

Sophie Aldinger  
University of Colorado, Boulder

Apathy and Aesthetics in the Construction of Gen Z Identity

Defended  
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Thesis Advisors

Françoise Duresse-Stimilli, Art+Art History

Marina Kassianidou, Art+Art History

Betsey Biggs, Critical Media Practices

## **Abstract:**

How has American teenage culture evolved within Generation Z due to the development of innovative technology over the last decade? Mobile cell phone technology, the internet, and social media have changed the way Generation Z relates to both their peers and their society. This new technology has led to a constant stream of communication, and lack of privacy, within generation Z which has fused their online persona with their “real life” identity. Contemporary pop culture glorifies mental illness by assigning a stigma of profoundness to symptoms like depression and psychosis, which teens associate with the “angst” that has always been canonic of teenage culture. In response to the accumulation of societal catastrophe within their lifetimes, Generation Z has developed a tolerance for disaster which has ingrained an attitude of apathy into their generation. My short film presents a character named Zillah, who initially seems like a stereotypical generation Z teen, but is revealed to be a schizophrenic, violent, antihero. The film explores the borders between aesthetics, online personas, and reality by presenting a character who lashes out based on the misanthropic attitudes the rest of her generation tends to only discuss in the hypothetical.

## **Introduction:**

American teenage culture has always been characterized by an infatuation with individualism. Generation Z (people born since the mid-1990s) shares the classic teenage struggles of defining identity and searching for existential meaning in life, but does so in a drastically different zeitgeist. Their experience of adolescence is evolving due to rapidly transforming technology and socio-political values. American youth, in their most formative

years, are watching society around them disregard catastrophe with the swipe of a finger through a social media feed. Generation Z has been reared in a culture of disconcert and deflection yet is abhorred by older generations for its regurgitation of this same apathy. The culmination of decades worth of systemic political negligence is falling on the shoulders of Generation Z, and they are less than enthusiastic about cleaning up the mess left behind by the same generations that have accused them of being lazy, unaware, and apathetic.<sup>1</sup> Generation Z is characteristically apathetic because their identity is constructed around a misanthropic internet culture, which idolizes mental illness through its fetishizing of substance abuse, emotional repression, and rejection of organized religion.

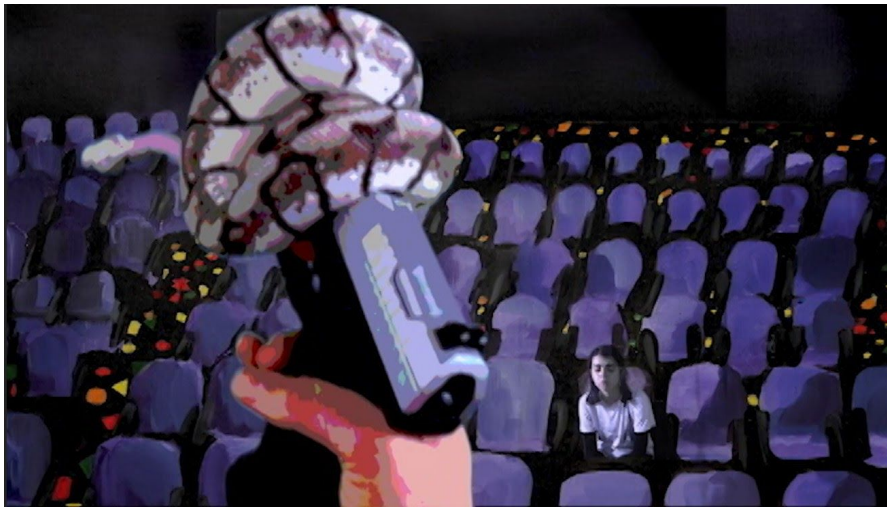
### **Project - Animation:**

My honors project is an experimental short film, named *Zillah*, for which I have written an original screenplay, composed a musical soundtrack, casted, directed, filmed, edited. Some of the technologies I have experimented with in the film are animation, green screen, and the convergence of 2D painting with video (Figure 1). I have spent the majority of my time in the University's BFA program fleshing out a character named Zillah, developing her personality and life story in great detail through journaling, visual art, and method acting. The short film is centered on antihero Zillah Marcello, and provides a small focus into a particular period of time in her life. I will continue to create more work about her in the future. The scenes of the film are nonlinear, and each has a style which feels slightly disjointed from the rest. This structure is

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<sup>1</sup> Twenge, Jean, W. Keith Campbell, and Elise C Freeman. "Generational Differences in Young Adults' Life Goals, Concern for Others, and Civic Orientation, 1966 –2009." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 102, no. 5 (2012): 1045–62.

meant to imitate the feeling of a diary, with each intimate “moment” making the viewer feel like they are seeing something they shouldn’t be. A defining characteristic of Generation Z is that they are pragmatic and value realism. The media they have gravitated towards is that which has a raw, authentic feel to it. In both the visuals and music for the film, I try to emulate this unpolished style (Figure 2); satiating that generational desire for intimacy and authentic interaction with media content.



*Figure 1. “EMDR: Theatre.”Zillah. 2020.*



*Figure 2. “House party”Zillah. 2020.*

*Zillah* explores the relationship between mental illness, religion, and existential purpose as Zillah's therapist guides her through a trauma therapy exercise called EMDR (Figure 3). As they explore her subconscious, it's revealed that she's been hiding a twisted experiment in her deviant chemistry research, a drug she's developed which causes the body to go paralyzed but the mind to stay alert. As they explore her memories, the therapist finds that she has abducted a young man by dosing him with the drug and has used it in tandem with virtual reality to torture him. Near the end of the film, the viewer realizes that Zillah's schizophrenia has caused her to hallucinate that he was someone else, an abusive brother. An underlying idea here being that Zillah has lost control over her perception of reality.



