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## TRAPPED IN A CHRONICALLY ONLINE WORLD: MILLENIGENZ, AND SOCIAL MEDIA

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## Trapped in a Chronically Online World: MillenigenZ, and Social Media

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Using a mixed methods approach, this paper explores MillenigenZ's relationship with social media and its potential for creating an activist and productive third space. The sample highlights the views of Latino/a/e, Asian American, and immigrant members of this cohort. Combining content and textual analysis, surveys, and interviews with MillenigenZ, I find that in contrast to stereotypes, they crave in-person interaction and prefer to discuss contentious issues "in the real." While they distrust official news sources, interpersonal relationships and alternate viewpoints are appreciated and valued. It remains to be seen if online spaces can create impactful third spaces that result in meaningful actions and policies. Many participants wanted to be engaged active members of their community and craved meaningful opportunities, which they found lacking. Mobilizing this group is essential for future elections and activism.

*"I purposefully avoid things like that. That's why I avoid politics. It's not that I... it's not that I'm not interested in things like that... But it's just sort of like when people are to the point where they're posting on their social media about it and feel so strongly about something that if I disagree with them, I feel like there's not anything that I can really do to open their mind or change... Or make them at least look at it from a different perspective. Uhm I think that that's more of like an in-person conversation, so I just avoid it through social media." Marta, a Latina recent college graduate*

I began this project with a colleague after an incredibly contentious national U.S. election in 2016. The project evolved and continued through a global pandemic, an ongoing series of highly visible incidents involving the murders of black people by agents of the state and ensuing nationwide protests, a burgeoning labor movement, and an attempt to contest a national election. As I engaged with news media, I did not see our thoughtful and engaged students reflected in accounts that negatively stereotyped and homogenized. As the United States heads toward another contentious election, I hope I can contribute to understandings of the political realities of engaged MillenigenZ, meaning younger Millennials and older GenZ, which is roughly people born in the 1990s. The genesis of social media as a critical cultural phenomenon, marks their

coming of age. Relying on existing generational tropes, devoid of nuanced historical representations, too often humor and stereotypes drive discussion. I wanted to allow this generation to speak for themselves and to situate their observations within this significant cultural shift. Moreover, the diversity represented on our campus provided an opportunity to amplify the voices of Latino/a/e<sup>1</sup>, Asian Americans, immigrants, and second-generation Americans. While some note the potential for social media to mobilize marginalized groups, others are more skeptical. Using a mixed methods approach, I explored MillenigenZs' experiences with social media.

### **Social Media and Media Logic**

Social media is and must be understood as media. While media may be a critical means of communication, the fundamental “rules of the game” center on producing content that draws audiences for advertisers. While social media may be used in alternative and resistant ways, it's fundamentally a corporatized environment in which the product being sold is the audience to advertisers (Fuchs, 2021). Scholars note how this logic infuses other areas of culture, which rely on media profits, resulting in media logic becoming hegemonic or “common-sense.” As a result, advertising has significant cultural impacts (Wharton, 2013). Sut Jhally's (1984) “*Sport Media Complex*” highlights how the logic of media has become central to sports as reliance on media profits contingent on advertising has come to dominate decisions. Similar observations have been made that, increasingly, news coverage of politics is infused with the logic of advertising (Strömbäck, 2008). Scholars suggest this is problematic as advertising has tended to limit and bias news and information (Altheide & Snow, 1988, 1979; Croteau & Hoynes, 2003), have a negative impact on democracy by limiting and shaping public discourse (Metykova, 2013), and to recuperate critical activism (Chan et al,

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<sup>1</sup>I have chosen to use the terms Latino, Latina and Latine, to refer to people whose ancestors experienced the colonization of Mexico, South and Central America, and the Islands of the Caribbean. I use Latino for people who identify as male, Latina for female, Latine for nonbinary, and as the plural. As suggested by Salinas (2020), existing terms are all problematic, for a variety of reasons, as all reflect a history of colonization. While a number of terms exist, Hispanic, Latinx, Latin@, I chose Latine for a number of reasons. First, it was initiated by the LBGQTQA community to be an inclusive term. While some associate Latine with nonbinary communities, it can be used to apply to anyone as a gender-neutral term. Second, it's easily pronounceable in English and Spanish (Salinas & Lozano, 2022). Third, the less vitriol seemed to be directed at it than at Latinx. Fourth, it seemed prudent to pick one, rather than use them all.

forthcoming). This is significant as “media logic,” how media “presents and transmits” content, has played an increasingly significant role in electoral politics, and the mediatization of politics refers to the growing influence of media on political processes, agendas, and participants (Altheide & Snow, 1991, 1988, 1979; Ampuja, 2014; Esser & Strömbäck, 2014; Kriesi et al, 2013; Strömbäck, 2008). The effective deployment of mass media has been credited as a factor in key elections, including Barack Obama (Miller, 2015), Donald Trump (Morris & Morris, 2022), John F. Kennedy (Druckman, 2003), and Brexit (Fuchs, 2021). The amalgamation of political and media logic results in media having a significant influence on which issues emerge as central to campaigns (agenda setting) and the framing of these issues (Croteau & Hoynes, 2003; Iyengar, 2016; Iyengar et al., 1982; Strömbäck, 2008). While in traditional media, content to lure viewers to be sold to advertisers needs to also be produced, social media reduces costs to providers by having the audience create and curate much of the content. Social media creates a potentially always available audience for advertisers, with concomitant data on the audience, making it possible to tailor advertising. This has problematic implications for the flow of information as generating an audience becomes central to what types of information are widely transmitted (Metykova, 2013). Social media, regardless of our feelings about it or our degree of engagement, is having a profound impact on the political landscape (Fuchs, 2021; Metykova, 2013).

