

Rethinking Gen-Z: Illusions, expectations & reality

View



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AS new generations emerge, they introduce fresh trends and discard old ones. Each new generation has impacted the world in a unique way. Spanning from early adolescence to their late twenties, Generation Z comprises individuals born between 1997 and 2012. As of 2026, this cohort is entering the workforce, influencing politics and redefining social norms. Despite this growing influence, public discussion of Gen Z remains largely defined by stereotypes. Narratives oscillate between admiration and alarm, often obscuring the structural conditions shaping this generation's outlook. Several commonly held beliefs about Gen Z dominate contemporary discourse. First, Gen Z is frequently portrayed as unusually fragile. Younger cohorts do report higher levels of stress, anxiety and psychological distress. However, framing this as an inherent weakness overlooks the disruptions that have marked Gen Z's formative years. Economic volatility, pandemic-era uncertainty and prolonged educational and employment instability—particularly acute in many Global South countries—have normalized insecurity at an early age, making psychological strain less an anomaly than a predictable outcome.

A second narrative depicts Gen Z as politically disengaged or unserious. The evidence here is highly context-dependent. Across many societies, young people increasingly participate in politics through digital mobilization, issue-based campaigns and informal activism rather than traditional party structures. In settings where institutional trust is low and political access is uneven—as is common across much of the developing world—this shift reflects adaptation rather than apathy. Misjudgment arises when formal participation is treated as the sole indicator of civic engagement. The third claim suggests that Gen Z's

immersion in social media fuels unrealistic expectations of rapid success. While partially grounded in truth, this argument often misses the mechanism at work. Digital platforms curate a narrow spectrum of visible outcomes—wealth, beauty, travel and entrepreneurial success—compressing the perceived timeline of achievement. The illusion is not that success is effortless, but that it is immediate. This distortion weighs more heavily on Gen Z due to their lifelong exposure to algorithm-driven comparison. Gen Z's expectations consistently emphasize financial security, meaningful employment and mental health support. These are not excessive demands but reflections of lived reality. They point toward a holistic vision of work and life: adequate income, fair conditions and alignment between professional roles and personal values. Flexibility, once considered a perk, is now widely viewed as a necessity—an expectation accelerated by the pandemic-driven normalization of remote and hybrid work. Even where such flexibility remains inaccessible, particularly for informal and frontline workers, it still shapes perceptions of fairness and opportunity.

Globally, youth employment has recovered unevenly from pandemic disruptions, yet precarity remains widespread. In 2023, the International Labour Organization reported that 64.9 million young people aged 15–24 were unemployed worldwide, translating into a youth unemployment rate of 13 percent—the lowest in fifteen years, yet still structurally high. Mental health indicators are even more troubling. UNICEF estimates that over 13 percent of adolescents aged 10–19 live with a diagnosed mental disorder, meaning one in seven young people globally. The World Health Organization identifies suicide as the third leading cause of death among individuals aged 15–29, with nearly 73 percent of cases occurring in low- and middle-income countries.

National data reinforces this pattern. NHS Digital reported in 2023 that nearly one-quarter of 17–19-year-olds in England likely had a mental disorder. In the United States, a CDC survey found that 39.7 percent of high school students felt persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness. To understand Gen Z accurately, stereotypes must give way to a three-tiered framework of illusions, expectations and reality. Public and workplace narratives often interpret Gen Z outcomes as reflections of character or values. Yet research consistently shows that generational differences are marginal. Structural pressures—housing costs, labor market volatility, debt burdens and digital overexposure—are the

dominant drivers. Misdiagnosing the problem carries consequences: it legitimizes underinvestment in training, mental health services and job quality, thereby reinforcing the very outcomes used to justify neglect. Gen Z's calls for flexibility, income stability and psychological support should be understood as risk-management strategies in uncertain environments, not as entitlement. A substantial share of young adults live paycheck to paycheck, with minimal financial buffers.

Behaviors often labeled as problematic “choices” are better interpreted as adaptations. Frequent job changes and multiple income streams reflect rising living costs and limited expectations of long-term wage growth. Delayed milestones—home ownership, marriage and parenthood—are driven by financial insecurity and unstable employment rather than diminished commitment. A strong digital presence offers both opportunity and strain. While it expands access to learning, networks and careers, it also intensifies social comparison and competition for visibility. Notably, young people

“Generation Z is often mislabelled as fragile, but persistent economic uncertainty, institutional neglect and structural pressures better explain their anxieties, expectations and demands for stability, flexibility and meaningful engagement in society.”

themselves voice concern over excessive screen time, indicating that perpetual connectivity is structurally reinforced rather than freely chosen.

Generation Z is defined less by illusion than by realism forged under constraint. Economic and psychological data support their desire for stability, autonomy and purpose. The “reality gap” they experience is not merely emotional but systemic. Understanding Gen Z requires moving beyond caricature. What is dismissed as fragility is more accurately a response to persistent uncertainty. Rather than attempting to recalibrate Gen Z's expectations, policymakers, employers and educators must confront the structural conditions that produced them. Gen Z is shaping the future of societies and states. Recognizing their concerns, addressing their constraints and responding to their expectations is no longer optional. Failure to do so risks deepening social fragmentation and institutional erosion across both developed and developing worlds.

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