Figure 3. "EMDR: Therapy Office." Zillah. 2020

*Zillah* holds a psychological lens up to habits and rituals associated with mental illness, internet aesthetics, and shifting paradigms of Generation Z's culture. Over time, the small shifts

within cultures result in each new generation of their youngest members being socialized with new values and exposed to new experiences.<sup>2</sup> Generation Z has been socialized in a world where fear of an ominous, vague apocalypse is the normal condition. If not mass shootings, then foreign terrorist attacks. If not climate change, then pandemic or the looming threat of World War III. Members of Generation Z witness from birth that such societal threats are commonplace. This has led to a paradigm shift resulting in the ability to acquiesce to catastrophe, which may be their quintessential characteristic.

### **Socio Political Structures:**

American youth are so overstimulated by constant media bombardment around climate catastrophe, acts of terror, and political turmoil that they have been forced to develop a new subconscious mode of processing grief. Tactics like dissociation, desensitization, and substance abuse have cultivated a new tolerance for terror within Generation Z. Zillah reflects this generational adoption of apathy, and ulterior mode of processing trauma and emotion. While she, as with the majority of Generation Z, may indeed be “lazy, unaware, and apathetic,” these traits are more a coping mechanism than a conscious choice. Frank Ocean iconically captures the older generations’ perception of American teen culture by including a voicemail left by his mother as an interlude on his latest album which reads:

Many college students have gone to college  
And gotten hooked on drugs, marijuana, and alcohol  
Listen, stop trying to be somebody else  
Don't try to be someone else  
You understand the things that I've taught you  
Not to drink alcohol, not to use drugs

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<sup>2</sup> Twenge, Campbell, and Freeman. Generational differences in young adults’ life goals, concern for others, and civic orientation, 1048.

Don't use that cocaine or marijuana because that stuff is highly addictive  
When people become weed-heads they become sluggish, lazy, stupid and unconcerned  
Sluggish, lazy, stupid and unconcerned.<sup>3</sup>

“Sluggish, lazy, stupid, and unconcerned” has since become a mantra of empowerment the misanthropic generation wears with pride. A 2009 study, *Generational Differences in Young Adults Life Goals, Concern for Others, and Civic Orientation*, found that while Millennials (children of the 1980s and early 1990s) are civic minded and extrinsically focused, the same cannot be said with certainty about Generation Z.

Will the next generation continue these trends or reverse them? For example, how will the 2007–2009 recession affect children? Under one view, this generation will be conformist and frugal, similar to those who were children during the Great Depression, and will return to more intrinsic values.<sup>4</sup>

At a time in history where focus on community and socio-political reform is more essential than ever, American society is witnessing a negative correlation between valuation of community and individual issues within its youth population. Generation Z blames the failing societal structure set in place by older generations for their mental illness and subsequent substance abuse, leaving them unashamed to vaunt their indulgence in it. They have a communal distrust for authority figures, with just 26% of Generation Z reporting that they feel they can trust elected government officials and only 47% reporting that they feel voting is important.<sup>5</sup>

Zillah constantly flaunts her knowledge of philosophy and political theory when she rants about her frustration with systemic social issues like class disparity, homelessness, and the

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<sup>3</sup> "Be Yourself." 4 on Blonde. Independent, 2016. Frank Ocean, Buddy Ross.

<sup>4</sup> Greenfield, P. M. 2009. Linking social change and developmental change: Shifting pathways of human development.

<sup>5</sup> Jason Dorsey. *2016 National Study On the Unexpected Viewpoints of the Generation After Millennials*. The Center for Generational Kinetics. 5-7.

opioid crisis. However, she does so while making minimal effort to reach outside of her privileged social sphere to help resolve such issues. While the sentiment of concern she expresses over these issues is genuine, it demonstrates a character flaw which is telling of a weightier generational shortcoming. In response to the way they are stereotyped as unaware, young Americans often take great pleasure in practicing existential and politically relevant debate in closed, online social media venues. But they do this as more of a masturbatory exercise in “woke” conversation than as a means for implementing civic change. Even when this conversation is briefly charged by real-world events, and results in actual protest in the physical world, there has not yet been a case in which the momentary “activism” resulted in any sustained institutional change. In the end, mass shootings continue and gun control efforts are thwarted. Bernie Sanders’ “revolution” is disappointed by abysmal under-30 voter turnout. By operating on a basis of self awareness as a form of justification for lack of action, Generation Z deflects any role of personal responsibility in an anemic form of advocacy.

### **Mental Illness:**

The film initially presents Zillah as a stereotypically egocentric Generation Z teen who is fixated with the existentialism that has become inseparable from teen internet culture.

Narcissistic personality traits, which correlate with less empathy and concern for others, increased over the generations among [millennial] college students.<sup>6</sup>

As the plot develops, it becomes clear that she suffers from schizophrenia. While there is an element of narcissism to both her character and her generation, Zillah is not a narcissist.

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<sup>6</sup> Stewart, K. D., & Bernhardt, P. C. (2010). Comparing Millennials to pre-1987 students and with one another. *North American Journal of Psychology*, 12, 579.



Mentally ill individuals who suffer from repressed trauma often rely on faux narcissism as a guise for their lacking ability to correctly perceive others emotions and respond with empathy.<sup>7</sup> Zillah's experience with concealing and revealing different portions of her personality and self-consciously distorted view on life exists in conversation with Mark Vonnegut's memoir *The Eden Express: A memoir of insanity*, in which he describes his own cognitive dissonance in knowing that his actions were outlandish and manic, and yet continued the behavior without regard for public perception.