### **Media, Politics, and Confirmation Bias**

Relationships between social and political views and mass media have long been a source of study for social scientists. Agenda setting refers to the correspondence between corporate media’s emphasis on specific issues, and the importance afforded by the public (Edelman, 1988; Fiske, 1996; McCombs, 2004; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Strömbäck & Kioussis, 2010). Framing shapes public understanding of key issues and tends to use schemas with which audiences are already familiar (Iyengar, 2016; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). Priming highlights how media focus on specific issues impacts voter response to electoral candidates (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Iyengar et al., 1982). Agenda setting, framing, and priming models highlight the role of media in shaping discourse. For example, media exerts an influence over the priorities people give to public issues and what counts as news (Gilliam & Iyengar, 2000; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Minich,

1998) and plays a role in shaping opinions (Baudrillard & Maclean, 1985). Increasingly, social media is playing a significant role by linking politics, events, and the performance of identity (Highfield, 2016; Klein, 2023).

Social media allows for targeted narrowcasting, making it incredibly polarizing. People tend to believe information that validates existing beliefs, and discount information that contradicts. Confirmation bias refers to the tendency to attend to and credit information that is consistent with one's pre-existing beliefs and to ignore or disbelieve information inconsistent with one's beliefs regardless of empirical evidence. Confirmation bias has been documented in a wide variety of contexts (for a review, see Nickerson, 1998) and explicitly in politics and social media (Acks, 2019; Del Vicario et al., 2017). Examining the impact of political attitudes on behavior during internet searches, Knobloch-Westerwick et al. (2015) documented a preference for online articles consistent with participants' opinions and noted that exposure to attitude-consistent content reinforced dogmas. Similarly, Frost et al. (2015) found that participants were more likely to recall blog posts about a political issue (gun control) when these posts were consistent with pre-existing beliefs on the topic. Algorithmic biases privilege increased length of viewership, creating an inherent bias in what users are offered. MillenigenZ are the folks who grew up alongside social media.

### **MillenigenZ – Coming of Age with Social Media**

MilleniGenZ represent the youngest of the Millennials (born 1981-1995) and the oldest members of GenZ (born 1996-2010) roughly those born in the 1990s. With MySpace launching in 2003, and Facebook being founded in 2003, expanding in 2005, to being publicly traded in 2012, we can see that MillenigenZ grew up alongside the birth and development of social media. YouTube (launched in 2003) and Twitter (launched in 2006). Thus, by their tween years or early teens, multiple platforms were vying for their participation. Instagram (launched in 2010), Snapchat (launched in 2011), and TikTok (launched in 2016) are taking an increasing part of the market. More recently, TikTok reported over a billion monthly users worldwide and 50 million active U.S. users daily, and it is increasingly popular with younger users (Pew Research Center, 2021; 2022). Asking whether one uses social media is no longer a relevant question, as it has saturated Western culture and is a common means of

communication. Even those who are not active users are exposed to trends, viral videos, memes, and events, as these are covered in news programs and pervade popular culture. Younger users cannot imagine a world without it, and a recent study found it much easier to find an American high school athlete with an NCAA Division 1<sup>2</sup> college scholarship offer than one who does not engage with social media (Wachs, 2022).

MilleniGenZs occupy a liminal space between their anachronistic elders and saturated youth. Commercial media has long been critiqued for valuing the size of audiences more than the impact of messaging on well-being (Demarest & Alien, 2000; Duncan, 1994; Grogan, 1998). With social media increasingly normalized as “media,” studies on social and emotional impacts are revealing problematic mental and physical health outcomes. Negative impacts on self-esteem and body image, along with anxiety (Baltaci, 2019; Brailovskaia & Margraf, 2018; Shensa et al., 2018), social anxiety (Baltaci, 2019), depression (Brailovskaia & Margraf, 2018; Shensa et al., 2018), stress (Brailovskaia & Margraf, 2018), decreased interest in in-person interaction (Jena & Mohanty, 2015), and “fear of missing out” (FOMO) (Przybylski et al., 2013), are highlighted as correlated to social media usage. It remains unclear as to whether social media usage causes negative mental health states or whether those struggling with challenges turn to social media (Shensa et al. 2018) regardless, social media appears to, at the very least, amplify negative mental health outcomes. Moreover, given the ubiquity of younger users, it is hardly surprising that younger adults are more susceptible to detrimental mental health impacts than older adults (Sharifian et al., 2021). In addition to deleterious mental health impacts, social media appears to have a negative impact on attention spans. Social media is designed to interrupt our deep focus with a barrage of attention-getting strategies that keep us online and open to marketing, with measurable negative impacts on focus (Hari, 2022).

