Mediating the Apocalypse: Understanding Zillennial Attitudes Towards Social and Ecological Crises Through Digital Rhetoric

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Chapter One: Introduction

Every age-group has a set of characteristics and ideologies resulting from the historical circumstances of its time, economic and socio-political events which shape the worldviews and policies of the people born within them. Semantically, these age cohorts are officially segmented by 15-year periods into generations, which provide labels to the generalized characteristics and values attributed to their age cohorts based on the events and societal developments happening within them. The defining impact of a generation depends on what it does once its members reach adulthood and begin affecting society at large; the generations currently navigating adulthood are Generation Y, known as millennials (born within the years 1981 and 1996) and Generation Z, known colloquially as “Zoomers" (born within the years 1997 and 2012). Both generations have entered adulthood during a time of unprecedented global and domestic calamities set in motion long before they were born.

Though elder millennials born in the early years of their age bracket are considered middle-aged, and Zoomers born in the latest years of their generation’s age bracket haven’t yet reached puberty, every member of both generations will face the aggregated consequences of those calamities at a scale and severity humanity has potentially never experienced before. The long-anticipated effects of climate change have become constant and untenable, and discourse abounds regarding these effects reaching points of no return (i.e., points in time beyond which our collective capacities to address these issues can curtail them) within the lifetimes of Zoomers and millennials.

A 2020 report from the World Health Organization, UNICEF, and the *Lancet* contended that every child in the world faces extreme threats from the effects of climate change and ecological degradation, as well as threats to personal health (physical and psychological) from

predatory marketing of unsafe and addictive products. Their findings assert that operating the way we currently do with regard to climate change will result in a 93% chance of global warming exceeding four degrees Celsius, which would result in "devastating health consequences due to disruption of water and ecosystems, rising ocean levels, inundation of coastal cities and small island nations, increased mortality from heatwaves, proliferation of vector-borne disease, and a crisis of malnutrition because of disruption to food production systems" (Clark et al., 2020). Findings from a 2020 Statista report contend that global temperatures have consistently reached record levels in recent years, causing the rapid onset of weather catastrophes such as hurricanes, floods, and droughts; the 2012 drought alone cost the United States approximately 20 billion dollars, the costliest drought in history (Jaganmohan, 2022). Key indicators of climate change have been worsening at wider geographic scales and more rapidly than expected, but reports find climate action worldwide has not progressed in any meaningful way (Jaganmohan, 2021).

Social and economic issues continue to escalate domestically as well, with widening wage gaps, racial and gendered inequality, student debt, mental health issues, and political polarization fully entrenched in American society. Increasingly polarized political rhetoric in news media coverage presents challenges for collective agreement about the empirical facts of climate change, and the nature of domestic events like political demonstrations and mass shootings further complicates efforts towards meaningful progress on any of these issues. As such, general attitudes towards the efficacy of our current system in addressing issues related to climate change as well as social, economic, and political issues in the United States have been suffering. Reports from 2020 show many developed countries (such as the United Kingdom) supporting the idea of climate change as a global crisis at rates upwards of 80%; a 2022 report on

public opinion of the existence of global warming in the United States found 62% of respondents believed global warming is happening (Jaganmohan, 2021; Jaganmohan, 2022). The Doomsday Clock, the metaphoric representation of how close humanity is "to destroying itself," is at 100 seconds to midnight, the closest it's been to midnight since the inception of the clock in 1947 (O'Neill, 2022). Proving the legitimacy of the overwhelming evidence from the scientific community regarding our impending crises is not the purpose of this paper; I outline these findings to situate the existence of discourse regarding these issues, as a contextual backdrop to investigate how the generations chronologically positioned to deal with them relate to these issues.

As digital natives who've grown up in or after the dawn of digital technology's ubiquity, social media plays a central role in how Zillennials (the term coined via digital platforms like Reddit's r/Zillennials to describe millennials and Gen Z simultaneously) communicate and form identities. Though I am not asserting these two generations function as one, or have the same defining characteristics, I conjoin their labels as a reflection of the way they are generally positioned in contrast to the pre-digital world of previous generations. To determine how Zillennials rhetorically construct and communicate their anxieties, values, and identities, my research pertains to how the generations inheriting our collective issues think and communicate about them, and how digital rhetoric functions in that relationship. Approaching the phenomenon of Zillennials' digital rhetoric from an Interpretivist perspective, my literature review provides insight from existing research towards answering my research question: *how does Zillennials' usage of digital rhetoric function in their relationship with the calamities facing humanity?*

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Situating Digital Rhetoric

To situate digital rhetoric as a discursive nexus for Zillennials within existing research it's necessary to start with the terms and theories grounding much of rhetorical analysis. When analyzing the rhetorical affordances[1] of new media, researchers and theorists usually begin with existing rhetorical theories and adapt them to fit the parameters of the digital realm, which often have more dynamics and complexities than traditional modes of interpersonal, institutional, or Aristotelian rhetoric. Mateus (2021) defines media rhetoric as the expanded forum for rhetorical practices and discourses available within media, breaking down the concept further into digital rhetoric, the subset which concerns "how social discourse inhabits and is reproduced in online environments" (p. 169**)**, and how digital media facilitates and constitutes online communities, collective and individual identities, and discourses. He echoes the sentiments of many media rhetoricians who assert that digital media are *themselves* rhetorical agents, crucial to contemporary social discourse (pp. 169-170).

Murray (2011) established four principle affordances of digital media that highlight the extent of their potential as a new frontier of conceptual and discursive spaces: encyclopedism ("providing information on every topic"), spatiality ("taking place on many conceptual levels" i.e., internal programming and product consumption), procedurality ("based on powerful strategies for creating abstraction through the ability to describe reality through a code"), and participativity (as in "the possibility of social interaction at the new level of *many-to-many"*) (p. 113). Media psychology (Polkinghorne, 2013) is concerned with how media affect and shape

[1] Affordance (n): "The quality or property of an object that defines its possible uses or makes clear how it can or should be used" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

people's identities, communities, mental health, etc., and centers qualitative research methods as the best route to understanding the role of media in people's lives.

Digital affordances mean updating the dynamics of traditional rhetorical analysis (Mateus 2021; Murray 2011; Fidalgo & Ferreira 2005; Polkinghorne 2013; Bendrat 2019); the digital realm is an expanded frontier for rhetorical spaces, weaving foundational theories and approaches into the messiness of digital communication. Fidalgo & Ferreira (2005) proposed adding media to Aristotle's rhetorical triangle of *ethos, pathos, and logos***;** Mateus (2021) notes that each digital platform carries its own norms and modes of engagement for rhetorical utterances. Bendrat (2019) brings novelty to the elements of "agents" and "audiences" from Burke's Dramatistic Pentad, in which audiences become agents in the feedback loop of digital interactions (p. 118).

Rouse & Ross (2020) highlight social identity theory in analyzing online group identity formation, a theory which applies to most research inquiries into Zillennials' digital rhetoric and engagement with global and domestic issues and which encompasses more specific theories applied by scholars to the affordances of digital media. Tajfel and Turner's (1979) social identity theory (SIT) "posits that a person's sense of being is tied to the group or groups to which they belong," creating ideological in-groups and out-groups that shape attitudes and opinions towards affecting phenomena like climate anxiety (Rouse and Ross, 2020, p. 1108). Within this rhetorical theoretical perspective Burke's (1965) concept of "terministic screens" (p. 45), in which the language we use unconsciously filters our experiences and perceptions, also fits into analysis of how generations raised on the internet come into their available symbolic language and worldview through digitally-mediated experiences.