At the time...insanity was a sane reaction to an insane society. Leaving the insane society to set up an independent self-sufficient commune seemed like a very sensible noble brave thing to do—plus it figured to be good for my mental health. Had I gone crazy in Boston or New York I would have blamed my culture and society without a second thought. The arguments were all packed, polished, and ready to fly.<sup>8</sup>

If it seems I tell too much here and too little there, I've honestly done the best I can. I honestly don't know which parts of what follows are schizophrenia, just my particular schizophrenia, living in our times, trying to be a good hippie, or whatever.<sup>9</sup>

As Zillah's character develops there is a play with concealment and revealing of different portions of her personality in varying scenarios. Similarly, to the experience Vonnegut describes in the above passage of his memoir, Zillah struggles with issues and feelings that are both reflective of larger generational frustrations, but exemplified by her mentally ill state. Her

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<sup>7</sup> Trbović M, Iz Klinike u Zagrebu. Narcissistic Depression in Schizophrenia. Acta Medica Iugoslavica. 1990. 59-64.

<sup>8</sup> Vonnegut, Mark, and Kurt Vonnegut. 2002. *The Eden Express : A Memoir of Insanity*. Vol. 1st Seven Stories Press ed. New York: Seven Stories Press. Preface to the 2002 Edition.

<sup>9</sup> The Eden Express, Mark Vonnegut. Preface to the First Edition Schizophrenia.

demeanor, thought patterns, and the colors and mood of the scenes fluctuate depending on both who she's interacting with and her progression into psychosis over the course of the storyline.

Zillah characterizes a recognition that we feel at once distant from others because on the internet almost everyone is a stranger, so we are daily surrounded by more strangers than at any other point in human history but also incredibly close to others, as the internet allows us to create connections more quickly than ever before. The simultaneous anonymity and false intimacy of the internet also so confuses self-identity that it makes it harder and harder to distinguish our opinion of ourselves from others' opinions of us, or distinguish what we could or do believe from what others believe.<sup>10</sup> Zillah's schizophrenia provides a mechanism for exploring these oppositions in constructing personal and social identities within the contemporary economic, technological, and social environment.

### **Bedroom Culture+Metamodernism:**

The emerging generation of fine art is constantly at play with the integration of mass culture and popular media. Metamodernism, a significant new school within fine art, emerged as a fluid movement within the Digital Age:

Metamodernism oscillates between the modern and the postmodern. It oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and the detachment of postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity. Indeed, by oscillating to and fro or back and forth, the metamodern negotiates between the modern and the postmodern. One should be careful not to think of this oscillation as a balance however; rather, it is a pendulum swinging between 2, 3, 5, 10, innumerable poles. Each time the metamodern enthusiasm swings toward

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<sup>10</sup> Clasquin-Johnson, Michel. "Towards a Metamodern Academic Study of Religion and a More Religiously Informed Metamodernism." *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 73, no. 3 (August 2017).

fanaticism, gravity pulls it back toward irony; the moment its irony sways toward apathy, gravity pulls it back toward enthusiasm.<sup>11</sup>

The metamodern artist Molly Soda plays with the ideas of perception, online identity, and internet culture aesthetics. Within her narrative work, she often discusses the teenage bedroom as a site of cultural production within American teenage culture, and uses it as a lens to analyze the historical development of teenage identity and angst.<sup>12</sup> Many of the scenes in *Zillah* play with this idea of sacredness and ritual within the domestic spaces of the bedroom and bathroom that give them a religious quality.

The autonomous teen bedroom is a relatively new phenomenon that took off with the rise of suburbia during the post-World War II era, as the average family size started becoming smaller and teenagers began to be seen as a separate, marketable demographic.<sup>13</sup> The bedroom is such an important space within teenage culture, because it is arguably one of the first spaces they can control. This control is the central tenet of the teen bedroom, starting with push and pull for power of this space between the teenager and the parent.<sup>14</sup> Perception of control, self, and the relation between the two is the core issue *Zillah* faces as she progresses through psychosis.<sup>15</sup> At the beginning of the film *Zillah* maintains a consistent level head, and always seems very in

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<sup>11</sup> Kersten, Dennis, and Usha Wilbers. "Introduction: Metamodernism." *English Studies* 99, no. 7 (March 2018): 719–22.

<sup>12</sup> Kearney, Mary Celeste. "Productive Spaces: Girls' Bedrooms as Sites of Cultural Production." *Journal of Children and Media* 1, no. 2 (2007): 41–43.

<sup>13</sup> Soda, Molly. "In My Room Episode 1: Control," *Molly Soda: In My Room Series on Teenage Bedroom Culture* (youtube), November 2017.

<sup>14</sup> Kearney, Mary Celeste. "Productive Spaces: Girls' Bedrooms as Sites of Cultural Production." 41.

<sup>15</sup> Norman, Paul, Paul Bennett, Christopher Smith, and Simon Murphy. "Health Locus of Control and Health Behaviour." *Journal of Health Psychology* 3, no. 2 (April 1, 1998): 171–80.

control of her words and actions. But as she progresses into psychosis, and her schizophrenic symptoms manifest more strongly, the image she has projected of herself begins to collapse.

The story begins with a direct homage to the final scene of the iconic Generation Z television series *13 Reasons Why*, which initially stirred controversy for starkly depicting suicide for a generation which had been adamantly socialized within institutions that aggressively promoted conventional mental health and suicide prevention platitudes. The establishing shot of the film (Figure 4) depicts Zillah, seemingly dead, with wrists slit in a pool of her own blood. It is voiced over with a brief intro which might be assumed to be an uncomfortably apathetic delivery of a suicide note centered on the idea of control, opening with “Control is funny. People who think they have it, never do.”



Figure 4. “<3CamGurl” Zillah. 2020

Zillah continues to talk about her disdain for being dependent on pills to function as a person, prompting the assumption that this is why she has killed herself. However, after she finishes speaking her eyes jolt open and she lets out a gasp for air. As she stands gets up the shot pans out revealing a rolling phone camera and the rest of the bathroom full of makeup and props

she uses to create footage of “suicide porn” she sells online, to a booming following. This scene is meant to quickly establish her questionable ethics, as well as present her online persona and style.

