlation does not equal causation, that technological determinism has been debunked, and that piling up confirmatory evidence is no way to test a hypothesis? Some, too, have critiqued the graphs which underpin Twenge's claim that 'iGen' – today's young generation for whom the 'i' stands for individualism, inequality, insecurity and, yes, internet – is more fragile and risk-averse than their predecessors because of mass adoption of the smartphone.

The field of children and media is regularly assailed by popular hyperbole about generational transformation, largely led by the self-promoting interests of the market research industry (think of Gen X, Y and Z etc.) along with technological gurus such as Marc Prensky ('Digital natives'), Don Tapscott ('Growing up Digital'), John Palfrey ('Born Digital') and others. Diagnosing what's wrong with young people is not only a favourite activity of digital pundits but also a distinctly profitable one. One result is to legitimate a simplistic discourse about complex matters. Of all the questions I am regularly asked by journalists, policy makers, and parents, the most common is, "at what age children should be allowed a smartphone." My answer – when a child is ready for it, depending on the child and the circumstances – is generally unwelcome. In this journal, we can take a deeper look at the data, asking whether the book's many graphs charting changing youth attitudes and behaviours over the past forty years support what is claimed of them. I shall suggest that Twenge's interpretation of the 'facts' obscures an alternative – arguably better – account.

Relying on survey data mainly concerning US 8<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, and especially 12<sup>th</sup> graders from the University of Michigan's *Monitoring the Future* study, with some from college students and none from younger children (notwithstanding Twenge's definition of iGen as those born between 1995 and 2012), Twenge reviews the past four decades to claim that today's teenagers are highly risk-averse, responsibility-averse and demanding to be coddled, resulting in an extension of childhood itself. Setting aside this odd account of childhood (usually thought of as a time of imaginative play and learning rather than high-maintenance self-absorption), she proposes a revision of the current orthodoxy that children are now getting older younger (witness early sexualisation and the commercialisation of childhood) and staying younger longer (witness extended years in education and delayed entry into employment and marriage or parenting). Apart from pointing vaguely at 'individualism', a term that sociologists have unpacked by reference to theories of individualization, the risk society, the network society or even neoliberal capitalism, Twenge, a psychologist, points to mass adoption of the smartphone by 2011. Yet thinking of how the US has changed from 1976 to 2015 makes one wonder about a

host of putative explanations for the observed trends – for instance, concerning the pressures on its education system, growing social inequality, racial and ethnic tensions, labour market instability, growing precarity, student debt, drugs policy, political disaffection, the undermining of health and welfare provision, and more.

Such explanations would, of course, require a wider analysis. Yet while the book compares iGen with the Millennial, Gen X and Boomer generations which preceded it, based on equivalent (historical) data from when they, too, were teenagers, nothing is said about those generations as adults, now the architects of the world in which iGen is growing up. Rather, it is assumed that a close examination of the youngest generation will yield all the insights needed – irrespective of the actions of their Gen X parents and tech innovators or their Boomer professors, bosses and politicians which, after all, created the society in which young people are growing up. Thus iGen emerges not only as ‘childish’ but also curiously decontextualized, unmoored from the wider society which is, in turn, tacitly freed of responsibility for a generation so ‘completely unprepared for adulthood.’

Faced with an abundance of simple univariate trends in youth attitudes and practices, academic readers of *iGen* are likely to be frustrated both by the relative lack of multivariate analysis and of systematic consideration of alternative, potentially confounding or counterfactual explanations. Let us try to disentangle the various types of findings. For it is simply not the case that 2011 was ‘the year when everything started to change in the survey data’ (p.5) or when ‘all of a sudden, the line graphs looked like steep mountains – [in which] rapid drop-offs erased the gains of decades in just a few years’ (p.4).

First, most graphs show a steady decline over the decades with no obvious recent drop at all – for example, in the rates of having sex young, getting pregnant as a teen, drinking alcohol or numbers of sexual partners – inviting an examination of the history of government interventions and campaigns, as well as slow cultural shifts across the generations. The detailed graphs concerned with religious beliefs and practices are also characterised by a long-term decline with little recent drop. Perhaps Twenge means such evidence to explain the apparent rise in individualism; certainly she communicates a dismay over the secularisation of the US. But none of this has much to do with the smartphone.

Second, some graphs show no neat trend at all. The graph for SAT scores shows a recent drop but this is less than that of the 1970s and 1980s, so another explanation is needed. The graph for drug taking also bucks the trend – showing a decline to 1994 and an increase since; here Twenge works hard to interpret this as the act of a risk-averse generation who also believes marijuana to be safe. The notion that the recent upturn in teen suicide and decline in homicide (itself dwarfed by comparison with its peak in the 1990s, also seen in relation to sexual assault statistics) can be linked to the smartphone stretches the imagination too far. Twenge observes that you cannot commit murder if you are often by yourself, provoking me to check out the original CDC source for this – it seems the US homicide rate refers to teen deaths from homicide, not necessarily teens killed by teens nor even teens who die outside the home.