Speaking to the reflexive, "influencer" hierarchies of digital media, Polkinghorne (2013) describes the utility of symbolic interactionism within media psychology research, a theory which builds on SIT in stating that the meanings of symbols (in this case, any form of digital rhetoric content) are learned through interaction with others. By this logic, our understanding of the polysemic images, hashtags, and references of digital media come from the digital school of thought we identify with (e.g., the influencers we rally behind, the group chats we send memes through, groups we subscribe to, etc.). Breaking digital rhetorical analysis down into the dynamics of individual artifacts, Bendrat (2019) employs Burke's Dramatistic Pentad (1969), which frames language as symbolic action, to discern the motives of rhetors in the digital realm as they adapt media messages to the norms or rules particular to each digital platform–the rhetorical situation (p. 118). Each theory, adapted to the parameters of digital communication, explains the underlying dynamics of how our anxieties, values, and identities come to fruition through digital rhetoric.

Digital rhetoric and Zillennials

Another prevalent theme in academic literature on digital rhetoric concerns the depths to which digital rhetoric matters specifically to "digital native" generations as an incubator for identity formation, coping mechanisms, and tools for political activism. A significant portion of research and public discourse regarding digital media and its role in the lives of young adults specifically focuses on the negative impacts of digital technology on mental health and socialization, none of which will be disputed in this paper. Ample existing research on the role of digital rhetoric in the lives of Zillennials, however, presents case studies extolling the virtues of digital media in collective and individual identity formation, community-building, trauma-

processing, social action, and, paradoxically, self-care (Ching and Foley, 2012; Broderick, 2018; Carter 2021; Weisgerber and Butler, 2016; Stenberg and Hogg, 2020).

Walter Fisher's (1984) concept of humans as "essentially storytellers" or *homo narrans* (p. 6) frames the stories we tell as the foundation for our identities and the way we operate socially and ideologically in the world. In the world of digital rhetoric, generational identities take shape through disparate threads of digital rhetoric that weave together into ideological narratives, offering spaces for commiseration, bonding, and coping with collective trauma. Broderick (2018) uses the nihilistic humor and cynical themes of the popular TV series *Rick and Morty* to break down digital millennial coping mechanisms for post-9/11 generational trauma, lack of meaning, and mental health issues as they appear in subreddits like r/OutOfTheLoop and (u/here_for_the_dog) (p. 26).

Carter's (2021) case study of the "Old Economy Steve" (OES) meme shows how artifacts of digital rhetoric can serve as galvanizing agents of self-care for millennials by tracing the trajectory of the meme's evolution as a discursive space for millennials to process the narrative of generational abandonment by Baby Boomers. Carter views OES as a tool for social criticism, a way for millennials to engage in collective self-care through memes highlighting the absurdity of "back in my day…" arguments from Baby Boomers which call out the economic inadequacies of millennials by the economic terms of their own generational circumstances, terms which no longer apply because of economic decisions Baby Boomers themselves were responsible for. The participatory self-care offered by the meme series helps millennials cope with the economic uncertainties of contemporary society and create new narrative forms for generational identity: "by allowing individual participants to articulate the manner in which the system failed them,

OES shifted the narrative from a story of simple generational antagonism to one that explored how generational decisions related to systems of economic opportunity" (p. 316).

Ching and Foley's (2012) exploration of positive technical development examines ways generations raised on digital technology use them for community and experimentation with identity, contradicting popular claims about the forums and anonymity of online spaces leading to insularity and toxicity (p. 116). Ching and Foley present a "de-essentialized theory of identity" for digital rhetoric, claiming the very process of articulation (posting, retweeting, creating memes) constitutes identity, shifting the role of technology as a facilitator of identity expression into a tool through which "identity is manifested digitally, or technologically" (p. 201). These "identities in practice" are "a continual negotiation between oneself and the world" (p. 224), constantly disrupted and evolved through each online interaction. These findings mirror those of Weisgerber and Butler (2016), who apply Foucault's concept of *hypomnemata* (i.e., therapeutic journaling) and self-writing (cultivation of the self) to the curatorial aspect of digital rhetoric, claiming that the curation of digital content shapes one's offline identity as much as one's virtual identity (sometimes referred to as the "digital self") (p. 1341). Both pairs of researchers offer rhetorical processes in the digital realm as processes of self-care, ways for Zillennials to express themselves, experiment with identity, and find community in ways they otherwise would not in AFK (away from keyboard) settings.

Beyond coping mechanisms and identity formation, research abounds regarding the social transformation possible through digital rhetoric. Russell's *Glitch Feminism* (2020) views digital affordances like avatar creation and virtual identities as avenues for gender expression and subaltern identity formation inaccessible in offline interactions, a type of activism inspired by the "glitches" of digital media, the coding and bandwidth errors that disrupt the flow of digital

experiences. “It allows us to seize the opportunity to generate new ideas and resources for the ongoing (r)evolution of bodies that can inevitably move and shift faster than AFK mores or the societies that produce them under which we are forced to operate offline” (p. 17). Stenberg and Hogg (2020) outline the impact of digital media (and their rhetorical affordances) on social activism through digital characteristics of widespread connectivity, speed of delivery, and international circulation (p. 165). Among the outings in social progress on racial and gendered inequality, Stenberg and Hogg include Alicia Garza’s #BLM movement, “Herstory,” the 2017 Women’s March, and Sasha Weiss and Suzanne Samin’s #YesAllWomen thread addressing sexism in digital spaces and gamer communities (pp. 165-67). Each of these now seminal examples of postmodern feminism depended completely on the affordances of digital media and the rhetorical appeals that propel them into national conversations, evidence to Stenberg and Hogg that Zillennials’ social involvement is alive and well by the graces of digital media, “slacktivism”[2] notwithstanding.

Functions of digital rhetoric (political engagement, ideology formation, and cultural narratives)

No review of digital rhetoric research would be complete without addressing the body of academic work focused on the dynamics and affordances of memes, a hallmark of “digital nativity,” a term I will use to describe the state of being and sense of culture defined by growing up after or during the advent of digital media ubiquity. Myriad theorists and researchers have written books, chapters, articles, and editorials affirming memes as integral to how Zillennials make sense of the world and position themselves in relation to issues specific to their generational age set, like student debt or climate denial. Knobel and Lankshear (2007) describe

[2] “Slacktivism” refers to activism restricted to social media engagement as opposed to physical, AFK activity.

memes as a “new literacy,” moving memetic research from the historical, neural mechanics of Richard Dawkins’ analysis into the practical application and affordances of digital memes as a cultural force for Zillennials, incorporating meaning-making, social relations, and ideological worldview into their analysis (pp. 201-17). They incorporate the concept of Gee’s (2004) “affinity spaces" (spaces that facilitate connection between people with similar interests) into their assessment of memes as rhetorical opportunities “tied directly to ways of interacting with others, to meaning making, and to ways of being, knowing, learning, and doing” (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007, p. 221).

De la Rosa-Carrillo (2015) inserts memes as *actants* into an actor-network theory approach to digital rhetorical analysis, in which memes are a culture-shaping force, not a “passive result of a social phenomenon that is played out in the digital realm, but as a craft and a language: a visual medium demanding to be engaged on its own terms” (p. 190). Hahner (2013) applies frame theory to memetics, viewing meme series as “frames” that orient participants around particular ideologies or ways of perceiving phenomena, similar to Carter’s narrative collectivizing of millennials via “OES” memes. Jenkins (2014) takes the same approach to his analysis of the “FAIL/WIN" meme series, viewing the rhetorical language of “FAIL/WIN” as a “mode,” which he takes to mean “manners that orient the interfacing between viewer and image, that provide implicit instructions in how to view” (pp. 446-447), in this case collective anxieties regarding social performance in 21st century society. For Jenkins, memes are “modes” through which publics engage “energies, anxieties, and affections influencing and shaping the rhetorical” (p. 462). Bose (2013) doubles down on the cathartic affordances of memes as contemporary artifacts of political humor and subaltern political activism, noting how jokes have been used to

resist dominant ideology throughout history and how memes, as the joke's modern incarnation, can be used to resist the hyperpolarization and hypocrisy of our current political situation.