Zillah’s aesthetics (Figure 5) directly parallel, and actually exaggerate, those of quintessential Generation Z artist Billie Eilish. Eilish’s rise in popularity is clearly marked by the five Grammy awards she earned this year for her debut album *When we all Fall Asleep Where do we go*.<sup>16</sup> The album lyrically addresses the hopes and fears of contemporary youth, exploring drug use, trauma, mental illness, and political issues of concern such as sexism and climate change.<sup>17</sup> The discussion of substance abuse and mental illness within Eilish’s music has popularised public discourse of mental health to such a degree that these subjects have become almost mundane; this is the milieu in which Zillah operates.



Figure 5. “Kidz Playland” Zillah. 2020

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<sup>16</sup> Eilish, Billie. *When we all Fall Asleep Where do we go?* Darkroom. 2019.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

A characterizing attribute of Generation Z is their culture of diversity and inclusivity.<sup>18</sup> They live in a culture of free choice, self-actualization, and self-expression. There is a generational aptitude for acceptance and fostering diversity which has allowed more free expression of previously repressed parts of self; like sexuality, religious belief, and mental illness. For nearly a decade now, American institutions have focused unprecedented urgency on mental health awareness, while stigmas around mental illness are being actively deconstructed in mass culture. This corresponds with a growing disregard of more extrinsic socio-political issues, and the practice of organized religion.<sup>19</sup> There has been a significant increase in diagnoses of mental illnesses, and prescription rates of antipsychotics, antidepressants, and other mood-stabilizing drugs among the general population are peaking.

The distance between academic theory and popular media is collapsing as access to education continues to grow. The popular media has begun appropriating philosophies such as existentialism and agnosticism, which had previously been alien and inaccessible to the lower classes, for purposes of entertainment.<sup>20</sup> While pop culture constructs a post-modern awareness of these subjects in the public mind, they fail to provide a deep understanding of these philosophical ideas, creating a liminal space in which many public misconceptions germinate.<sup>21</sup> This phenomenon has played a key role in the formation of public perception of mental illness, especially as it relates to drugs, medication, and substance abuse.

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<sup>18</sup> 2016 *National Study On the Unexpected Viewpoints of the Generation After Millennials*. Jason Dorsey. The Center for Generational Kinetics. 5-7.

<sup>19</sup> Kasser, Tim, and Richard M. Ryan. "Further Examining the American Dream: Differential Correlates of Intrinsic and Extrinsic Goals." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 22, no. 3 (1996): 280–87.

<sup>20</sup> Granholm, Kennet (2013a). "Locating the West: Problematizing the Western in Western Esotericism and Occultism". *Occultism in a Global Perspective*. Henrik Bogdan and Gordan Djurdjevic (editors). Durham: Acumen. pp. 17–36.

<sup>21</sup> Timothy Shary. *Generation Multiplex: The Image of Youth in Contemporary American Cinema*. University of Texas Press. 2002. 11.

The United States is currently experiencing the first major sprawl of irreligion within the less-educated classes in which religious beliefs, both informal and institutional, have historically been strongest.<sup>22</sup> While there has always been irreligion in society, it has more typically been a characteristic of more elite classes of people. Contemporary American society is an unusual instance in which we see such a growing presence of irreligion in the common class, without an offsetting “folk religion.”<sup>23</sup> The American education system can be held largely responsible for this social evolution, as it degrades religion, intellectually elevating atheism. With each passing decade, education becomes increasingly more accessible and the population becomes better educated and less religious overall.<sup>24</sup> While there are statistically fewer people subscribing to traditional religion, this hole is also being filled with other sources in an attempt to satiate a collective sense of unrest. Younger generations tend to subscribe less to organized religion but they still yearn for existential purpose and a sense of meaning in their life.

### **Irreligion and Constructing Identity:**

In an era of irreligion what remains is a craving for structure and existential meaning. Humans inherently want to identify with a group that makes them feel useful and fulfilled. The social distance between the self and others, and between the self and society, is one that postmodernism celebrates by finding myriad ways to put the self (or groups of selves) in a dialectic with opposing selves or groups.<sup>25</sup> In the twenty-first century, or the “internet age,” this

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<sup>22</sup> Campbell, Colin David. *Toward a Sociology of Irreligion*. N.Y.: Herder and Herder, 1972. 1-3.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Wright, Elliott A. “Religion in American Education: A Historical View.” *Phi Delta Kappan* 81, no. 1 (September 1999): 17–20.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

innate human desire to be part of a tribe has largely manifested itself through virtual connection. While past generations have expressed a fear that the development of technology and AI would foster an inherent social distance between individuals, Generation Z embraces this new technology as means of doing exactly the opposite.

Religion generally serves as a socio-cultural system through which a socially distinct group of people subscribe to a particular set of metaphysical beliefs. These beliefs may relate their humanity to some supernatural element for purposes of construing existential meaning.<sup>26</sup> A major underlying tenet of Zillah's personal mythology is her disbelief in religion and gods; and yet, her actions, beliefs, and placement of herself within her culture directly parallel religious structure. As a means of coping with existential anxiety, and despite a declared nihilistic outlook on life, Zillah has inadvertently formulated her own surrogate religion. This 'religion' is loosely composed from a hodgepodge of angsty aesthetics, mentally ill habits, and veneration of misanthropic ideologies. With every intention of degrading religious belief, describing it as a mode of flipping off the brain's "existential concern" switch, she simply preaches and moralizes in accordance with an alternative dogma.

For example, she expresses to her therapist that she doesn't want to be dependent on schizophrenia medication to be happy, on the grounds of not wanting her emotions to be dulled out. Yet, in place of this, she fluctuates between constant states of psychosis and depressive episodes, self-medicating with recreational drugs and dissociation from reality. She is self-justified in her substitution of cigarettes and cocaine for prescription meds, while fully aware of the irony in her actions. After an accumulation of these more subtle instances, the tension

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<sup>26</sup> *Merriam Webster*, s.v. "religion," accessed March 27, 2020.



around this hypocritical cognitive dissonance within Zillah's character is directly addressed by her best friend Garcia once tensions start rising near the climax of the film.