Third, driving and gaining a driver’s licence do show a gradual decline until the turn of the century and a sharper recent drop, but this occurs around the financial crash of 2008 rather than around 2011. Twenge interprets this as about kids preferring to be ferried about by their parents rather than, say, their inability to afford a car (as might be suggested by the gradual

decline in teens doing paid work or getting an allowance from their parents). Since the decline in going to the movies also began not in 2011 but around 2008, while the decline in party-going and going out to see friends began even earlier, consideration of disposable income – along with, maybe yes, growing internet use, and fearful parents – is surely warranted.

There is also a gradual then recent dramatic drop in teens' extrinsic and intrinsic motivations for school. As Twenge suggests, efforts to woo kids with educational technology are not working; most likely what matters is that they cannot see how school will guarantee a stable future, though they still aspire to and work towards an instrumental vision of education to improve their employment chances. This seems plausible, inviting a wider socio-economic analysis of educational and labour market opportunities than we are offered.

At least one trend is misleadingly presented. Under the heading 'Generation Porn,' Twenge quotes research from the University of New Hampshire showing high levels of exposure to online pornography in 2005 but she does not cite the 2010 research from the same group that shows a notable drop.<sup>i</sup> She then links sexting and pornography to the findings on fewer partners or teen pregnancies to suggest that iGen is playing it safe, preferring online to offline (physical) sexual experiences, as part of their extended childhood. Beyond the above problem with the actual finding, this explanation is odd, since vicarious or 'safe' sexual experience is neither part of most conceptions of childhood nor commensurate with the available research (which suggests that, far from being compensatory, online sexual experiences are positively correlated with offline sexual experiences<sup>ii</sup>).

Fifth (forgive me, the book contains a lot of graphs!), going out without parents shows a gradual 20-year decline for 8<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> graders, and a steeper recent decline for 8<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup> and even 12<sup>th</sup> graders. Dating shows a similar trend, while teens whose parents always know where they are increases commensurately. Here it seems likely that, as Twenge proposes, the advent of smartphones plays a role. But given the long-term decline that preceded the recent drop in independence, one might reverse her causality. Parents have long worried about teens going out, getting gradually more risk-averse as parental anxieties have been whipped up by the media (irrespective of the largely stable or even declining incidence of actual harm). This set the scene for the smartphone less as the problem than the solution for parents' growing need to keep kids under supervision, and for teens' need to occupy themselves and stay in touch with peers when they aren't allowed out. Constraints on teens are many – the graphs show that going to the mall has declined steadily over the past quarter century; does the regulation of malls – to prevent teens hanging out - play a part? The statistics on teens who try to run away from home did not decline at all until a recent rapid drop around 2011, leading Twenge to suggest that even if unhappy at home, iGen goes online to find succour rather than risk encountering the 'stranger dangers' of which they have long been warned in the outside world.

Finally, some graphs suggest that historic long-term improvements in teens' wellbeing (reported happiness, life satisfaction, loneliness, depression, anxiety) have recently reversed, and this is indeed worrying. The liveliest debate over the reception of the book centres on whether this is due to use of the smartphone or, perhaps, the cumulative effect of many adverse factors shaping children's lives, or, even, a greater openness to reporting mental health difficulties (and so, ultimately, a good thing, leading more to seek support rather than suffering in silence). Twenge acknowledges the limitations of a correlational study by saying:

“these data can’t definitively show that the shift toward screen time has caused more mental health issues. However, other studies can: experiments that randomly assign people to experience more or less screen time and those that track behavior over time have both found that more screen time causes more anxiety, depression, loneliness, and less emotional connection. It seems clear that at least some of the sudden and large increase in depression has been caused by teens spending more time with screens.” (p.112).

Two experiments are cited to support this paragraph, although no detail is given in the book. So I checked them both out. The first randomly assigned 1003 Danish Facebook users (average age 34) to either use or not use Facebook for one week; those who took a Facebook break reported improvements in well-being compared to the control group, with effects greater for heavy users and for those who envy others on Facebook (itself clearly a prior condition).<sup>iii</sup> The second asked university student friendship pairs to spend five minutes communicating in-person, and via video chat, audio chat, and instant messaging; comparing both observed and self-reported indicators of emotional connectedness across these four conditions. The authors found more connectedness during the in-person communication and the least in the instant messaging.<sup>iv</sup> Setting aside the various nuances and complexities in the findings reported in each study, suffice to say that neither concerns teenagers, only the former concerns mental health or randomly assigned people to experience less (but not more) screen time, and neither measured effects over the years implied by the quote above (“those that track behavior over time”).

I’ll withhold from drawing larger implications from the seeming mismatch between the studies cited and the claims made for them. Many will, nonetheless, judge it plausible that fear of missing out, oppressive exposure to the perfect lives of others, bullying and harassment are indeed all intensified in the digital age, with young teens especially vulnerable. But the research cited in this book does not evidence this, however plausible such a claim may be. And worries about grades, employment, future earnings etc. must surely also be part of the story. And let’s not forget that the effects of socioeconomic and other pressures are felt not only by young people but also by their parents and the wider society, this too shaping the conditions in which young people live and the beliefs, emotions and values they develop.