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<sup>2</sup> Division 1 (D1) college athletics refers to college sports programs that are members of the US NCAA Division 1 (National Collegiate Athletic Association). Division 1 is the top or highest level of college sports competition possible in the United States. NCAA Division 1 includes some of the largest and most well-known universities and top athletic programs.

## **Chronically Online**

Increasingly, we are what is referred to as “permanently online,” meaning that through devices, we are perpetually connected rather than connecting at specific times or for specific purposes (Herbert & Fisher-Høyrem, 2022; Quinn & Oldmeadow, 2013; Vorderer & Kohring, 2013; Vorderer et al., 2016). For younger people, the phone is the preferred device for accessing social media (Dennen & Rutledge, 2018). Certainly, our participants reported always checking in through their phones, contributing to a “chronically online” status. A reduction in communal “third spaces,” exacerbated by the global COVID-19 pandemic, has made social media into a proxy for potential in-person experiences, enhancing the impact of social media.

Almost 90% of Americans use the internet (Pew Research Center, 2022), and over 80% engage with social media. Over 80% of adults use social media sites like YouTube and Facebook, while users under 30 prefer Instagram and TikTok (Pew Research Center, 2021). There are generational divides in the use of social media and in platform preference. While only 4% of those over 65 are using TikTok, 48% of those 18-29 are, while 22% of those in their 30s and 40s, and 14% of those 50-64, use it. By contrast, Facebook is used by half of those over 65, 70% of those 18-29, 77% of those in their 30s and 40s, and 73% of those 50 to 64 years of age (Pew Research Center, 2022). While race does not impact whether one engages with social media, the content with which one engages, what one shares, or avoids, does vary by race. In terms of posting and engaging with content, Black social media users are more likely to see and post articles about race and race relations than Latino/a/e users, who are more likely than white users (Anderson, 2016). In terms of information, previous studies found that minoritized groups are more likely to engage with social networks and interpersonal channels, especially in times of crisis (Day et al, 2019; Spence et al., 2007a; Spence et al., 2007b; Spence & Lachlan, 2016). Distrust of government and official sources can also impact minoritized and immigrant groups' perceptions of official sources (Cordasco et al., 2007; Crouse Quinn, 2008; Day et al., 2019; Samilton, 2017). Moreover, immigrant Asian communities may be forced to rely more on social media due to a shortage of the availability of heritage language sources (Chong et al, 2022).

### **Social Media as a Third Space**

Some highlight the ways that social media is becoming a “third space.” Third, spaces are not home, not work, spaces where we build relationships and community, share and develop ideas, and express ourselves (Capener, 2020; Davis, 2010; Lefebvre, 2016; Oldenburg, 1991). Scholars have noted that literal space may not be necessary and highlight the potential for online third spaces (Brock, 2009; Chong et al., 2022; Graham et al., 2015). What matters is that in third spaces, our identities are expressed through our experienced affinities.

Postmodern theorists develop the concept of third space to highlight moving through space with a critical awareness of relations of power, an awareness of subjectivity, the experience of the self as an object, and historic relations that shape spaces and subjects (Soja, 1996). Post-colonial studies highlight third spaces as one in which the cultural hybridity engendered by diasporic experiences can become part of one’s constructed identity (Bhabha, 2004; Davis, 2010). The space exists as a place where home cultures and new cultures blend. It is part of the creation of identity but does not need to exist as a literal space. Research has demonstrated that racial identity can be developed within third spaces (Salas Pujols, 2022). Some scholars highlight how online third spaces can create a place for minoritized groups to highlight shared experiences and impacts of ongoing social issues (Brock, 2009; Chong et al., 2022; Graham et al., 2015). Overall, is this the experiences of our participants? This project strove to gather meaningful mixed methods data to explore social media use, attitudes, and practices of MilleniGenZs, and to highlight social media usage by Latino/a/e, Asian American, first- and second-generation users.

### **Methods**

The research was primarily conducted at a large public university in Southern California. This university is both a Hispanic-Service Institution (HSI) and an Asian, Native American and Pacific Islander, and Indigenous Serving Institution (ANAPISI). The first phase of the project began with content and textual analysis and focus groups. This was followed by two surveys, and finally in-depth interviews were conducted. At each stage, the campus Institutional Research Board (IRB) granted approval, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. The research began in the 2016-