### **Evolution of Teenage Angst:**

Social evolutions, like the ability to acquiesce to catastrophe, are changing the way markets cater to teenage culture. Humans have long been subject to the violence and terror of war and violence accompanied by a primal urge to indulge in the obscene.<sup>27</sup> However, Generation Z presents a marked new quality of indifference towards it all, which pop culture has profitably accommodated.<sup>28</sup> This tolerance for the explicit is exacerbated by the entertainment field's attempts to appeal to an even darker underbelly of this generation. The normalization of violence is exacerbated by the media's attempt to stimulate Generation Z's interest by any means possible. In doing so, they have turned true fear, horror, and shock into such rare occurrences that teenagers have developed a fetishization of the explicit, treating it almost as a form of intimacy. This permeates everything from reality television to video games<sup>29</sup> to pornography<sup>30</sup> to their sense of humor (demonstrated in figure 6).

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<sup>27</sup> Scull, Andrew. *Cultural Sociology of Mental Illness: an A-to-Z Guide*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage, 2014.

<sup>28</sup> Timothy Shary. *Generation Multiplex*.

<sup>29</sup> Ferguson, Christopher J. "Advancing Responsible Adolescent Development: Video Games." In *Adolescents, Crime, and the Media: a Critical Analysis*, 105-126. New York: Springer, 2014.

<sup>30</sup> Ferguson, Christopher J. "Advancing Responsible Adolescent Development: Pornography." In *Adolescents, Crime, and the Media: a Critical Analysis*, 141-58. New York: Springer, 2014.

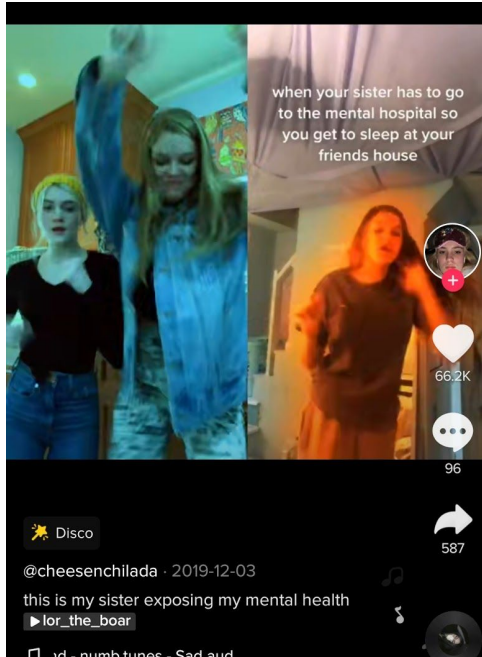


Figure 6.<sup>31</sup>

There is an undertone of sadness and moodiness within the Generation Z consciousness. This valuation of angst has become ingrained as a mode of existential self-expression. Teenagers elevate pop culture icons who base their aesthetic choices and media representation in emo culture, equating sadness and depression with being “deep” or philosophical.<sup>32</sup> Because of their integration into the aesthetics of celebrity, facets of identity like profundity and creative angst are strangely integrated with the imagery of mental illness.

The contemporary decline in religious affiliation, the normalization of mental illness and drug use, and the undermining of traditional sexual, gender, and interpersonal norms has been fueled by the advancement of communications technology, specifically the internet. Social media presence is a new facet of youth culture which provides easier access to the spread of more

<sup>31</sup> Cheesenchillada. “TikTok.” *TikTok* (video). Original Sound: Puffalou, December 2019.

<sup>32</sup> Jadayel, Rola, Karim Medlej, and Jinan Jadayel. “Mental Disorders: A Glamorous Attraction on Social Media?” *Journal of Teaching and Education*, January 7, 2017, 467-468.

seemingly intimate relationships with friends, strangers, and celebrities alike.<sup>33</sup> The search for ways to define their individual identity, as well as their place within the layers and hierarchies of society, is fundamentally different for the first generation to grow up entirely in the age of the internet. Stereotypical teenagers are emotional, rebellious, and angsty. While this still holds true on some level for Generation Z, there is still this distinctive sense of apathy that differs from prior generations. Beyond the underlying factors such as mental illness, substance abuse, and irreligion, rapidly advancing technology is a fundamental driver of this social evolution. Observers often refer to Generation Z by the alternative moniker “iGen,” as the ubiquity of screens is the natural environment from which they emerged.<sup>34</sup>

By nature, humans seek out authentic interpersonal relationships and emotional connection. While older generations fear that Generation Z’s apparent apathy is evidence of the internet undermining this, this is more of a generational gap in understanding. In reality this is quite the contrary, as social media and cell phone technology have in some ways allowed for Generation Z teenagers to be more connected than any previous generation.

Unlike the hour-long phone calls or chat rooms of teenage past, contemporary social media accommodates a limited attention span, and implements a habitual urge to consume. Rather than a limit, this actually expands the range of opportunity for connection. There are longstanding precedents for the relationship between this type of angsty teen culture and technology.<sup>35</sup> Record players, radios, televisions, and landline phones led to desktop computers and eventually laptops and then tablets and cell phones. The more advanced the technology

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Jason Dorsey. *Unexpected Viewpoints of the Generation After Millennials*. 5-7.