In terms of digital media's affordances for online community discourse, existing research provides examples of both positive and negative implications for the identity-forming capacity of digital rhetoric. Richter (2021) centers his analysis of online communities on the structural ethos of Reddit's "Rediquette" and "Rules" pages, linking the moderated discussions of specific subReddits like r/AmITheAsshole and r/PoliticalDiscussion to Aristotle's tenets of decorum, metadiscourse, and *telos,* finding that these types of models for content oversight can counteract the toxicity characteristic of many social media platforms and encourage "empowered, vigorous political and democratic deliberation along shared lines of inquiry that are grounded in community values" (p. 2).

On Facebook pages like Watts Up with That, however, Bloomfield and Tillery (2019) assert that the easily evaded moderation structures allow for identity formation around climate change denial, in which the language of "hyperrationality" (the belief that one's own rationality is more rational than that of the scientific community) reinforces conservative ideologies of climate denial (p. 365). Rhetorical appeals to hyperrationality "create a self-closing loop by arming members with technical-sounding arguments that can be recirculated in other spoken and written contexts. These rhetorical practices also function to reaffirm group membership" (p. 370). With digital media platforms serving as the "new rhetorical landscape" (pp. 23-24), the moderation structures within platform-specific networked communities allow for a wide spectrum of ideological and ethical ecosystems to thrive.

Generational attitudes via social identity

Research specifically regarding Zillennial engagement with climate change reflects social identity theory as a key determinant in shaping how demographic subsets of these generations feel and act differently towards what would outwardly seem to be the most universal impending crisis in public discourse (in 2019 *Grist* magazine called climate anxiety the "biggest pop culture trend" of the year, and Oxford Languages named "climate emergency" the word of the year) (Wray, 2022, p. 24). The through-line of research findings from Hurrelman (2021), Rouse & Ross (2020), and Prelog & Bakić-Tomić (2020), among others, contend that Gen Z and millennials as generational cohorts are distinct identity categories due to the "social, economic, and political events" (Rouse & Ross, 2020, p. 1120) impacting their formative years, but that intersectional identity groupings affect differences in their relationships with climate change.

Wray (2022) and Rouse & Ross (2020) highlight populations disproportionately affected by climate change due to living in the "climate gap," places with higher rates of economic and health issues related to climate change, for whom the consequences of climate inaction are felt more immediately. Wray (2022) highlights historic American disparities in climate impact such as the higher concentration of Black Americans forced to live in "fenceline" communities next to polluting factories and chemical plants due to "a legacy of racist policies" (p. 23). Rouse & Ross (2020) studied Latino Zillennials living in the climate gap, finding that the most salient indicator of attitudes on climate change come from attachments to a particular group identity. As such, Wray's (2022) findings show that Latinos are more likely to get involved with environmental reform campaigns (p. 23).

International studies of Generation Z's positioning in relation to political and social issues via digital rhetoric come to very different conclusions regarding assessments of Gen Z's

relationship with societal issues, often with findings of Gen Z engagement that are at odds with one another. Hurrelman's 2021 study of Gen Z members in Germany found that 37% of participants actively informed themselves about current events and received most of their news via digital media platforms: "public service broadcasting aimed at Generation Z should be fun, but also be serious" (pp. 67-68). Hurrelman does note, however, that Zoomers form their own public sphere online and actively take steps to organize and coordinate activism (p. 70). Prelog & Bakić-Tomić (2020) studied Gen Z's attitudes towards the influx of fake news in Zagreb, Croatia, finding that most of their participants don't verify suspect information on the internet and are aware they contribute to the spread of misinformation, but "do not consider it as a problem or a reason for concern" (p. 454). The authors concede that their research misses *why* Gen Z members in Zagreb might not care about spreading misinformation or the value of truth in society. What is clear is that generational cohorts can differ significantly in their collective engagement with society and the issues facing them depending on demographic differences like geographic location or social positioning.

Among the more consistent findings as to Gen Z's attitude towards climate issues was Wray's 2021 study of 10,000 Gen Z members from countries ranging from the US to Nigeria, in which 45% of participants said climate anxiety affects their daily functioning, 50% said humanity is doomed, and 39% were hesitant to have children. Participants affirmed mental health issues related to climate anxiety were not only due to perceptions of a degrading environment but "perceptions of government betrayal and being lied to by leaders who are taking inadequate climate action while pretending otherwise" (Wray, 2022, p. 25). In each of the studies by Hurrelman, Prelog & Bakić-Tomić, and Wray, Gen Z members were characterized as aware of the issues collectively facing them (with varying degrees of concern), and differences in

engagement correlated with specific identity categories shows the influence of social group attachments on attitudes towards generational issues. This body of research attests to social identity theory's usefulness as a frame for analyzing generational attitudes towards climate change but does not investigate how these identities are formed/reinforced/negotiated through digital rhetoric, a pertinent gap in research given the ubiquity of digital media usage in these generational categories.

Discourse on the "dooms"

Current popular discourse in the United States has politicized generational reactions to the issues specific to climate change, with pundits and editorials representing the "dooms" (doomerism, doomscrolling, doomwatching, etc.) as manifestations of Zillennial anxieties from which to judge their character as identity groups. Doomerism refers to the ideology of Zillennials struck by eco-anxiety, termed by the American Psychological Association as a "chronic fear of environmental doom" (Doherty & Cunsolo, 2021). While terms like eco-anxiety (and synonyms like eco-dread or climate anxiety) refer to psychosomatic distress regarding the state of our environmental degradation (Wray, 2022), doomerism takes on the ideological positioning of giving up on climate issues which humanity can no longer solve. Activities like doomscrolling and doomwatching refer to the masochistic malaise of subjecting oneself to endless news stories and media content extolling scenes of environmental disaster, wildlife extinction, and any news stories attesting to our collective failures to adequately address climate issues. Non-scholarly news publications from either side of American politics link doomerist trends to the Zillennial identity, but with differing notions of what those ideological trends indicate about Zillennials' character, attitude towards civic responsibility, and implied value to society.

One thread of discourse presents arguments negating doomerist perceptions that the environment is past saving, asserting feelings of climate defeatism reflect poorly on Zillennials who identify with them and make choices because of them. Kearns (2021) lambasts “climate alarmists" for not wanting to have children due to environmental concerns, saying the circumstances for quality of life have never been better, in contrast to past time periods in which prospects and child mortality rates were much more dire. “And yet those who came before evidently did not give up on life, since here we all are" (p. 13). Coaston (2022) draws comparisons between end-time Evangelicals preparing for the Rapture and doomers, positioning the doomerist mindset as hysterical and resulting in depressive inaction; she lauds positive mindsets as the best option for facing our environmental issues but does not address the feasibility of addressing those issues or actionable methods to begin doing so.

Another theme amid doomerist discourse situates climate anxieties as understandable and relevant, focusing on methods to assuage fatalistic feelings and take steps towards re-orienting attitudes with digital activism. Harvey (2021) lists statistics regarding trends among Zillennials’ attitudes towards climate anxiety and child-rearing amid the unprecedented array of climate crises. She fully endorses their concerns: “At the Guardian, we will not stop giving this life-altering issue the urgency and attention it demands” (Harvey, 2021). Buckley (2022) writes about climate activists intent on shifting negative doomerist narratives about Zillennials, which she says create self-fulfilling prophecies which could ensure our climate doom. She instead highlights positive changes influencers inspire by example via digital rhetoric, like the TikTok user @thegarbagequeen page debunking doomerist claims, @trashCaulin’s TikTok videos of garbage-pickup pilgrimages, @browngirl_green focusing climate activism stories within intersectionality, and Philip Aiken’s “just to save the world” podcast. *The Guardian* (2022)

describes tension between “climate appeasers” who minimize climate breakdown and doomers, adopting a “hope for the best, plan for the worst” attitude towards preparing for possible climate eventualities which could still be avoided.

