

# Millennials are

**Rising social media use has sparked a passionate debate among psychologists: are today's young people more "Generation Me", or "Generation We"?**

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**By Christian Jarrett**  
17 November 2017

At the next table in the cafe where I was working this morning, a young woman spent a whole hour talking excitedly to her older companion about herself, her hopes and aspirations for her job, her romantic relationship and her home. It was hard to avoid the impression that she thought herself the centre of the Universe, her dreams eminently fascinating and important.

Is this simply what young people or "millennials" (people born after 1980) are like these days? Fuelled by the endless opportunity for self-promotion and self-reflection on social media, combined with a wider culture that's arguably placed greater emphasis on the importance of self-esteem than learning, have young people's personalities changed from earlier generations to become more narcissistic and selfish?

Psychologists are divided. Some say the evidence that the young have become "Generation Me" is overwhelming, yet others counter just as strongly that this simply isn't true. Meanwhile, more encouraging evidence is emerging to show positive trends in how our personalities seem to be changing over time, similar to the way that intelligence has increased over the generations.



Are narcissists more likely to take selfies, or is selfie culture creating narcissists? (Credit: Getty Images)

The most vocal proponent of the view that young people today are more narcissistic and self-centred than in previous generations is psychologist Jean Twenge at San Diego State University, California, who has been studying the shift for more than 15 years.

Twenge believes that the rise in narcissism has its roots in cultural changes, especially the increased focus on individualism through the last few decades. For example, with parents, and society as a whole, today arguably placing greater value on young people's individual achievement over their civic duty.

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Another possible theory is that it's down to what's been dubbed the "self-esteem movement" – the idea that many of society's problems, from drug addiction to violence, can be traced to people having low self-esteem. Alas, countless studies have shown this simply isn't true; in fact, myth 33 in the book **50 Great Myths of Popular Psychology** is "Low self-esteem is a major cause of psychological problems". Nevertheless, thanks to this movement, especially through the 1980s and 1990s, efforts were made to protect young people from negative feedback, such as poor grades, for fear it may damage their self-esteem. At the same time, self-love and

feelings of being “special” were nurtured.



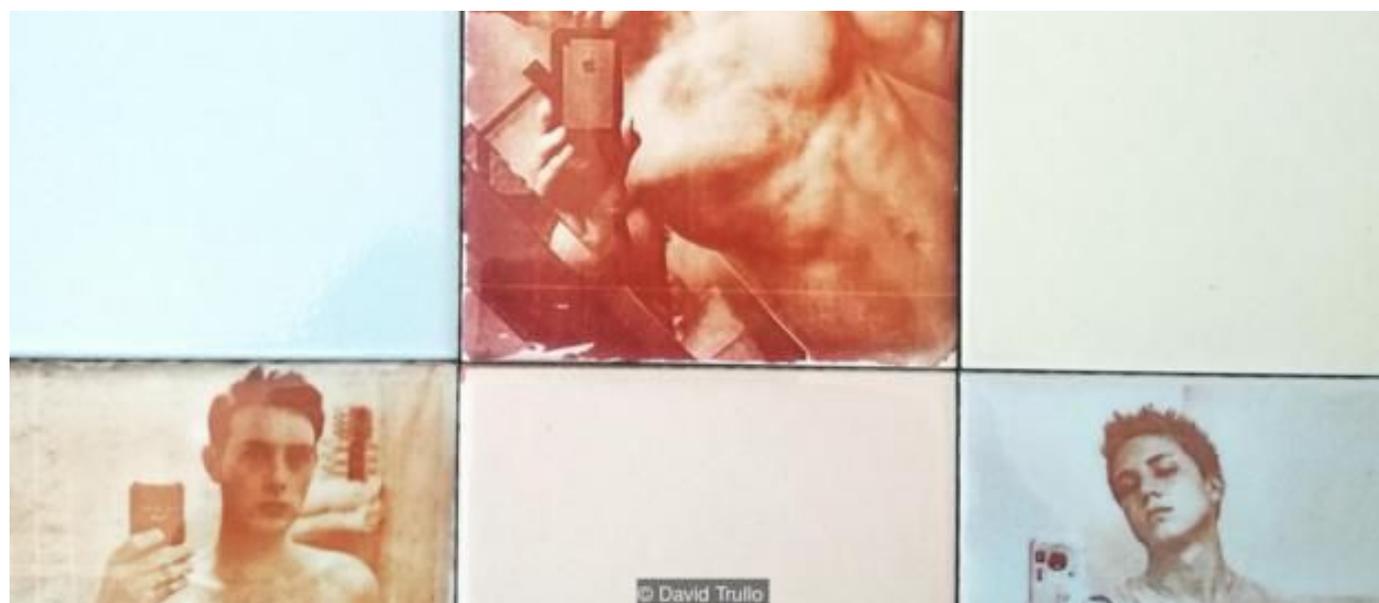
Assertiveness and self-esteem is encouraged from birth for many - does it breed narcissism though?  
(Credit: Getty Images)