<sup>35</sup> Mary Jane Kehily, Janet Maybin. (2011) A Window on Children's Lives?. *Journal of Children and Media* 5:3, pages 267-283.

becomes, the more it opens the opportunity for the expansion of intimacy beyond the solitude of home.<sup>36</sup>

### **Evolution of Teenage Culture - Media+Music:**

Online presence has become an integral element of the teenage experience, especially within the past decade as technological innovations have made devices more mobile. Teenagers are now constantly connected because of this mobile access to this stream of communication and consciousness in almost any situation throughout their day.<sup>37</sup> Scenarios like transportation rides, waiting rooms, and lulls at work, which used to exist as moments of waiting and silence, are now filled with this readily available virtual interaction.<sup>38</sup> This has changed the way teens structure their daily activities to such a degree that it fundamentally alters the dynamics of their interpersonal relationships.

“In these jaded times, meme-ing, tweeting, instagramming, and tik-toking about anxiety and depression isn't just for coping. It can act as a guise of honesty — especially to youth desperately seeking authenticity and connection in a virtual social environment that tends to distort it.”<sup>39</sup>

The most popular forms of social media among younger generations are those with the most interactive elements between users. New platforms continually improve the ability to richly engage through video posts, live streams and enhanced commentary with tools that speed up and

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<sup>36</sup> Dodd, Annabel Z. *The Essential Guide to Telecommunication*. Sixth ed. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2019.

<sup>37</sup> Curtis, Brenda L, Robert D Ashford, Katherine I Magnuson, and Stacy R Ryan-Pettes. “Comparison of Smartphone Ownership, Social Media Use, and Willingness to Use Digital Interventions Between Generation Z and Millennials in the Treatment of Substance Use: Cross-Sectional Questionnaire Study.” *Journal of Medical Internet Research* 21 (November 2018).

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Joho, Jess. “How being sad, depressed, and anxious online became trendy” *Mashable* (blog), June 28, 2019.

even deepen communication. Generation Z has great affinity for apps like Snapchat and TikTok that are based on video content, yet chat and discussion functionality is also fundamental. In the past, apps like Tumblr were home to the glorification of psychosis, self-harm, and drug addiction. The community regulations of this app, this content generational attitude was expelled from Tumblr, and, some would argue, transferred straight over to TikTok.<sup>40</sup> TikTok has become the perfect breeding ground for apathetic, dark humor Generation Z is entertained by. Figures 7 and 8 illustrate screenshots of typical TikTok videos which roots its apathetic humor in jokes about mental illness and substance abuse.

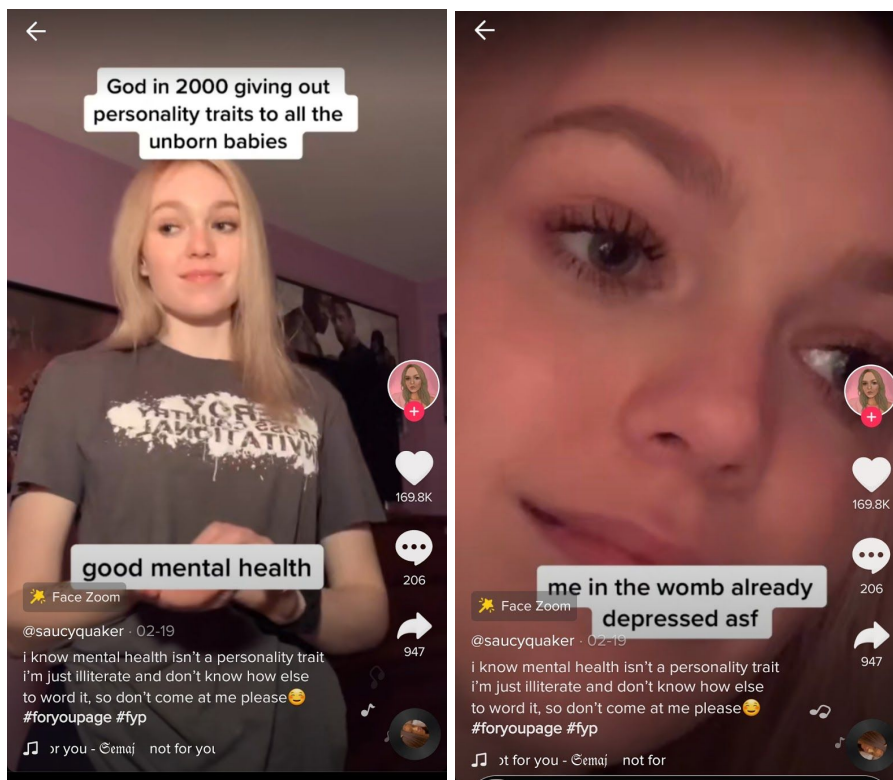


Figure 7.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Tracy, Natasha. *Lost Marbles: Insights Into My Life with Depression & Bipolar*. Createspace Independent Publishing Platform, 2016.

<sup>41</sup> Saucyquaker. "TikTok." *TikTok* (video). Original Sound: curlyhead\_piink, January 2020.