2017 academic year by obtaining permission from a group of students to follow their Instagram accounts. Students were recruited across campus through a convenience sample. Students were compensated with gift cards and pizza for participating. Initially, 348 students consented, but since only 96 were active on social media, their accounts were the initial focus. One can assume that in many cases, students also had Finstas, accounts shared with a limited number that includes content for a select audience, to which I lacked access. In addition, 71 filled out an extended survey featuring demographic and attitudinal questions. My research team followed their accounts for the academic year. Based on their posts, I created a systematic coding scheme, and conducted a typical content and textual analysis involving systematic, quantitative analysis of content, usually texts, images, or other symbolic matter (Cooky et al., 2010; Krippendorff, 2004; Wachs et al., 2012). As I did this, the team hosted 7 focus groups with three to eight students participating in each group. As I attempted to make sense of initial data, what struck me was the lack of diversity of content. Social media is what Goffman (1959) terms a *front stage* performance of identity foregrounding aspects of culturally valued roles and activities. It's curated filtered content. One tells one's best stories, shares recent triumphs or relatable events, and avoids deeply troubling or perplexing conundrums. One performs the role of engaged appropriate citizen rather than displaying the messy realities of our complicated existence. People know this and post accordingly, given their social roles (Smith & Sanderson, 2015). Even when our image is messy, the display is not - a sweaty post-workout shot, a proud gardener, and so forth. The display is language, and social media pageantry highlights cultural competency in normatively valued roles. Our students are a relatively diverse group. A range of ethnicities, class statuses, ages, family backgrounds, and personal experiences make our classrooms fascinating and compelling. That did not come through at all in social media. The uniformity of presentation shifted our direction. We had expected a space of originality and expression, but instead, a fairly homogenous landscape of front-stage performances emerged.

Based on initial research, I worked with colleagues to develop a survey, first distributed in the Winter and Spring of 2018 (n=936). The survey was modified, updated, and redistributed during the Spring and Summer of 2020 (n=745). Both

surveys were convenience samples distributed on campus. However, students across a range of colleges and majors were sought. Hard copies of the surveys were distributed, and student assistants input the data into an SPSS database. All data input was double-checked for accuracy. Given our location, a few things stand out about the data. Almost 45% of both samples identified as Latino/a/e participants, and about 20% of both samples selected Asian American. In addition, we have a high proportion of first- and second-generation respondents. Over 40% of both samples had at least one parent born outside the United States, and 13% in the second survey were immigrants. Almost 20% of our Asian American participants reported having immigrated, as did a quarter of our Latino/a/e participants, while over 70% of our Black respondents and 80% of our white respondents reported being third-generation Americans, over 90% of our Asian American respondents are children of immigrants or immigrants themselves. While almost 60% of our Latino/a/e respondents reported being born in the United States, only about a quarter are third-generation Americans. Our mixed-race participants reflected an almost negligible number of immigrants, with two-thirds being third-generation Americans. Hence, the salience of “children of immigrants experience” is important to consider. Interviewees recounted feeling a sense of not fully belonging to either culture, even if born in the United States. Daniel poignantly observed, “*We were those who were stuck between not being fully American because we were children of Mexican immigrants, but also we’re not Mexican.*” Table 1 summarizes the racial breakdown of each survey.

**Table 1:** *Overview of Ethnic Identity of Participants*

	Latino/a/e	Asian American	Black	White	Other	Multi-ethnic
Survey1	44.6%	21.7%	4.1%	13.0%	1.8%	14.8%
Survey2	43.1%	18.7%	2.0%	14.8%	3.2%	17.4%

Finally, during the Spring and Summer of 2020, 14 in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted, which covered a range of topics, including upbringing, language, social media use, and social and political opinions. Interviews were transcribed and open-coded (Corbin & Strauss, 2022). Key themes that emerged

highlighted high rates of usage, concern about *usage, social media as a source of information, and overall distrust of news media*. This paper uses all of the data collected to make sense of MillenigenZ social media use.

### **Analysis – Social Media Usage – What Are They Doing and Is it Too Much?**

In terms of usage, the MillenigenZ in our sample engage with social media at similar rates to national averages. Our participants reported the highest usage rates for Instagram, with Facebook being second and TikTok up and coming. Consistent with national studies (Pew Research Center, 2021, 2022), close to 90% used Instagram, and over 80% used it daily. Social media is increasingly the gateway to content, or how people interact online. Our participants also noted the importance of social media platforms as messenger services, especially for connecting with family in other countries. Valeria, a current college student and an immigrant from Mexico, detailed that she first began using social media to connect with family, and as her family's usage evolved and changed, so did hers, with family chats starting with Facebook Messenger, moving to Snapchat, and now taking place on WhatsApp.

To some degree, our participants were indeed chronically online. Consistent with national data, our participants used Instagram at a rate approaching 90%, with daily usage hovering at just over three-quarters of our participants (both surveys). Instagram was the platform of the MillenigenZ. Perceiving Facebook for interacting with "older" family members, Instagram had the highest daily usage among our participants. Participants shared that they fulfilled familial obligations on Facebook while enjoying their time on Instagram. Many report Finstas (second accounts only shared with select friends), in addition to their primary Instagram account, which allowed them to highlight

aspects of identity that might result in pushback from family. YouTube and Snapchat had significant usage, with TikTok use increasing. We contend that differences in platform preference reflect similarities in generational cultural expression rather than substantive platform content differences, as platforms share corporate ownership and systemic goals. Indeed, generational “divides” are a source of content that is humorous, hostile, and sometimes accurate. As with anything that generates viewers too quickly, the humor becomes ubiquitous and cliché.