Writing in New York magazine **recently**, Jesse Singal describes how the self-esteem movement especially took hold in American schools, which adopted exercises like Koosh ball: “A kid tosses the ball to another kid and compliments them — *I like your shirt*. Then they toss the ball to someone else and compliment them — *You’re good at soccer*. The good feelings travel with the Koosh ball across the room, back and forth and back and forth.”

Given these cultural trends, it certainly seems plausible that today’s youth might have learned to see themselves as gifted and crave admiration.

Much of Jean Twenge’s case is based on the “Narcissistic Personality Inventory”, a measure that asks people to choose between 40 pairs of self-descriptive items, one of which is narcissistic in tone (“I will be a success”) and the other not (“I am not too concerned about success”). Twenge’s studies show that scores have risen among US college students over time. For example, she and her colleagues **found** that, among a 2009 cohort, almost two-thirds of undergraduates were more narcissistic than the cohort average from 1982.





Artist David Trullo makes bathroom tiles with selfies of men taken in their toilets and uploaded to Instagram (Credit: David Trullo)

Summarising her position in **a 2013 review**, Twenge concluded: “At the moment, the evidence clearly supports the view that today’s young generation (born after 1980) is – at least compared to previous generations – more 'Generation Me' than 'Generation We'.”

Others disagree, among them Jeffrey Arnett at Clark University, Worcester. He **argues** that US college students are hardly representative of young people as a whole and he also doubts whether the Narcissistic Personality Inventory really measures narcissism at all. For instance, the supposedly narcissistic option on the inventory could sometimes actually be a measure of benign, or harmless confidence – he points to examples such as “I am assertive” versus “I wish I were more assertive”.

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*Millennials are an exceptionally generous generation that hold great promise for improving the world – Jeffrey Arnett*

Citing the fact that the young are more likely to volunteer and more tolerant of diversity, Arnett says his view is directly the opposite of Twenge’s: today’s emerging adults are not only less narcissistic, they’re “an exceptionally generous generation that holds great promise for improving the world”.

In fact, there’s mounting evidence that this might just be the case. Take a study which is about to be published in the journal **Psychological Science**. Personality expert Brent Roberts and his colleagues compared scores on the Narcissism Inventory among several cohorts of over 50,000 students who attended three American universities in three separate eras: the 1990s, 2000s and early 2010s. Unlike most of the earlier research, Roberts’ team didn’t just look at narcissism directly, but also other, related traits such as vanity, entitlement and leadership.



Young models in China take selfies during a fashion show (Credit: Getty Images)

They also accounted for the fact that students from different generations may interpret the statements they were tested with differently. However the researchers sliced the data, they found the same pattern: narcissism has been declining among young people since the 90s.