Both narratives from public discourse on the issue of climate change regard the trend as indicative of Zillennials’ entitlement and selfishness, *or* a sense of rational pragmatism given the circumstances of climate progress, a stance which positions doomerist ideas as understandable symptoms which can be harnessed into productive action against real threats. Scholarly research on the advent of doomerism and climate anxiety provides explanations for these trends, justifying such polarizing responses to the magnitude of challenges presented by climate emergencies and our leadership’s lack of assertiveness in meeting them.

As points of no return with regard to environmental progress continue to pass us by, the timeline for irrevocable damage to our ecological systems places Gen Y and Z squarely in the path of facing whatever consequences arise from current climate inaction. As Wray (2022) states, “they did not create this dangerous reality, but they have inherited it along with the duty to clean it up, and are often made aware of this before they’ve had the chance to figure out important aspects of their identity” (p. 24). She positions eco-anxiety as an empathetic response for our planet, given the environmental damages already incurred, and that our governing bodies’ response to these effects and the science behind them (particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic) affects Zillennials’ sense of “ontological security,” or the sense of order and continuity in life. “Our leaders have been either fully denying the crisis or promising paltry action that will only delay the inevitable, rather than addressing this emergency at the scale it demands” (Wray, 2022, p. 21). The dooms are presented as understandable, if maladaptive, effects of these seemingly intractable systemic roadblocks to progress.

Phenomena like doomscrolling and doomwatching limit potential for productive discourse and emotional attachment by desensitizing viewers to the seemingly unending crises and traumas constantly visible via digital media, numbing empathy similarly to the way media psychology scholars like Brockmyer (2013) describe desensitization to media violence (pp. 214-220). The stress of real-world crises affects media viewing habits outside of news media as well: Issawi (2022) links the fraught emotional environment in which Zillennials exist to the popularity of the TV series *Euphoria*, in which Zillennials doomwatch the trauma and toxicity on the show as projections of their innate fears and anxieties.

Conclusion

Current evidence suggests we collectively face global and domestic crises that have been worsening for generations and will reach crux points within the lifetimes of Zillennials. As the cohorts who will necessarily inherit the next phase of collective response to these issues, studying the anxieties, values, and identities of Zillennials in relation to these issues could not be more relevant. I have not found significant analysis of how members of generations inheriting these issues relate to them from their own perspective; discourse abounds regarding the character of these generations from the perspective of older generations, and myriad research addresses the role of digital rhetoric in Zillennial collective identity formation and communicative infrastructure, but not definitively in relation to the entirety of social, economic, and global climate-changes issues that collectively loom over the futures of Zillennials.

With my research I hope to begin to bridge that gap. By analyzing popular social media avenues for digital rhetoric and personal accounts of how generational attitudes, anxieties, and identities manifest via social media, I aim to understand how Zillennials' media usage and digital communication reflects, constitutes, or deflects their engagement with the potential end of the

world. Conclusions from these points of interest could help shift existing narratives of Zillennial generational characteristics and help broaden understanding of how these generations will operate socially, professionally, and politically via digital media going forward.

Chapter 3: Methods

Introduction

Existing research on this topic tends to focus on specific generational issues and their influences in terms of identity groupings and intersectionality rather than addressing the actual, lived experience of contending with the totality of social, economic, and climate issues currently facing Zillennials. My methodology seeks to fill in these gaps of research. Towards accounting for Zillennials for whom the onus or consequences of tackling systemic issues in the US and global crises has not yet descended, such as demographics impacted by the "climate gap" or mitigating factors like economic insecurity, I focused my own research on Zillennials representative of the "global north" who care about these issues but have not been directly affected by them.

My own research aimed to highlight the factors most likely to affect views on these topics, such as which generations engage specific platforms for specific anxieties, and differentiating between generational attachments and attitudes of millennials and Zoomers who are typically axiologically linked (hence, the term Zillennials). As I am asserting that these formative ideological processes are negotiated and/or reflected in digital spaces via rhetorical choices, my methodology centers on social media platforms and Zillennials' relationship to them.

Research study design

For this case study I recorded eight voluntary, hour-long qualitative interviews at private locations chosen by the subject, unless they preferred to conduct the interview via Zoom video-conferencing software. I saved the video or audio files on my private laptop hard drive according to IRB data security protocols, transcribed them, and organized quotes and observations based on

themes of 1) generational identification, 2) patterns of digital rhetoric engagement by digital platforms used, 3) self-disclosed individual and collective attitudes towards global and systemic issues, and 4) implications for those attitudes on social and civic engagement.

I asked questions based on those answers about 1) the subject's attitude towards key anxieties identified as central to each generation from existing research (such as climate change or economic/social inequality), 2) how attitudes towards those anxieties are expressed or mitigated through digital rhetoric (in the form of humor, commiseration, etc.), and 3) how subjects conceptualize generational and individual responsibility for addressing the issues facing them. I incorporated these insights qualitatively in the form of quotations and/or paraphrased observations in the analysis/discussion chapters of this project. A complete list of interview questions can be found in the appendix chapter of this project.

Research subjects, recruitment methods, and interview process

I enrolled eight adult (age 18 or above), self-identified members of Generation Y and Z to participate in voluntary hour-long semi-structured interviews conducted in-person or via video conferencing (with the potential for an hourlong follow-up interview). I approached participants via non-probability snowball and convenience sampling methods and sent potential subjects from the CU Boulder/Denver-Metro/California Bay Area a recruitment email, pre-screening questions, and an informed consent document.

After asking subjects to identify themselves within the age parameters of Gen Y or Z, I asked the pre-screening questions, "*Do you consider yourself part of the dominant culture of your city?"* followed by "*Have you been directly affected by impending crises such as climate change? If so, how?"* Though identification with concepts like dominant cultural demographics was open to interpretation by the participants, the purpose of these pre-screening questions was

to focus my interviews on people of middle to upper-class socioeconomic status, for whom engagement with global/domestic crises was likely to be more conceptual than based on direct impact to their lives. In the interest of not offending or evoking defensiveness in potential subjects, explicit mention of socioeconomic status was excluded. The semantics of whether the participant accurately evaluated what the "dominant culture" of their city meant was irrelevant; outside of eliminating potential demographic outliers, the purpose was to contend with participants who consider *themselves* average people who have not been directly and severely impacted by the issues in question.

For the purposes of providing a balanced set of identity demographics from which to investigate generational attitudes, half my interviewees I selected based on self-identification of membership in Generation Y (ages 26-41), and half I selected based on self-identification of membership in Generation Z (ages 18-25). Selection was based on no other criteria, as my research pertains to digital rhetoric's functions within generational identities and attitudes as a collective, although considerations of demographic factors like gender and ethnicity factored into my analysis, as well as self-disclosed rating of generational anxieties.

Through the recruitment process of snowball sampling from my professional, academic, and personal acquaintances, all my subjects fell within the ideological perspectives of Leftist politics, and therefore the implications for their interview analyses pertain to generational members of those same values and politics. As the interview passages were meant to faithfully reflect subjects' emotional orientation towards the issues and dialectics involved in our often-frustrating digital ecology, quotes were not censored for profanity–subjects' prolific and consistent swearing reflects the vehemence with which they speak about these issues.