Reflecting on *iGen’s* arguments, we should distinguish the time trends actually revealed by the data from Twenge’s interpretation, including the role she attributes to the smartphone. I have suggested that even her own data demand a more complex explanation. What might this include? If Twenge is right that ‘the entire developmental trajectory, from childhood to adolescence to adulthood has slowed’ (p.41), one possibility is that wider demographic and accompanying economic trends – with today’s youth projected to live longer, work for longer, carry more debt, struggle to obtain a mortgage or build up a pension – encourage young people to pace themselves. What’s the rush, when you’re going to live at least decade longer than your parents and grandparents? Also important is the parenting they have received – with ‘parentials’ ramping up their expectations of their children even as they increasingly constrain and control them (think of the talk of helicopter parents, ‘tiger moms’, paranoid parents, concerted cultivators and other supposed parenting ills). Yet another possibility is economic pressures, especially as this is linked to demographic shifts, the changing labour market, and the rolling back of welfare provision. It is most likely, of course, that a combination of factors is, in some ways, often unevenly, reconfiguring the conditions of childhood and thereby both

explaining the longer term and more recent trends in children's wellbeing. In this wider context, we might conclude both that the smartphone is implicated (in ways that need to be better understood) and, also, that its much-heralded effects are unjustifiably exaggerated.

Twenge gets more speculative when she switches focus from the causes to the consequences of being a member of iGen. The book contains a lengthy account of recent US campus struggles over free speech, no-platforming, safe spaces, trigger warnings and so forth, all evidence she suggests of a 'snowflake' generation unable to bear emotional discomfort or challenge of any kind. Now she does hold parents responsible for overprotecting their children (though without, in turn, asking why parenting has also changed, considering neither their economic struggles nor the US culture of litigation nor the increasing institutionalized responsabilisation of individuals). Still, she captures something of today's concerns, albeit through rather extreme summaries ('In brief: money is in, and meaning is out'; p.167) or simplistic explanations little supported by available evidence ('Another likely influence on the desire for wealth is screen time'; p.169). But the lack of a wider frame makes it easy to blame young people for their own problems – Twenge judges them hypocritical, for instance, for wanting to help others yet giving less to charity than previous generations, and narrow-mindedly libertarian in their personal politics. These seem harsh judgements to make of 17-year-olds who, we have seen, have experienced a decline in their disposable income and a rise in personal debt, on the one hand and, on the other, considerable frustrations at the societal constraints on their voice and efficacy, including online.

Concerned that her arguments might lead the reader to blame young people for their own problems, as well they might, Twenge stresses that some iGen characteristics are positive (with less binge drinking, teenage pregnancy or physical fighting, for instance, than in previous generations, and more tolerant attitudes towards LGBT, gender equality and ethnic diversity). Others, too, have noted the steady improvement in indicators of youth wellbeing over recent decades. But this is surely less to do with the smartphone than with wider cultural, economic and policy developments. However, mental health indicators do indeed suggest a recent and concerning downturn, so it is important that youth researchers from multiple fields engage in careful efforts to explain this. Indeed, perhaps the value of a book such as *iGen* is that it provokes attention to and debate around our field, opening the door to further critical interrogation of the available data, consideration of alternative explanations, and wider deliberation over the big picture within which researchers and practitioners variously position our contributions. This must be set against the risk that, instead, such a book may legitimate the popular tendency to blame the technology and, by implication, the youth who use it.

After reading this book, I resolved to check out the original data sources further, for there is much of interest here, while staying grounded in the multidimensional realities of young people's lives, listening to the diversity of their voices, and recognising their relations not only with each other but also with other generations. Most important, I have resolved never to forget the huge constraints that result from growing up in a world not of one's own making. For if indeed iGen exists (and is likely to persist) as a coherent phenomenon, and if it is as individualistic, instrumental and miserable as she suggests, then older and more powerful generations surely have a case to answer. Let's hope the questions raised here foster more and better research about and with young people growing up in the digital age. Putting down the phone, in and of itself, is hardly going to solve young people's problems nor help them face the future.

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<sup>i</sup> Jones, L. M., Mitchell, K. J., & Finkelhor, D. (2012). Trends in youth internet victimization: findings from three youth internet safety surveys 2000-2010. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 50*(2), 179-186.

<sup>ii</sup> Livingstone, S., and Görzig, A. (2014) When adolescents receive sexual messages on the internet: Explaining experiences of risk and harm. *Computers in Human Behavior, 33*: 8-15.

<sup>iii</sup> Tromholt, M. (2016). The Facebook Experiment: Quitting Facebook Leads to Higher Levels of Well-Being. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior & Social Networking, 19*(11), 661-666.

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<sup>iv</sup> Sherman, L. E., Michikyan, M., & Greenfield, P. M. (2013). The effects of text, audio, video, and in-person communication on bonding between friends. *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace, 7*(2), article 3. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5817/CP2013-2-3>