Being chronically online has negative impacts on stress levels and mental health (Klein Murdock, 2013; Vorderer et al., 2016). Unlike teen users, who see the social benefits as outweighing the negatives (Anderson et al., 2022), MillenigenZ users reported being concerned about their usage. While some blame technology more generally, scholars noted that high levels of usage and addiction are not about the phone but are linked to intentionally enticing features of social media platforms (Gezgin & Mihci, 2020; Hari, 2022). Similarly, participants in this study used social media, but they were not feeling great about how much they were doing it. Table 2 highlights that only one-third perceived that their usage was at the “right amount,” less than 5% report insufficient usage, while almost 60% report using it “too much” or “far too much.” Less than 2% have never used social media.

**Table 2:** *Self-Perception of Social Media Usage*

Social Media Usage (Survey 2)- I use Social Media...	
Far Too Much	16.6%
Too Much	42.8%
The right amount	33.4%
Not Using It enough	4.8%
Never Use Social Media	1.6%

Consistent with previous studies, participants recognized potential negative behavioral and mental health outcomes to social media usage (Vorderer et al., 2016).

Daniel, who identifies as Latino and is currently applying to graduate school, reflected,

*I mean it's hard to... I mean I have a hard time kind of unplugging so I can.. trying to stay up to date with everything and what do you seek out with on social media for like let's say on Instagram or, you know, Twitter, but I guess Instagram, because it seems like Instagram is the one that I use the most.*

Gabriel, a second-generation college graduate who identifies as Latino observes,

*For me, I think social media is a vacuum that's just going to suck you in and I've been drawn to it so many times where I just sitting there on my phone and hours go by before I notice I literally been watching these random videos for 3, 4 hours when I could've been doing something productive.*

Daniel and Gabriel note that they spend more time than they would like on social media, and that it is challenging to self-limit. Several of our interviewees, like Anika, an immigrant from Southeast Asia of European descent who recently graduated from college, attempted to curtail their usage. Anika explained that she imposes her own restrictions, using the timers on her phone, but she also admitted she sometimes broke her own rules. Despite attempts to limit usage, most recognized that they were using social media, probably more than they should, and despite mild protestations, probably would continue to do so.

### **What Are MillenigenZ Doing Online?**

Like previous studies on college students, our participants reported that devices provided a distraction from the mundanity of waiting and were frequently used to “kill time” (Voderer et al., 2016). When asked about when they use social media, most talked about waiting in line, having a break between activities, or waiting for events to begin. However, participants also talked about temptation, alerts, and being on social media for longer than they would like. They highlighted a tendency to share privately but view publicly. With the exception of group chats, participants behaved more like an audience than producers of content. While happy to share accomplishments among friends and family, most reported mostly viewing rather than creating content for wider consumption. Ji-An, a second-generation Asian American recent college graduate, enjoyed social media, and noted, “*Oh, I watch other people. I like sometimes make*

*TikToks as a joke, but I would never post them like publicly.*” Even when she makes content, Ji-An prefers to share only within a select group.

Participants reported primarily using social media to connect with people and to stay up to date on popular culture. This is consistent with existing studies, that younger people are less interested in discussing politics or religion online, preferring to highlight accomplishments and connect with friends and family (Anderson et al., 2022). Everyone reported using social media to connect with friends and family online, and almost two-thirds of participants were engaging with celebrity culture online. This means following celebrities, athletes, artists, or other types of bloggers. When we asked participants about their engagement with celebrity culture, participants reported following their favorite musicians, actors, fitness influencers, and athletes. Unlike in-person third spaces, social media has always inherently existed within media market logic. Following influencers, celebrities, and social media personalities illuminates the ways social media creates an aura of intimacy with digital identities. Effective marketing takes place through the relationships ordinary people form with celebrities and influences. Parasocial marketing is based on the idea of using relationships with media figures as the basis for marketing goods, services, and experiences. Our participants spoke about keeping up with high school friends and favored celebrities and popular culture without distinction. Parasocial relationships occur when people who engage with celebrities online or through media come to view themselves as having a relationship (Kim & Lopez Sintas, 2021). This is not a new idea. Thorstein Veblen (2001, originally published 1899) highlighted the role of celebrities and media figures as *heroes of consumption*, whose display validates and idealizes excessive expenditure. Some mentioned cultural influencers who monetize fame, such as the Kardashians. One of the participants, Valeria, a young Latina who had immigrated from Mexico as a tween and is currently a student, shared that she found the lifestyle of influencers to be “aspirational.” She went on to say, “So I think it’s interesting like to see their lifestyle and like the, the things they have and like, all of that’s just interesting to me.” While the lifestyles of influencers or celebrities may seem aspirational, social media is a space in which users are made instantaneously aware of what peers possess and, therefore, what they may lack (Klontz, 2017). Previous research demonstrates negative self-perceptions are

enhanced through comparison to others on social media, though differently based on gender identity (Haferkamp & Kramer, 2011).