The interviews, whether in-person or via Zoom video conferencing software, lasted between 35-65 minutes. For each interview, I started from the same list of questions but encouraged participants to follow extended trains of thought for subjects they knew more about or that they were particularly interested in, which resulted in welcome variations regarding specific examples of phenomena or personal anecdotes. Each interview was recorded via Otter.ai and Apple Voice Memos and transcribed via Otter.ai. Interview transcripts were then reviewed in conjunction with each audio recording for accuracy. The process of compiling my analysis began with grouping each interview question answer set by generational cohort to see if patterns emerged along generational lines. Participant answers were then compiled in totality to see if patterns or themes emerged from the entire roster, and if certain patterns carried implications for my research question, various answers were used as evidence for wider commentary in my discussion chapter.

Research subject key

Because my sample population was limited and my interpretive approach to the case study involved in-depth analysis of each participant's perspectives, participants (or "subjects," terms used interchangeably) will be listed individually throughout my methods chapter. Per my informed consent document, no identifying information was to be used in the project, and as such each participant will be identified by a pseudonym followed by either (Z) or (Y) to denote their generational cohort. I allowed each participant to choose their own pseudonym, and their choices did not necessarily align with their personal gender identity; in doing so, they removed demographic concerns regarding gender from inclusion in my analysis. As gender identity was not an axis of analysis for this project to begin with, each participant will also be described with

the de-gendered article “they.” A key listing the members of each generational cohort is included below.

Generation Z (Zoomer) participants:

- Brandi (Z)
- River (Z)
- Naomi (Z)
- Peter (Z)

Generation Y (Millennial) participants:

- Steve (Y)
- Lewis (Y)
- Quinn (Y)
- Jessica (Y)

Chapter 4: Analysis

For the analysis of my research subjects' pre-screening questions and interviews, findings will be presented in three sections: 1) self-reported demographic information, social media usage habits/personal conceptions about social media platform affordances and spheres of influence (as the "new literacies" and rhetorics of digital natives), and personal digital engagement with global/domestic crises; 2) conceptions of generational values, characteristics, and roles in engaging global/domestic crises; and 3) positionality regarding doomerism and conceptions of how best to "care" about these issues in the digital age. The order of findings reflects this project's interest in assessing the distinctions and connections between participants' generalized conceptions of digital media and generational cohorts (towards establishing the relationship between social media affordances for Gen Y/Z and generational evaluations in popular discourse), and participants' *personal* attitude towards the feasibility of making progress on these issues and the role digital media should play in that process.

The findings of this chapter point to a deeply dysfunctional digital media apparatus requiring a user-based, communicative overhaul for social media platforms to be able to facilitate meaningful discourse and progress on global/domestic issues. Because of the business models of these platforms and the upswing in polarizing political/cultural rhetoric, Zillennials are generally disillusioned by the available means of civic engagement and the feasibility of solving these issues without massive sea changes in our collective ideological positioning and ability to compromise. Findings also illuminated a generational gap in digital savviness and emotional burnout towards addressing the issues in question, with participants agreeing that Zoomers alone have the digital wherewithal and stamina required to initiate the collective actions necessary to shift our collective attitude and approach towards our myriad crises. Within the current

circumstances of digital rhetoric, subjects describe the conundrum of caring about these issues, but being unable to engage in the activism or advocacy which would shift progress on them. As such, subjects give insight into what sustainable "care" for these issues could look like while maintaining personal wellbeing.

Section 1

In this section I compiled analyses of questions related to the mediascape in which digital rhetoric takes place, whether related to the global/domestic issues in question or not. To get a sense of who my participants are, and what informs their perspectives on digital media and the issues which matter most to them, I will begin with analysis of my pre-screening questions. I then describe patterns in my participants' usage of social media analyzed from the interviews themselves, with specific attention given to the platform used most often by my participants, Instagram. Within the frame of social media dynamics, participants then describe the extent to which they digitally engage with their top crisis-anxieties and give their insights into the overall impact social media currently has on progress towards those crisis-anxieties.

Analysis of pre-screening questions

Because of the emphasis on generational values and civic engagement pervading popular discourse about attitudes towards crises like cultural/political polarization and social inequality, I asked participants whether they identify with their allotted generational cohort, meaning whether they believe their values and engagement with social/ecological issues aligns with their allotted generation's. Analysis on this line of questioning will be discussed later in this chapter. Based on their answers to the pre-screening questions, each of the participants self-reported themselves as part of the dominant culture of their city except for two, but did not list socioeconomic status as their reasoning, which was the primary pre-screening concern for this project's purview of

subjects. When answering the pre-screening question regarding whether they had been directly impacted by impending phenomena like climate change, all participants answered no except for two, who were mildly affected by local wildfires. Neither participant's experience was deemed too extreme to represent the average member of these generations' experience with climate change.

My final pre-screening question asked participants to rate five "crises" based on their level of personal concern (with the opportunity to include other crises not listed): 1) climate change, 2) political/cultural divisions in the US, 3) being "successful" economically, 4) systemic inequalities in the US (like sexism, racism, or bigotry), and 5) personal mental/physical health. The categories listed, which will be described as "crisis-anxieties" throughout my analysis and discussion chapters, were chosen based on their capacity to encompass any major issue or crisis raised in popular discourse in recent years. This was important because many issues relate to multiple categories and participants could then be free to interpret which category their top choices fell under. The rating system helped orient each interview around the participant's top choices and draw connections between generational priorities, their alignment (or misalignment) with generational characterizations in popular discourse, and, most significantly, how their orientation to doomerism informs their worldview and identity. No participant added any other crisis-anxieties to the list.

Among all participants, the top ranked crisis-anxieties were political/cultural polarization, systemic inequality, and climate change. Political/cultural polarization ranked in the top two choices for six out of eight subjects, systemic inequality ranked in the top two for five out of eight subjects, and climate change ranked in the top two choices for four out of eight (but placed either at the top or bottom of the list for almost all participants). Of the three subjects who ranked

climate change towards the bottom of their list, two were "elder" Zoomers who did not strongly identify with membership in their generation, and all three subjects identified themselves as completely doomerist, and felt the climate was entirely past saving and thus not worthy of more anxiety than the other categories.

Systemic inequality ranked in the top two choices for every participant from Gen Z. The lowest ranked categories among all participants were personal health and economic success; the two participants who ranked personal health first were two of the same participants that ranked climate change last, which they explained was due to prioritizing mental health in response to their doomerist feelings about the irreversibility of our global/domestic crises. Further analysis of subjects' doomerist feelings will be discussed later in this chapter, but the consensus on prioritizing social issues like political/cultural polarization and social inequality while de-prioritizing personal concerns like health and economic success (even within a small sample population) points to a distinct deviation from traditional Western ideologies of neoliberal capitalism and the selfish, entitled characterizations of these generations in popular discourse. A key with each participant's prioritized list is included below.

Generation Z (Zoomer) crisis-anxiety prioritization:

- Brandi (Z)
  - Personal mental/physical health
  - Systemic inequality
  - Political polarization
  - Climate change
  - Economic success

- River (Z)
  - Political/cultural polarization
  - Systemic Inequality
  - Personal health
  - Climate change
  - Economic success

- Naomi (Z)
  - Climate change
  - Systemic inequality
  - Political polarization/cultural divisions
  - Being successful
  - Personal health

- Peter (Z)
  - Political polarization
  - Systemic inequality
  - Climate change
  - Personal health
  - Economic success

Generation Y (Millennial) crisis-anxiety prioritization:

- Steve (Y)
  - Systemic inequality
  - Climate change
  - Political/cultural polarization
  - personal/physical health
  - economic success

- Lewis (Y)
  - Climate change
  - Political/cultural polarization
  - Systemic inequality
  - Economic success
  - Personal health

- Quinn (Y)
  - personal/physical health
  - political/cultural polarization
  - Systemic inequality
  - climate change
  - economic success

- Jessica (Y)
  - Climate change
  - Political polarization

- Economic success
- Systemic inequality
- Personal health

Social media habits and platform affordances

The top social media platforms regularly used by all participants were Instagram (which all participants used regularly), TikTok, Reddit, and Twitter. None of the participants used Facebook with any regularity or personal investment. Zoomers made up the majority of TikTok users, and millennials (or subjects on the generational cusp who identified more strongly with millennials) made up the majority of Reddit and Twitter users; not a single millennial uses TikTok regularly. When asked what their preferred social media platforms "do" for them, or why they regularly use them, two themes emerged among both generations: emotional affordances related to self-care, and affordances related to identity curation.

