

Study shows growing gap between teens' materialism and desire to work hard

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Are today's youth really more materialistic and less motivated than past generations, or do adults tend to perceive moral weakness in the next generation?

San Diego State University [psychology professor](#)

Jean M. Twenge—along with co-author Tim Kasser, professor of psychology at Knox College—has set out to answer that question.

In a study published today by *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, Twenge and Kasser show that there is in fact a growing gap for today's young adults between [materialism](#) and the desire to work hard.

"Compared to previous generations, recent high school graduates are more likely to want lots of money and nice things, but less likely to say they're willing to work hard to earn them," said Twenge, author of the book "Generation Me."

"That type of 'fantasy gap' is consistent with other studies showing a generational increase in narcissism and entitlement," Twenge said.

Twenge and Kasser drew from a nationally representative survey of 355,000 U.S. [high school seniors](#) conducted from 1976 to 2007. The survey examines the materialistic values of three generations with questions focused on the perceived importance of having a lot of money and material goods, as well as the willingness to work hard.

The fantasy gap

Compared to [Baby Boomers](#) graduating from high school in the 1970s, recent [high school students](#) are more materialistic—62 percent of students surveyed in 2005-07 think it's important to have a lot of money, while just 48 percent had the same belief in 1976-78.

Sixty-nine percent of recent [high school graduates](#) thought it was important to own a home, compared to just 55 percent in 1976-78. Materialism peaked in the 80s and 90s with Generation X and has continued to stay high.

As for work ethic, 39 percent of students surveyed in 2005-07 admitted they didn't want to work hard, compared to only 25 percent in 1976-78.

The researchers also found that adolescents' materialism was highest when advertising spending made up a greater percentage of the U.S. economy.

"This suggests that advertising may play a crucial role in the development of youth materialism," said Twenge. "It also might explain the gap between materialism and the work ethic, as advertising rarely shows the work necessary to earn the money necessary to pay for the advertised products."

Why it matters

Understanding generational trends in materialism among youth is important because placing a strong priority on money and possessions is associated with a variety of problems, including depression and anxiety, according to earlier research performed by Kasser.

"This study shows how the social environment shapes adolescents attitudes," said Twenge. "When family life and economic conditions are unstable, youth may turn to material things for comfort. And when our society funds large amounts of advertising, youth are more likely to believe that 'the good life' is 'the goods life.'"

Provided by San Diego State University

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