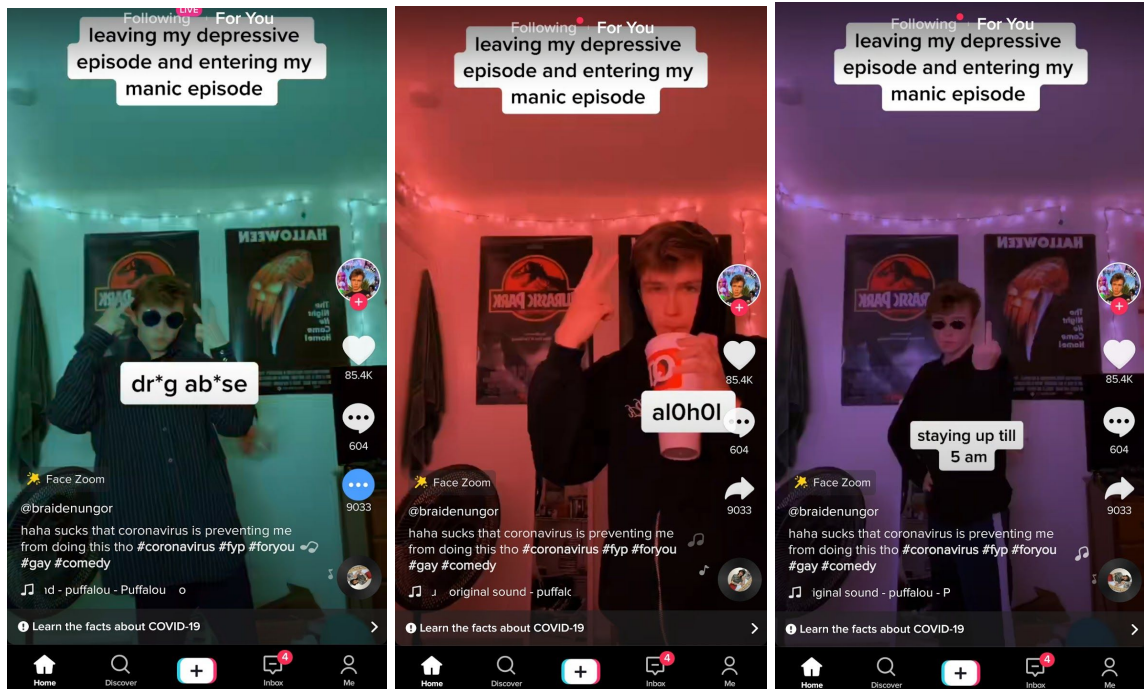


Figure 8.<sup>42</sup>

Dependence on video content within social media for peer connection is a new facet of internet culture which, in part, developed out of shifting socializing practices. In generations past, teens would spend their time at movie theatres and malls, but this dynamic is greatly diminished with Generation Z.<sup>43</sup> Online shopping, streaming services, and other online resources directly compete with such physical social venues. In addition to this, even before the apocalyptic consciousness of pandemic, the culture of fear resulting from the normalization of terror attacks and school shootings in public spheres left parents less inclined to let their kids spend unsupervised time in public.<sup>44</sup> This has resulted in a larger portion of quality time between friends existing in an online format, and video interactive elements satiate this urge for live

<sup>42</sup> Braidenungor. "TikTok." *TikTok* (video). Original Sound: Numb.Tunes, March 2020.

<sup>43</sup> Timothy Shary. *Generation Multiplex: The Image of Youth in Contemporary American Cinema*. University of Texas Press. 2002.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

interaction. While this gives older generations the impression that Generation Z is lazy and obsessed with their phones, this is how Generation Z was socialized. Building interpersonal relationships virtually is the normal reality for Generation Z, and it will only be reinforced in the future due to social distancing in response to COVID-19.

From the hippies in the 70s, the punk rock culture of the 80s, to early emos of the 90s, all alternative subcultures have been crafted on the same grounds of teenage rebellion and rejection of dogma.<sup>45</sup> Music consistently serves as a driving force for this social deviance, and is a key component in construction of teenage identity. For a generation socialized with the mentality to continually consume, music is the never ending source of inspiration. Consuming music is a highly individualized ritual which teens have long used as a social identity indicator.<sup>46</sup> The abundance of varying music genres and artists allows teens to develop individual tastes while simultaneously identifying within a social group of like-minded people, based on the styles they choose to listen to. In their 1991 analysis of bedroom culture, McRobbie and Garber describe the teenage consumption of pop music as a form of escapism into the romantic fantasy world of the pop idol. I argue that this holds true for Generation Z, and therefore that the aesthetic choices of the celebrities popular with youth are telling of what the generation is experiencing and thinking about.<sup>47</sup>

The music coming out of a generation reflects the collective feelings within it. This new sound coming from Generation Z stems from a state of unrest, uncertainty, and misplaced

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<sup>45</sup> Mark Vonnegut. Eden Express. Introduction: Second Edition on Schizophrenia.

<sup>46</sup> Soda, Molly. "In My Room Episode 7: Fandom," *Molly Soda: In My Room Series on Teenage Bedroom Culture* (youtube), June 2018.

<sup>47</sup> Lincoln, Sian. "Feeling the Noise: Teenagers, Bedrooms and Music." *Leisure Studies* 24, no. 4 (2005): 399–414.

emotion. This is why so many of the artists rising in popularity brand themselves in a particular new trans-genre style which is best identified by its experimentation with merging other loosely defined genres like emo-rap, lo-fi, and hyperpop. Artists falling into this nascent category, like 100 Gecs, Death Grips, or Grimes, are difficult to label under a single genre; which is a key aspect of their popularity. The soundtrack I've created to accompany the animation intentionally emulates a wide variety of the experimental sounds currently rising in popularity. An example of this can be seen by the merging of genres within track two, *Playland*, as the hook is a play on a typical hyperpop melody, but then the sound transitions into an eerie lo-fi interlude after the second verse; with a few ear-piercing, warped scream sound effects scattered throughout. This seemingly distasteful sound inclusion directly references musical tactics of 100 Gecs and other artists of the hyperpop genre. Music doesn't necessarily have to sound good to be popular with Generation Z, it just has to be meaningfully different. Experimental or underground artists have a more individualized quality to them that teenagers can latch onto as a means of feeling unique in their own identity, by association.