Regardless of their preferred platform, nearly every Zoomer participant cited using social media for affordances within the realm of self-care, such as pleasurable distraction in the case of Naomi (Z): "it's like TV static for my brain," as a coping mechanism in the case of Brandi (Z): "an escape from my own personal mental health," or for feelings of community with like-minded peers for River (Z): "I don't know, they speak my language… I feel seen."

Among the subjects who most strongly cited self-care affordances as their priority, most were either ambivalent about their usage of social media as a vehicle for identity-formation or completely rejected identity as a reason for digital engagement; none of them were concerned with amassing a digital following or creating a digital brand. As Brandi (Z) stated,

> "To me that goes against why I use social media, which is an escape, a platform for fun and cute animal videos, to laugh about our fucked-up world. I'm not going on there trying to be like, 'look at how different I am and you're stupid for not

> knowing that and disrespecting me.' I'm not looking for a fight… So getting my identity validated by people online is not important to me personally."

Though subjects did not see identity affordances as a priority, they all cited identity projection as a central priority to most social media users and did not begrudge others for using social media in that way.

For the subjects who cited identity affordances as their highest priority, all of them described identity in terms of projection and validation, not identity *formation*; they each looked to social media for projecting a curated version of their identity which would garner the most engagement (and thus validation) from their following or potential audience, and each of them were self-aware of this dynamic with varying degrees of cynicism. As Quinn (Y) said, "you know, there's always some part of this that's like a projection of a certain image. So like, a lot of stuff I post is like, film photography and traveling, like I don't post me sitting in the living room or me doing my job." Nearly every comment about the identity-projecting affordances of social media was centered around Instagram, the most used platform among both generations.

When speaking to the culture and engagement afforded by Instagram specifically, participants across both generations said the platform centers around projecting identity, networking a digital brand, and distraction, but that it is distinctly non-conducive to productive, meaningful communication or interaction (particularly around the crisis-anxieties ranked in the pre-screening questions). Participants generally use the platform to keep up with their immediate circles of friends, to gain artistic or travel-related inspiration, and to escape from the stresses of their lives with mindless "scroll holes" of content with minimal interpersonal engagement or productive personal/social growth. As Steve (Y) said, "I would say 90% of the time, I don't remember or have any sort of recall of like, what the fuck I just watched, which is scary." The

predominant consensus from both generations negated the usefulness of Instagram for any productive processing of anxieties related to major global/domestic crises or issues. “It’s very visually appealing… but I personally don’t see that there’s a lot of interaction to be had,” said River (Z). Though Zoomer participants accepted the identity-projecting centrality of Instagram as much as the millennials, each of them described orienting their Instagram usage away from the “keeping up with the Joneses” mentality of performative lifestyle one-upmanship.

Zoomer participants each described how their usage of Instagram has changed as they got older and their priorities for projecting a personal brand diminished, generally gearing public-facing engagement like story updates and posts as obligatory maintenance for their digital presence. Nearly every participant spoke to the phenomenon of social media presence as an obligation for societal acceptance; to have *no* social media presence whatsoever is a taken-for-granted red flag in contemporary society for my subjects, but outside of marking their existence to the world, their practices with the platform uniformly deviate from identity projection. As Naomi (Z) said, “I got older and like, I wasn't living like a literal pirate... Just like always doing fun things and always having a cool Instagrammable moment doesn't really serve its purpose.” What Zoomers and millennials alike choose to do on Instagram is “lurk,” i.e., observe others’ engagements without posting or interacting themselves.

Almost none of the participants interviewed enjoy posting content to their preferred social media platform profile and actively avoid posting or engaging with others on social media regarding any type of meaningful, opinionated content for two reasons, consistent between both generations. The first reason was that they do not invest interest or care into their digital following because their relationship to performative identity-projection via platforms like Instagram changed, as described above. As Peter (Z) said, “a lot of the people that I follow on

Instagram I just don't care about their lives like that, and I don't really want them caring about mine."

The second reason concerns context collapse[3] and the toxicity permeating digital discourse in the context of the "culture war" which continues to polarize Americans on social/cultural/political issues. This trend of opinion aligns with subjects' consensus on political/cultural polarization and social inequality as priority crisis anxieties: subjects fear posting meaningful, editorial content because of potential reprisal from imagined audiences, limiting their field of digital rhetoric to the mundane or superfluous. Nearly every participant described limiting their interactions on Instagram or any other platform to the superficial because in their estimation, nothing productive comes from those interactions. Brandi (Z) said,

> "Oftentimes when you're really trying to represent yourself on social media… you're just making yourself so vulnerable to getting beaten down on, because anybody can see that… anybody can do whatever they want with your information. So putting it all out there is a more dangerous feeling to me."

Speaking to the types of online argumentation provoked by posting digital rhetoric regarding socially/culturally/politically conscious content, Lewis (Y) said,

> "I get really stressed out by that… It feels safer almost to kind of figure out what I'm trying to say, as opposed to like, impulsively react… and a lot of responses to people's posts are happening instantaneously. And they're not mindful."

Quinn (Y), speaking to the lack of meaningful discourse on Twitter, said, "I've sort of been increasingly turned off by a lot of like, 'woke' and 'cancel culture' shit… like Twitter to me

[3] "Twitter flattens multiple audiences into one – a phenomenon known as 'context collapse.' The requirement to present a verifiable, singular identity makes it impossible to differ self-presentation strategies, creating tension as diverse groups of people flock to social network sites" (Marwick & Boyd, 2010, p. 122).

is like the worst place for like, ‘pile-on culture’ and people jumping down people's throats and ‘canceling’ people for no fucking reason. And I really dislike that.” The issue is not that they have nothing to say on these issues, it’s that the digital environment in which these conversations can happen necessitate willingness to submit oneself to hostility from others who have no intention of conducting reasoned arguments. “So I’m glad that people do post but I’m not going to be one of those people who's trying to change the world through social media,” said Brandi (Z).

Despite being nearly uniformly opposed to posting content that could be received negatively or garner hostility from imagined audiences, the resounding theme when I asked about their regard for self-censorship, or catering to specific audiences, was that almost none of the participants consider their audience outside of their intimate personal social sphere. Not a single participant said they make digital rhetorical decisions based on concern for audiences they don’t have some personal connection to, unless their social media accounts were linked to professional interests. The only form of censorship subjects engaged in was to limit obscenity for concern for family members, except for Jessica (Y), a professor, who limits posting anything that their students would deem shocking, and Quinn (Y), who was specifically concerned with extended family members across the political divide:

> “I want to maintain connections with them without like… [pauses] Like, I have a cousin who's a cop. And I'm not saying I'm like an ‘enlightened centrist’ or anything, but I don't want to be the person who's like clogging up people's feeds with like, ‘let me teach you a lesson today, signed, a white guy.”

For Quinn (Y) and Jessica (Y), digitally voicing their unfiltered opinions around polarizing issues is not worth jeopardizing the social contracts of their professional or familial

lives, particularly because they feel the type of discourse possible on these issues via social media does not result in the respectful or empathetic communication necessary for either side to learn anything or find common ground.