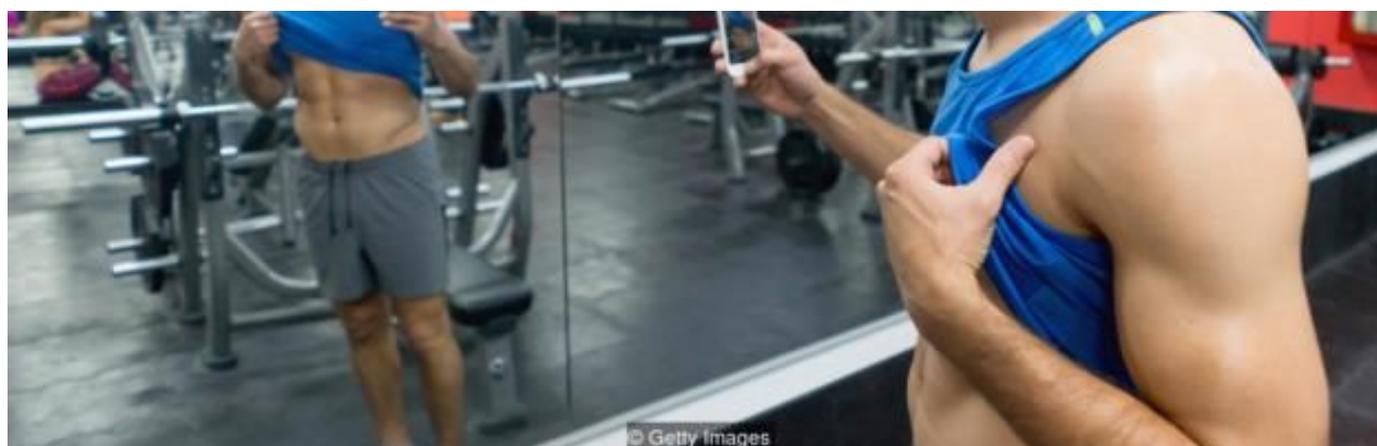
In a press release, Roberts also added that older generations may have forgotten their own youthful narcissism; it fades with age. “We have faulty memories,” he said, “so we don’t remember that we were rather self-centered when we were that age.”



*Narcissism has been declining among young people since the 90s, according to one study*

This also chimes with a new study just **published** in New Zealand, which found no evidence of rising entitlement, an aspect of narcissism, among millennials. Intriguingly, it also hinted that the higher sense of entitlement among younger people is a developmental effect, not a generational one. In other words, we generally feel less entitled as we get older.





Scholarly debates are raging against a backdrop of rising of social media use and selfies (Credit: Getty Images)

For their part, Twenge and her colleagues are convinced that narcissism is on the rise. Among other things, they've discovered that more recent pop songs contain more **words pertaining to self-focus** compared to 80s hits, and that more individualistic words and phrases, such as "I am special", have been on the rise in books since 1960. They've even speculated that this same individualistic culture could be responsible for **common names falling out of fashion with parents for their children**.

These scholarly debates are raging against a backdrop of rising of social media use, selfies and the habit of constantly updating everyone else with what you're doing, thinking and feeling. It's hard to resist the conclusion that this technological and cultural change may be fostering a rise in vanity and narcissism.

Twenge has certainly made the link. In a 2013 **article** for the New York Times, she called social media a "narcissism enabler" but conceded that there is little evidence to show that social media actually causes narcissism. Indeed, accumulating data suggest that yes, **narcissists are more likely to post selfies**, but that doesn't mean that posting selfies makes you a narcissist. In fact, there's evidence that the more "agreeable" you are – trusting, warm and friendly – the more active you're likely to be on **social media**.





The scientific name for daffodil is narcissus (Credit: Getty Images)

So much of the debate has been focused on narcissism, but what about the possibility that our characters are changing in positive ways? In fact, there is some good news.



*Is social media a  
“narcissism enabler”?*

Scientists have known for years that we’re getting cleverer, by around three IQ points per decade.

It’s called the Flynn Effect after James Flynn, an academic from New Zealand who first came up with the idea. Years of incremental improvements have added up to a substantial increase in intelligence test scores from the 1930s to the present day. Explanations range from a decline in infectious diseases to better schooling, but now scientists are wondering if a similar effect has been shaping personality traits, too.