### **Social Media and FOMO**

It's not simply that users keep up with friends, families, and fads, increasingly, people engaging with social media feel a need to keep up and exhibit a “fear of missing out” or FOMO. FOMO is a pervasive apprehension that others might be having rewarding experiences from which one is excluded or absent (Abel et al., 2016; Kim et al., 2020), and is linked to feelings of inadequacy (Kim et al., 2020). Social media usage has been positively correlated with FOMO (Abel et al., 2016; Buff & Burr, 2018; Hutchinson, 2019). Some evidence suggests the correlation between FOMO and social media usage is stronger for younger people (Abel et al., 2016; Buff & Burr, 2018). Social media exists as a source of advertising revenue, hence generating desire for material goods and purchasable experiences, and insecurities about lacking these, is ideal. Consumer culture thrives on creating and then solving insecurities centered around traditional identity categories, such as gender (Dworkin & Wachs, 2009). It's hardly surprising that there is a connection between social media, FOMO, and consumer behavior (Abel et al., 2016; Buff and Burr, 2018). Abel et al. (2016) described negative impacts of FOMO on a person's state anxiety and immediate decision-making capabilities. FOMO could be activated for altruistic purposes (i.e., ice bucket challenge) (Abel et al., 2016), however, market systems tend to highlight purchasable items and experiences. FOMO is correlated with device usage (Abel et al., 2016) and social media usage (Buff & Burr, 2018). One researcher observed that “social media is like kerosene on FOMO's fire” (Miller, 2012, p. 2).

FOMO is not only triggered by material goods but is as relevant to experiences. It's not necessarily a display of what one has that can trigger FOMO, but social concerns about missed experiences, or achievements can generate negative feelings (Kim et al., 2020). Unlike other forms of anxiety that tend to deter behavior, FOMO acts as a catalyst for action (Kim et al., 2020). This makes FOMO ideal for those hoping to market products or experiences. Participants highlighted the need to stay current, which was inherently linked to consumable experiences trends or that required engagement with and valorization of the existing market system. Furthermore, participants frequently

mentioned they used social media, Veronika, a recent college graduate and daughter of Lebanese-Armenian immigrants noted that she sometimes shared videos from her dance performances, and she used Instagram as she describes below:

*So keeping up mainly like high school friends or even before that, like my Armenian friends from my Armenian school that I went to, um, sharing photos every now and then and liking pictures. And I don't know if you have an Instagram, but there is a section, um, it's, it's called like an explore page or something like that and it has like beauty or food and whatever. So you can go there and I guess scroll for hours and you can see makeup tutorials or food, how to make certain recipes. So sometimes I just sit there and I just scroll through those. Procrastinating.*

Setting aside the Kardashian popularization of the phrase, Veronika's observations highlight this aspect of social media. To “keep up with” has a double meaning-in “keeping up” with friends, one may feel one also needs to “keep up.” While participants reported also using social media to follow news, they were deeply skeptical of social media as a news source.

### **News and Politics- Declining Trust**

MillenigenZ reported skepticism and distrust of social media as a source of news or political information. Our participants did not simply distrust information on social media; they lacked faith in information and news media overall. The last few decades have seen declining trust in media, government and other institutions that were once valued as trusted sources of accurate information (Kavanaugh et al., 2019). In addition, during this time, standards and styles of reporting changed. For print journalism, as reliance on social media has increased, there has been a shift away from factual description to relational and emotive description, with increases in interviews and opining for broadcast journalism, it has meant greater focus on emotional impact (Kavanaugh et al., 2019). Respondents were both skeptical of social media and news media but also highly reliant on it. Consistent with past studies, print media continues to be viewed as the most reliable source of information. However, even the highest-rated news source (the major local paper, the *Los Angeles Times*) is viewed as reliable by less than half (48%) of respondents. Similarly, traditional print media like the *New York Times* is viewed as reliable by 45.2%, while the *Washington Post*, probably being negatively impacted by Bezos' ownership, is viewed as reliable by only just over one-third of



participants (35.7%). Among cable news CNN is viewed as the most reliable at 40.6%. There was no difference by race in perceptions. Similarly, social media was viewed as most likely to purvey “fake” or false information. Our respondents were most likely to view Facebook as “fake” (57.2%), followed by Twitter (52.4%), Instagram (51.9%), Fox (51.1%), Snapchat (49.9%), and YouTube (45.3%). Respondents noted that being informed generally required some effort, and the use of multiple sources. Dustin, a mixed-race college graduate and one of the more politically conservative participants, employs this strategy. Dustin shared:

*Um... it depends on the situation. I like to take 3 or 4 different sources and kind of get my news from that just because I know regardless of where you go you're going to have a bias with it so I kind of try and pull from different sources just to kind of see like an overall- get an overall feel for what the actual issue is going on.*

Similarly, Gabriel, a politically progressive college graduate Latino highlighted the commitment it takes to be informed. Gabriel stated:

*And I would say around July or August, I kind of realized that this is very consistent. And honestly, read the New York Times like cover to cover. I would read it all the time, usually that is my go-to. And then everything else, if they referred to um a scientist or a certain study, then I would go read that. Versus going back to social media and seeing I was wrong two months ago. Um I don't really, social media isn't very high on my list.*