Personal engagement with global/domestic crises

Six out of eight participants said they do not engage whatsoever with the global/domestic crises that matter most to them. Their reasoning for not posting about crisis-anxieties, debating others online, or participating in digital activism fell along three overlapping axes: fear of toxic rhetorical responses from other users, disillusionment with the efficacy of digitally engaging with crises for enacting any meaningful change, and that subjects do not trust the veracity of information they see on social media platforms and don't feel confident in asserting their positions (or that opposing parties would be engaging in debate based on false information and basis of fact, thus invalidating any meaningful exchange).

Subjects who considered themselves informed and capable of voicing opinion or engaging in debate regarding their priority crises-anxieties were turned off from digitally engaging on those fronts for the same reasons they avoid posting in general: digital discourse on any issue or subject, especially polarizing issues, often turns so openly hostile and demeaning that participating is not worth the adverse mental health effects. As Naomi (Z) said,

> "I don't like drawing attention to myself in those kinds of threads because they're usually full of really overactive trolls, just ridiculous, gross social media people like that…if you say something, they might respond with something like that just attacks, like how you look or your character or something like that. And that's not helpful discourse."

The two subjects who did engage with their priority crisis-anxieties online were both in the age range of elder millennials and found satisfaction and purpose in advocating for their values regarding issues like social inequality and climate change. Steve (Y), who fundraises on Instagram, said “Yeah, it feels good… like, these little tiny things that we, that I do, and don't know if it necessarily makes a difference, but it is something that kind of feels better than not doing. So there's that.” Jessica (Y) engages in discussion and advocacy primarily via Twitter, and is conscious of steering clear of the divisive, petty rhetoric permeating much of digital discourse. “I wouldn't say [read: Tweet] like, ‘I hate a president or I love a president,’ but I guess those are my boundaries. Because like, who really cares, right? It's more about issues. It's not about putting hate on people or anything like that.” Their efforts came from a place of participating in addressing these issues without overriding expectations that engagement like theirs would effect widespread changes.

Participants second reasoning for avoiding engagement with their top crisis-anxieties regards misinformation, from the angle of not trusting the information they receive and thus being incapable of asserting confident positions on these issues (and, also from the belief that oppositional perspectives would be engaging debate based on misinformed facts and thus engaging discourse from an alternate reality). Peter (Z) said, “I've just gotten to a point where I don't trust a lot of it at all. And so I don't even trust myself to like, unpack the information and make a sound judgment on it.” For Naomi (Z), the environment of misinformation and groupthink permeating digital discourse was too demoralizing to attempt engagement in meaningful debate:

> “The fact that people are out saying this with no repercussions whatsoever is bad. And then the worst part is seeing how well engaged those Tweets are and how

> many people are like agreeing with that. So like just kind of seeing the positive response to these just absolutely ridiculous takes does play into the doom factor."

Participants' third and most prevalent reasoning for not engaging with global/domestic crises online was that they don't believe any rhetorical engagement they could contribute would have any effect on progress for solving or assuaging these issues. As River (Z) said, "It's not like I'm avoiding it, because I read it. I know it's out there. It's in my brain. I'm thinking about it. But it's not really going to help me to like, worry about it. Because that's only gonna harm myself." Brandi (Z) agreed: "like, yeah, you can go for it… But is anything really going to change, man?" Whether due to the combination of misinformation and confirmation bias negating shifts in perspective or compromise, the toxic rhetoric permeating socially-conscious discourse, or disbelief in the power of digital activism in general, members of both generations do not believe in their agency to enact progress.

The strongest opinion on the efficacy of digital activism or engagement with global/domestic crises of any kind came from Quinn (Y), who became disillusioned with activist efforts after rigorously engaging with in-person community activism, ("the shit they tell you to do instead of sitting on the internet, right?"), campaigning for local representatives with their same values toward enacting change even on a limited, local level.

> "And I still feel like it was kind of a dud, I mean, maybe it moved the needle slightly, but not much. And so this is looping back to: I would not blame somebody for checking out because I hear this story over and over, people get really involved and then they realize it's kind of a sham and then they back away… So I got to a point where I became very disenchanted with this thought

> that I was like making a difference by putting infographics on Instagram. It just didn't make sense to me anymore."

For Quinn (Y), engaging with the crises that matter most to them via traditional, in-person grassroots activism yielded such middling results that online engagements towards the same goals, which require much less personal effort and theoretically have much lower returns on investment, seemed completely arbitrary to the results they wanted to achieve.

Impact of social media on attitudes towards global/domestic crises

Participants' views on the macro effects of social media on their priority crises, separated from their own engagement with those crises, fell along a near-even split (regardless of generational cohort) between subjects who see the potential benefit of digital media towards enacting meaningful changes (but who do not see social media being predominantly used in that way), and those aware of the pitfalls of digital rhetorical engagement but who focus on the positive changes they see in digital culture.

Subjects in the former camp, who see social media currently doing more harm than good, listed the crises at the top of their anxiety list as the reasons why social media isn't living up to its socially transformational potential: cultural/political polarization and social inequality (i.e., the views and attitudes which contribute to it). They view the structure of social media platforms' business model as enabling the worst elements of culture war polarization and bigotry to flourish, as commodifying attention has shifted algorithms towards the most divisive, misinformed content possible. Recent whistleblowing events from within social media giants like Facebook/Meta confirm the intentional shift towards polarizing, sensationalized content; as former Facebook data scientist Francis Haugen testified in Congress, "The result has been more

division, more harm, more lies, more threats and more combat. In some cases, this dangerous online talk has led to actual violence that harms and even kills people" (Allyn, 2021).

Subjects like Lewis (Y), however, don't just blame the platforms: "I don't think these digital constructs are the issue. I think it's human behavior. That's the problem. It's like, you know, it's 'us versus them.' And where's the freedom of thought? Everybody's just trying to be fed something and that's how everybody just keeps making money." Zoomers like River (Z) referenced the digital toxicity and tribalism that's flourished following the recent upswing in political/cultural polarization, saying,

> "I also think that there's that aspect of groupthink, like, you don't want to be the one to say something against what you feel is the majority of the people in the room because you feel like you might get attacked. So you're just gonna comply and assimilate with them instead of actually speaking your mind."

Several participants in both generations voiced concern for the overriding ethos and structure of social media engagement towards social/cultural progress but made points to note positive influences within the digital sphere, and ways in which social media has allowed grassroots organizing to shift selective progress and awareness of issues in novel ways. Brandi (Z) said, "people can also do really nice, good things on it. I don't know. AOC [Democratic NY Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez], love her. Lizzo [a pop star] is an example of somebody who always… everything she puts online is like, I would say positive and helps people, brings them up." Jessica (Y) views the grassroots digital activism around fandoms for pop culture phenomena like #FreeBrittney[4] as valuable examples of how to get communities interested in collective action.

[4] #FreeBrittney: the fan-led grassroots campaign to free pop star Brittney Spears from her conservatorship, in which fans "took it upon themselves to investigate the arrangement that controlled Spears's life, scouring the star's social

> "So I told my students like, y'all need to run for politics… We need people in Congress to use the internet… It's where we [find] overlapping values and how we can become participants in that…in these social change movements, and finding out just different ways we could do that… It doesn't have to be time consuming and it doesn't need to be clicktivism."

Jessica's commentary speaks to a nascent sea change coming from the digital ideology of Gen Z, a turn towards recentering honest communication and self-presentation in response to the commodification of digital identity practices within influencer culture. As Zoomers' social life has *always* been enmeshed with digital culture, their level of concern and care for what is valued on social media platforms is respectively higher than other generations', and they're significantly more invested in the rhetorical environment which facilitates their social lives.