Generation Z's musical tastes are relevant to their shifting societal perceptions, because the changing trends reflect a more fundamental, underlying shift in values. While society is working to encourage openness about mental health and destigmatize mental illness, how is Gen Z self-diagnosing mental illness where really there is just growing pains and human struggle? As teenagers are going through adolescence and trying to define a sense of individual identity, they are easily influenced. Younger generations who are seeking a group to identify with are influenced by the deification of mentally ill characters and celebrities whose psychotic, chaotic,



or otherwise dangerous traits are glorified for their contrast from the mainstream population.<sup>48</sup>

The mass effort to destigmatize mental illness within contemporary culture has led to its decontextualization in popular media.<sup>49</sup> The original intention of raising awareness traversed the social spectrum to the point that symptoms of mental illness are often romanticized by the media. These media trends have misled Generation Z on what a healthy relationship with mental health and even a concept of higher self should look like. Juice WRLD, one of most iconic emo-rappers of the time, is an example of a deified mentally ill figure. His music existed in constant conversation with current issues Generation Z is coping with, with a recurring focus on his own battle with mental illness and substance abuse. He always said

It feels more authentic to me that these kids are likely to talk  
about their addiction, their drug use, their demons, if you will.<sup>50</sup>

Fetishization of violence, substance, and mental illness runs rampant in teenage culture. Generation Z's idols are those that are mentally ill and dying young, usually of drug overdoses.<sup>51</sup> Juice Wrld's death was not an isolated occurrence; within the past three years, Generation Z has witnessed the deaths of five major figures within the genre of emo-rap alone.

As a cultural form, music is integral to the creation and evolution of their youth cultural biographies, and works as a 'soundtrack' (DeNora 2000) to their social lives.<sup>52</sup>

The environment within which Generation Z's punk culture thrives stands in stark contrast to the punk iterations of past decades. For Millennials, the punk counterculture was

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<sup>48</sup> Jadayel, Rola, Karim Medlej, and Jinan Jadayel. "Mental Disorders: A Glamorous Attraction on Social Media?" *Journal of Teaching and Education*, January 7, 2017, 465-470.

<sup>49</sup> Timothy Shary. *Generation Multiplex*. 15-18.

<sup>50</sup> Younger, Briana. "The Beautiful Vulnerability of Juice WRLD." *The New Yorker*, December 9, 2019.

<sup>51</sup> Jadayel, Rola, Karim Medlej, and Jinan Jadayel. "Mental Disorders" 465-470.

<sup>52</sup> Lincoln, Sian. "Feeling the Noise: Teenagers, Bedrooms and Music" 399.

limited to the emos, rooted in emotionality and sadness. Much in the way that Post-expressionist artists abandoned the emotionality of the expressionists, Generation Z exchanged the overly emotional quality of melancholic emo music for a more apathetic angst.<sup>53</sup> Teenage culture is fundamentally emotional, as this is an age typically associated with puberty and changing hormonal balance. Generation Z's zeitgeist, however, is forcing them to transcend this inherent teen urge to wallow in melancholy. As much as they might prefer to stew in their own angst, they are the heirs of failing institutions, climate, and social-class structured society.<sup>54</sup>

Despite their lack of Millennial enthusiasm for conventional reform, and their parents' and grandparents' looming cynicism, Generation Z is largely composed of realists who are conscious that the future of the United States and the world rests on their ability to restructure failed institutions, turn back climate change, and redefine inadequate social and class structures. Whether they will be inspired to act in response to these needs, however, is a very open question. Although this generation has demonstrated that they are perfectly capable of raising their voices in loud momentary support of their fellow students protesting gun violence, they seem incapable of maintaining that support long enough to actually vote for representatives able to change existing laws. Generation Z tends to shed responsibility as quickly as possible, in hopes of returning to whatever they would rather be doing, unbothered by a society toward which they feel mostly apathetic. This is a difficult sentiment to reverse. The future of America and the world seems very uncertain, as it will soon be inherited by a generation with a reputation for expending the minimal effort required to skate by.

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<sup>53</sup> Kersten, Dennis, and Usha Wilbers. "Introduction: Metamodernism" 719–22.

<sup>54</sup> Jason Dorsey. *Unexpected Viewpoints of the Generation After Millennials*. 5-7.

Zillah represents the paradigm shifts of the first generation born into a world with the internet, and all of the ancillary technologies that have fundamentally defined the structure of their relationships with each other and the world around them. Looking into the abyss, she neither embraces it nor cowers in fear, but rather has adopted the apathetic outlook her generation developed to grapple with the utter complexity of it all. She embodies the contradictory set of values held by this generation that recognizes the need for societal change, but is so plagued by mental illness that they lack the motivation to take action on extrinsic issues. Consequently, the future defined by Generation Z and its children is unlikely to be truly hopeful, and yet the world is not necessarily doomed. The experiences of people like Zillah will ultimately define the manner in which society responds to the challenges of the future, and their success will largely depend on their ability to transcend their own indifference.

## **Conclusion:**

If there was ever a time for Generation Z to make good of the socio-political system which failed them, it is now, during its collapse. The continual accumulation of catastrophe is changing the basis of the way American society operates. This is Generation Z's chance to use their new generational perspective, and unique ability to cope with catastrophe to help structure new social frameworks. Generation Z's dissociation from society might end up being the key to creating change during this complex collapse of American society.

This project embodies my motivation as an artist by confronting my personal role in this Generation Z narrative. As an individual who has struggled with mental illness and held an active role in this internet culture which aestheticizes its symptoms, This is a group of

individuals I have an insightful understanding of and unique ability to influence. I hope to use this project to voice my concern for the repercussions Generation Z's internet culture can have on society and the lives of generations forthcoming. Zillah's behaviour directly reflects the type of hyperbolic conversations about violent, morbid, and otherwise misanthropic topics that Generation Z indulge in online. The only distance between Zillah and my intended audience, is that she takes action on the sorts of things they talk about. I am asking my peers to ponder the reality of the things they say, the aesthetics they perpetuate, and the cognitive dissonance that likely exists between their aesthetics and core values. It is not surprising that Generation Z is characterized as apathetic when their identity is constructed around a misanthropic internet culture which idolizes mental illness through its fetishizing of substance abuse, emotional repression, and rejection of organized religion. In the same way I have struggled to, I am asking Generation Z to reevaluate the way they might have unintentionally modeled their identity around a problematic set of beliefs.

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