Participants are media literate, but the time and effort required to obtain information is challenging compared to the comparative ease of social media offerings. In addition, reliance on the associated press for information means interpretation may vary across news outlets, but what counts as a story is heavily filtered. Consistent with existing research, which finds social media and word of mouth are viewed as least reliable in national studies (Pollard & Kavanaugh, 2019), participants were frustrated with access to quality sources. Despite high degrees of skepticism, approximately a quarter are using social media to get information about politics (Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube), and 40% reported viewing Twitter as a source for political news. In interviews, some participants mentioned the value of online sources for more in-depth information if one was focused. Luis, a Latino soon to graduate from college with a degree in Engineering, shared wanting to hear more in-depth information from

candidates, though perhaps it would have been better if not during the time he was doing his homework. Luis stated:

*Yeah, well not-I've been reading and watching videos on it because I feel like TV doesn't really do it justice because its a lot of them just arguing for five minutes straight and cutting each other off. So I've been trying to watch like hour interviews on YouTube or online while I'm doing homework, kind of like a podcast in the background type of thing, just to see what everyone has to say.*

Luis highlights the effort it takes to stay informed, and the importance of direct sources to combat incomplete information and misinformation in political arenas.

In addition to being concerned about the veracity of online information, many participants expressed frustration with limited heritage language sources. More than half the sample have at least one parent who is an immigrant or are an immigrant themselves. Participants highlighted insularity among their home communities, with many reporting limited interaction with people of different races, religions, and class backgrounds, as children. Participants recognized the importance of reaching out to communities, hearing multiple perspectives, and are frustrated by the limited presentation of stories in heritage language sources.

Several shared frustrations at a lack of nuance in understanding social unrest around incidents involving BIPOC (Black, indigenous, people of color) people and law enforcement. One respondent, Julián, was critical of the coverage of protests relating to George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. Julián is a Latino on his way to graduate school. He was one of our more politically engaged participants, attending marches, voting, and discussing politics with family. Julián shared: *“And in all the videos they would show just like one version to it, that the protestors were the aggressors. And I’m like that’s not what happened; I was there at one of ‘em. That was not what happened.”* In this example, our participant found his account discredited by relatives who favored the narrative available from their favorite Spanish language station over his eyewitness accounts. Another shared frustration at having to counteract misinformation with family. Isabella, soon to graduate from college, is the daughter of Mexican immigrants who have lived in both the United States and Mexico. She observed:

*I know for my mom, we were trying to make her understand exactly what was going on. Because um when, so when like the [long pause] well anything in like*

*the protests like the pandemic like everything, um she realized a lot of on, on, um that in American like Hispanic um news sometimes they don't base, they don't show what's actually happening.. or... We realized, we started realizing some of the stuff that they were showing was very biased and very like [pause] basically not what was happening.*

Similarly, Gabriel shared that one relative, his Aunt, shared dubious information. To counteract this, he sought out “real news.” By contrast, Julián, provides an example of being able to counter inaccurate news coverage:

*Oh yes, me and my dad are always talking about this. One thing I really do appreciate is that he does listen to me. He values the fact that I actually research this and tell him what I researched, what it means, the significance behind it. He does respect my opinion. He will argue against me at times but when he knows he's wrong, he admits it and that is a very rare quality for us to have.*

Julián and Isabella, college-educated Latines born in the United States, discussed having to counteract Spanish language news and noted a limited number of sources led to polarization among their older relatives. Participants had strong ties to their cultures of origins and wanted more opportunities to use and share their heritage language. However, they were highly critical of limited news sources, which they felt were out of step with their values.

### **Avoiding Online Political Discourse**

Given their antipathy to social media as a space for political debate, it's not surprising that most of the participants were not politically active online. While over two-thirds of our respondents on the first survey reported seeing political advertisements, less than 20% followed political figures or blogs online. For those who followed political figures, former U.S. President Obama, former U.S. first lady Michelle Obama, U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders, U.S. Senator Elizabeth Warren, Congressperson Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC), and former President Donald Trump were all mentioned, and many followed a range of figures across the political spectrum. Several who noted they followed Trump also distanced themselves by stating they followed him for entertainment or to see what the other side was doing. That statement meant typing additional information in a comment box on an anonymous survey, an indication of a strong desire to distance. While not following politicians, almost 60% reported reading political articles online, while less than 13% chose to share political articles or articles

that might be perceived as political. When they did share, it was usually related to a special interest or area of expertise. Valeria, a Latina born in Mexico and immigrated to the United States in grade school, highlighted a particular interest in agriculture and human and animal rights. She shared: *“Instagram stories, a lot about like animal agriculture. When I was just hearing, I would share that stuff. And then recently, with the women’s stuff happening in Mexico, I shared about that.”* Hence, she shared only things about which she was passionate and well informed.

Less than 10% reported commenting on articles posted by friends or family that they perceived as political. Yet, sharing divergent opinions was not disqualifying; only under 10% unfollow people whose politics they do not share. Over 40% report reading posts and comments contrary to their viewpoints to better understand opposing positions. Just under 6% have donated to a political campaign on social media. Just over a quarter of respondents do not engage with others on social media, regardless of content. They fundamentally behave more like an audience than people inhabiting a third space.