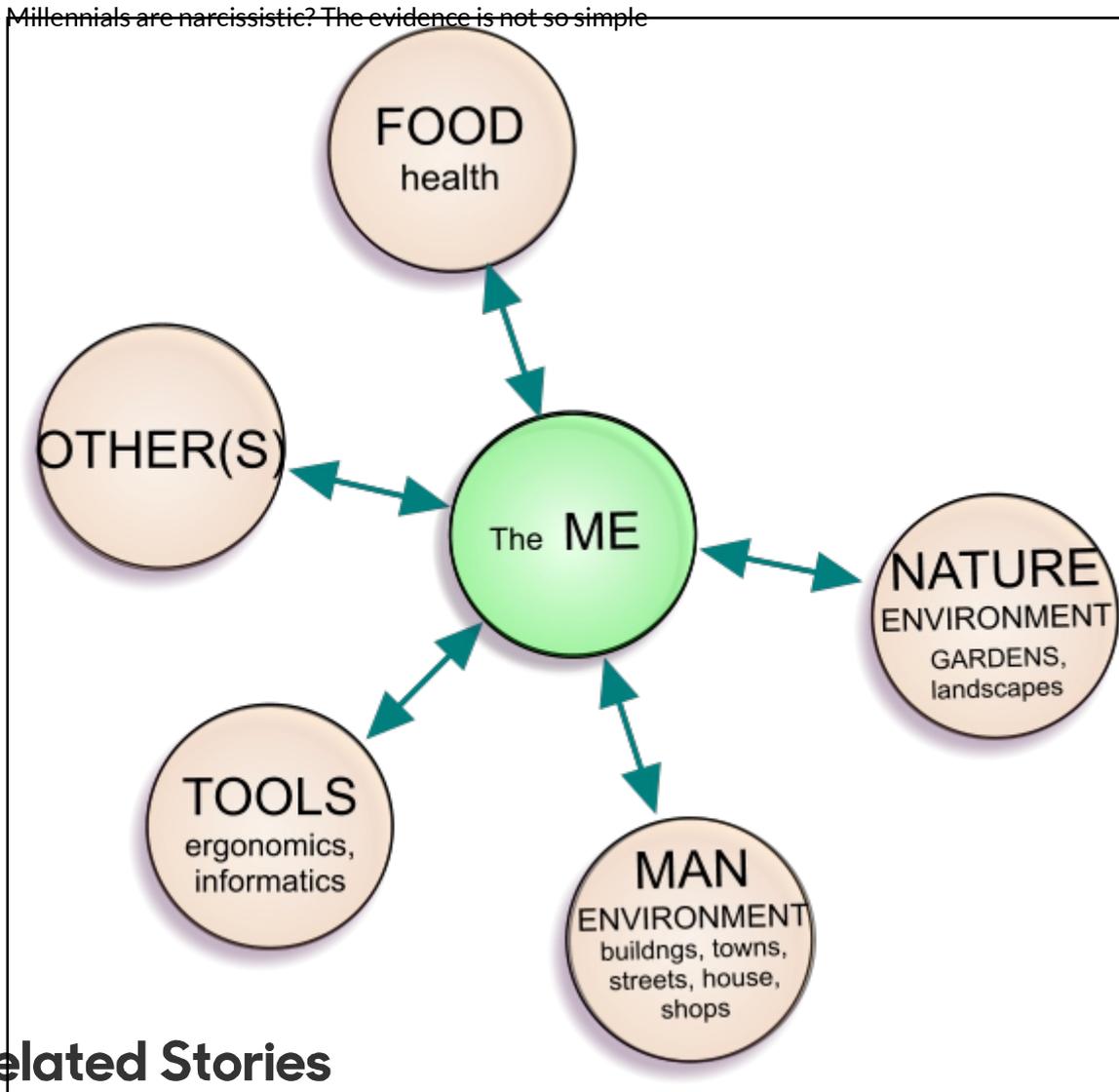
A Finnish study released this year suggested that this might well be the case. The researchers, led by Markus Jokela at the University of Helsinki, analysed personality data from nearly half a million military conscripts born between 1962 and 1976, collected when they were aged 18 or 19. Jokela and his colleagues reported that over time, successive cohorts are scoring higher in extroversion-related traits, like sociability and being more energetic, and conscientiousness-related traits, like dutifulness and achievement striving.

Intriguingly, they also found evidence of rising self-confidence. This may corroborate the research on rising narcissism depending on whether the confidence is seen as healthy or not, which the Finnish data can’t speak to.

It seems it may well be true that young people today are more self-assured than in previous generations. Whether you see that as a healthy sign of confidence or a worrying signal of narcissism may well say more about you than it does about them.

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***Dr Christian Jarrett*** edits the *British Psychological Society's Research Digest* blog. His next book, *Personology*, will be published in 2019.



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