

Blame parents for Generation Meh

By Teresa Mull, *The Australian*, 28 Oct 2017

Millennials grasp at anything, even the most superficial fluff such as selfies, to fill the void and give ourselves a sense of worth.

There exists a prevailing opinion that millennials are boring. As a member of the generation born between 1980 and 2000, I can attest that this view is for the most part true.

People — myself included — love to criticise millennials, to the point that the term millennial has become belittling (though if you prefer, there's also the less than flattering moniker Generation Me).

US conservative commentator Ben Shapiro recently declared in Breitbart that millennials are “the worst generation”.

A *Washington Post* article titled “Five really good reasons to hate millennials” observed: “The millennial hit-piece has practically become a literary genre unto itself.”

We get it: no one likes us. Yet in all the mud-slinging at our expense, I have yet to find anyone who has come clean about what (or who) made us this way.

I have a theory on this, and it would be a disservice to my youth not to put the blame where every younger generation believes it correctly belongs: on my parents.

A Business Insider article reported this year that millennials are stereotyped as “infamously narcissistic, entitled, lazy and arrogant”. Oh, and boring. Don't forget boring, which inherently comes with the self-centred territory, since no one is ever as interested in you as you are.

Youth is supposed to be the time of your life to have the time of your life — engaging in reckless behaviour you don't tell your mother about until years later, experimenting with phases and ideas that make grown-ups shake their heads. In sum, you do strange, stupid and daring things that will make good stories for your grandchildren and unleash your imagination while it's still good and wild.

It's also evolutionarily sound to get such things out of your system before starting a family. And it's the best way to learn. As CS Lewis said, experience is “that most brutal of teachers ... you learn, my God, do you learn”.

But millennials aren't doing these things, and we're not much for starting families either. We aren't very adventuresome, particularly quirky, exciting or excitable. Research shows we do far less drinking and fewer drugs than previous generations, and we aren't having as much sex. Either that or we've finally figured out how to lie to pollsters.

Giving millennials the benefit of the doubt, it's great that we're not harming our bodies and souls with substances and immoral behaviour. But if we're not partying, sowing our wild oats, being angsty and rebellious, and learning valuable lessons from our own dumb mistakes, what are we doing?

A barman in Leeds, England, fumed to *The Economist* recently: “Kids these days just want to live in their f..king own little worlds in their bedrooms watching Netflix and becoming obese.”

In an article speculating about why millennials are disillusioned with sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll, Vice noted: "Smartphones have increased ... 'isolated socialising', which leads to less drinking and drug taking."

So instead of meeting up, making bad decisions and having fun together, millennials are busy obsessively trying to impress others with their pseudo-enviable lives through filtered and Photoshopped images on social media. Life then becomes a never-ending search for validation by one's peers — or virtual peers, anyway.

How did we turn out so inadequately edgy and so consumed by the need for validation? It totes isn't all our fault.

Millennials were raised by baby boomers. Helicopter parenting came into vogue while we were kids. Small families, too, became the norm, and there was a dearth of siblings to keep the others from thinking too much of themselves. While we were smothered with attention and oversight, our every move uncomfortably monitored, we were neither sufficiently disciplined nor held to enough of a standard.

We were raised in a politically correct culture that, to quote Mel Brooks, has been "the death of comedy". Our parents and educators worshipped at the altar of self-esteem and offered us as child sacrifices. With such little fun to be had and nothing to do but take ourselves seriously, we failed to develop an interesting identity — or any identity, really — and now we can't do much but think of our own images and stage freak-outs over the banal.

Our parents created Generation Me by constantly telling us how great we were. Everyone was a winner. Everyone got a trophy. Nothing — save competition — was ever off limits. Saving sex for marriage, giving your child a normal name, staying married and other traditional principles had been completely unwound from the pillar that holds a Christian society together by the time millennials came along.

It's no wonder we're "narcissistic, entitled, lazy and arrogant". But why are we so piteously trite on top of it all?

The traditional values of faith, family and freedom that have been the basis of American and indeed Western culture since its founding were replaced for millennials by relativism, the self and fascism.

The rebellious American spirit that prompted our patriots to overthrow the British, caused James Dean to rebel, well, without a cause, and drove Jack Kerouac across the country to produce his frenzied accounts of the beatnik generation was extinguished in millennials - because our curiosity about anything but ourselves failed to be nurtured. We were raised with, and sometimes by, a big and ever-growing government. With more government comes more regulation, and regulation makes everything regular, including people.

Millennials don't know how to rebel but, in our defence, we never really had anything to rebel against because the generation that invented the free love movement didn't have "no" in its vocabulary. Today, we're too busy being scandalised by alleged cases of bigotry — asking Lena Dunham to keep her clothes on is now a borderline hate crime known as fat shaming — to rebel and produce anything interesting.

What happened to defying authority as a youthful rite of passage? Rules were made to be broken but millennials make it their goal to impose more rules and make sure everyone fits in

as LGBTQI or P, whereas the “cool kids” were historically the ones who didn’t want to fit in and didn’t care what others thought — let alone beg the government for a label.

The restless struggle with the idea of human existence expressed in the greatest works of Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Edward Abbey, Tom Wolfe and the like isn’t even vaguely alluded to by today’s artists. Millennials have managed to take the attitude towards life that prompted Hunter S. Thompson’s youthful, maniacal consumption of American culture (and a whole lot else) and snuff it into a whiny little expression that isn’t even really a word so much as the sound a baby would make: meh.

There’s no arguing with meh because you can’t debate feelings. The 1960s radicals may have come to the wrong conclusions, but at least they were asking the right questions. With Generation Me, or Meh, there is no longer argument; we simply exchange emotional reactions summed up by platitudes: “You’re sexist!” “You’re racist!” Thus, Western youth have replaced beliefs and arguments with attitudes, and instead of philosophers we need psychologists. (Millennials are also reportedly facing a mental health crisis.)

When nothing is right, nothing is wrong; nor is anything good or bad. Nihilism, for one thing, is incredibly boring, but a lack of purpose and meaning in life also leads to loneliness, emptiness and depression. We then grasp at anything, even the most superficial fluff such as selfies, to fill the void and give ourselves a sense of worth.

Millennials were raised to seek and receive praise. It’s all we know, and we aren’t growing out of it. We’re afraid to lose our sense of approval and will do whatever it takes to fit it.

We aren’t eccentric. We’re lacking the spark that made other generations shake things up, be provocative and reinvent things in a way that helped make the world a better, or at least more interesting, place. We’re a homogenous group of youngsters all desperately claiming to “be yourself” in the exact same way. Of course, there’s nothing wrong with a tight-knit community all working towards a greater good, but what is it that millennials are working towards exactly?

Groupthink and idea shaming, that’s what. And what does oppression of thought produce? Art? Music? Comedy? No. More likely a bovine herd and an inevitable pile of dung.

A final word to my fellow millennials-who-wish-we-weren’t and you other-generations-who-hate-millennials: take comfort in the fact the nonsense we produce is destined to be lost forever in the intangible world of cyberspace, and the children we produce will, with any luck, rebel against their parents.

This essay originally appeared in The American Conservative online journal. Teresa Mull is a writer based in Teton Valley, Idaho.