### **Online Third Spaces**

For immigrant and minoritized communities, social media can create spaces and moments of connective action (Lai, 2022). There have been several awareness campaigns and local examples of collective action. Because these campaigns are now taking place in a mediated advertising-based format, even social justice is required to come under the auspices of media market logic, which fundamentally has a negative impact on democracy by limiting public discourse (Chan et al., forthcoming; Metykova, 2013). Participants were not finding online third spaces. Gabriel noted that he cut down on social media usage: *“I don’t want to say it’s a waste of time, but... coming up, I just I find myself really angry. And I’m trying to conserve my energy.”* This is by design, negative emotions result in longer engagement which generates the audience sold to advertiser (Hari, 2019). The participants noted social media as generating emotive discussion, without substance. They were far more critical of inaccurate, salacious, and emotive media than they were appreciative of the potential for social justice, awareness, or change. Participants shared their appreciation of in-person discussion, explicitly noting the accountability it engenders. Their experiences led them to seek a

communicative space free from the influence of advertising, which is exactly what theorists' critique social media for impeding (Metykova, 2013).

In my work with Eric Chan (Chan et al, 2024), we coin the phrase *woke recuperation* to refer to the ways that media logic recuperates resistance to support systemic logic. Rather than a vibrant third space of activism, participants interacted with social media as a necessary performance of self and a time kill. In addition to anger, participants highlighted humor as what garnered their viewership. Julián noted he enjoyed memes:

*I do, I will say that I love the memes, especially the memes that are Hispanic-Latino, Mexican American related, where they're kind of aimed at people who basically are raised here with Mexican parents or Latino parents, not just Mexican. And all those memes are so relatable and I'm like it's nice to kind of find out that you're not the only one who feels that way.*

Like Julián many participants noted enjoying and sharing humorous videos or memes, especially those that captured experiences around critical aspects of identity like the immigrant experience or ethnic identity. At the same time, many highlighted how stereotypes perpetuated by humor can normalize dehumanizing references and discussions. By contrast, Gabriel describes third-space interactions that have allowed him to develop and grow. Gabriel noted that when he was younger, he wanted to learn more about his background and become more involved in his community. He noted the importance of this being in person rather than online:

*I was in high school I was part of a group called MEChA. It's like a kind of an activist group that where you're very proud to be Mexican American so I think that way because I wanted to be more connected. It's hard to describe it, it's like I realized how important it was to identify.*

Gabriel learned the importance of continuing his development and growth. Rather than turning to the echo chambers of social media, he challenged himself with more complicated in-person interactions. He shared that he valued the opinions of co-workers with different backgrounds and experiences:

*So, like for example, I have an African American colleague, I will reach out to her, and I will ask her a lot about her culture. I'll even remember certain things to, just like connecting with her. Recently, I have a Jewish colleague about whom*

*I've asked a lot. She visits Austria a lot, and that is where her family is from. Often, I can see her like photo books, I'll ask about her experiences. So, it's about building my communities, to be more inclusive.*

Gabriel highlights a personal commitment to engaging with other cultures, but he finds greater motivation, compassion, and depth when dealing with people without a corporate intermediary. Like Gabriel, my participants preferred in-person connections and spaces in which to develop relationships and themselves, rather than online spaces, in which they acted as audiences, rather than participants.

### **Conclusion**

Coming of age with social media, MillenigenZ have a unique perspective. Not fully saturated, they have media literacy, understand profit motivations, and the impact of advertising, but they aren't sure how to improve their experience. My participants use social media, recognize negative impacts on themselves, and public discourse, and acknowledge that they probably use it more than they should. In short, MillenigenZ are not "cultural dupes." Participants are well aware that social media is a tool to deliver them to advertisers; they understand platforms are not substantially different, they understand corporate control and ownership, and they know it is not to their benefit. They are aware they are being marketed to and understand they are being manipulated to engage longer. Some recounted buying specific items that had successfully been targeted, and others highlighted wanting to share in life goals or try new products or experiences they saw on social media. They are aware that social media is creating heightened emotional states to this end. Knowing that one is being manipulated as a consumer does not mean one is not going to be manipulated; it rather points to a conscious relationship in which consumers choose between spaces, arenas, or people of influence. Enjoying cultural experiences within a problematic system is the human experience (Hugg, 1987; Dworkin & Wachs, 2009). The challenge created by social media is that the level of self-control necessary to unplug is unrealistic, given the research behind manipulating one into tuning in more (Hari, 2019). MillenigenZ understand social media as an obligatory space where they are perpetually tempted into spending too much time while being entertained and/or enraged. While serving as a valued means of communication, participants expressed considerable concern at how it

shaped the attitudes and views of those around them. They combated these tendencies among family and friends with discussion, including personal accounts and fact-checked sources. While participants value in person, they crave non-corporatized third spaces in which they can form genuine, meaningful, deeper connections that facilitate engaged and direct action. Perhaps MillenigenZ will be help create legislation and structures that can create these spaces.

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