Shifts in digital culture (values, authenticity)

One major generational difference in perspective regarded positive shifts in the value of authenticity within digital culture, a concept that has permeated commercial and social consciousness in myriad ways since the ubiquity of social media began. Out of all my interview subjects, only the Zoomers spoke to a shift in digital consciousness away from the performative virtue-signaling of progressive values that created the public fervor around cancel culture and the commercialized dynamics of influencer culture. Naomi (Z) believes there's a palpable change in the ways digital audiences value honesty and transparency over influencer-based identity curation intended to seem natural and unadulterated. They brought up the recent upswing in

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media posts for clues, examining court documents, organizing online and holding demonstrations outside court hearings and concerts to raise awareness of what was going on" (Anguiano, 2021).

influencer accountability, in which massively popular influencers are being called out for misrepresenting products and falsifying claims to authenticity:

> "It was just talked about constantly in the discourse of like, if this makeup artist who people have really gained trust from and we thought would show us like, more affordable hacks for other things or whatever... Like if they're selling out like this, like who else is selling out?"

River (Z) said they've automatically started unfollowing or muting users who use personal engagement with social issues as props for increased following and attention. "I feel like I can tell when a tweet is about like a genuine opinion, or if they're just tweeting about it to get engagement. It's like, okay, this is like you're doing too much now. Like, I gotta get you off." Zoomers like River and Naomi are starting to see trends towards unfollowing or calling out influencers, brands, or individuals who they deem inauthentic to the values they claim to represent, especially given current economic conditions. Naomi (Z) said,

> "People don't want to see just these flagrant displays of wealth, probably because people aren't very wealthy right now. And people want to see more content that they relate to, and like, stuff that doesn't feel like you're watching that super-out-of-touch reality TV show."

They hope such grassroots resistance to commercialization and overconsumption carries up the economic ladder to the corporations who market to digital audiences and set the ideological standards towards neoliberal capitalism.

In this section of analysis, participants revealed a mediascape which generally discourages collective/individual activism or productive discourse towards the issues which matter most to them: political/cultural polarization, systemic inequality, and climate change.

Because the digital rhetoric provoked by discussion of those topics is so rife with hostility, misinformation, and general disillusionment with digital activism, participants generally relegate their digital rhetoric practices to the innocuous functions of platforms like Instagram, the most popular social media outlet among my participants. For most of my participants, platforms like Instagram provide the emotional affordances of self-care and identity curation, which insulates subjects within algorithmic "filter bubbles"[5] that cater to their interests and emotional wellbeing. Participants, notably among the Zoomers, also pointed to forces shifting the ethos and discursive environment of social media for the better, and attest to Gen Z's potential for galvanizing digital activism.

Section 2

For this section I compiled participant responses to questions related to how they view millennials and Zoomers in terms of their defining characteristics, values, and digital rhetoric practices as they relate to engaging with participants' top crisis-anxieties. Inspired by existing public discourse generally characterizing these generations in negative ways, I sought to compare generational narratives from public discourse with firsthand experiences and perceptions from members of each generation. Analysis from this section helped organize an updated, realistic blueprint for how these generations conceptualize the crises facing humanity, the societal and digital factors hampering efforts to solve them, and the psychology underlying Zillennials' therapeutic digital rhetoric practices.

Millennials (generational characteristics and digital rhetoric)

Participants among both generations shared similar characterizations and valuations of the millennial mindset, worldview, and social positioning in relation to addressing

[5] Filter bubble (n): "an environment and especially an online environment in which people are exposed only to opinions and information that conform to their existing beliefs" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

global/domestic crises. They brought up the digital divide for millennials, the unmoored, liminal cultural space between being brought up on Boomer values and culture, the dawn of the internet era, and experiencing the explosion of social media culture. They view the fact that the majority of millennials had to assimilate to digital culture, as opposed to being born from it like Zoomers, as key to their psychology around digital activism, with Zoomers like Naomi (Z) saying, "in the millennial era, you're kind of like mourning the death of the, quote, 'simpler life' while also trying to embrace this 'internet land' at the same time."

Subjects also described the overriding disillusionment and cynicism of millennials towards enacting social/political/ecological change due to disappointments in economic policy which disenfranchised them from the lifestyles and ideologies of previous generations, as well as a collective lack of progress on global/domestic issues. Quinn (Y) said,

> "I think what any millennial would hopefully say to you is like, we went through the recession. And that didn't meaningfully change policy. We went through multiple elementary school shootings that didn't meaningfully change policy… Yeah, I think that sort of breeds a very nihilistic viewpoint. Because even if you have little hope, you would think that a cataclysmic 'Black Swan' event would get people kicked into action, and it still just doesn't happen."

For many millennial participants, the pervading sense of disillusionment with grassroots activism stems from disappointment and resentment from previous generations' mishandling of solutions to the crises currently, or impedingly, negatively affecting their lives and the world at large. Jessica (Y) said,

> "I'm really hopeful with courage for Gen Z taking over…because they are fearless in their voice, I think in a way that millennials just are too exhausted to be

> fearless. Because we've had a recession and a pandemic. We've had promises made to us as a generation and nothing was kept in terms of, you know, education we can afford and those kinds of things."

Outside of one Zoomer, Peter (Z), who was under the impression that millennials were responsible for the economic policies which led to the exacerbation of the global/domestic crises at the top of their priority list, subjects overwhelmingly disagreed with the narratives in public discourse regarding millennial hypersensitivity and self-interested uselessness to society. As Jessica (Y) said, "We don't have people in Congress that necessarily represent our values. And that's regardless of the political spectrum. Millennials aren't represented and when they are, they're made fun of, they're called snowflakes."

Zoomers also disagreed with the notion that millennials are self-victimizing burdens to society and empathize with the situation millennials were subjected to under the circumstances of the recession, wage gaps, debt, and straying from the norms of American hegemonic archetypes like the Nuclear Family. River (Z) said,

> "I wouldn't say they're victims in the sense of like, somebody stole their lunch money… It's more just like this is what I have grown up living through. I'm just trying to, like, share my story. And sometimes it's not even about complaining, just stating facts. And sometimes the facts are pretty shitty, but people who have sort of like those different views will see it as complaining because they didn't specifically have that experience. Or they feel like they had it worse."

A positive theme emerged from the millennial mindset regarding disillusionment with progress on social/economic/political/ecological issues and bearing the onus of responsibility to improve the situation: because millennials are already blamed for many of society's breakdown

in the eyes of older (and certain members of younger) generations, and no discernable results from concerted efforts towards progress have emerged, millennials are adopting a liberated lifestyle of self-care. These were the participants who prioritized personal health/success above climate change or other societal issues. As Steve (Y) said,

> "Millennials are seen as wanting, and I'm honestly kind of proud about this… like, choosing happiness over duty, and like a sense of being a worker in this workforce, [this] capitalist machine. I want to actually create art and find joy and choose mental health over, you know, success. And I think that's something that is specific to this particular age range."

Brandi (Z) identifies with that perspective as well: "I think millennials are more similar to my mindset where it's like, I'm just worried about myself and like, everything's fucked... I'm just gonna try to be happy and do my thing." Quinn (Y) put it pointedly: "To me it's like reverting to like, okay, if this system is so fucking powerful and fucked up and strong, what is the number one thing I can do for the rest of my life? I can spend time with my dog, with my family, with my friends."

Zoomers (generational characteristics and digital rhetoric)

Several themes emerged from participants' views on the general characteristics of Gen Z and their digital rhetoric regarding global/domestic crises, the central impression being that Gen Z is more digitally engaged and galvanized, individually and collectively, around issues that they care about. Interviewees voiced hope for the invigorated engagement they see in Gen Z stemming from Zoomer's desire to change what doesn't work for them about society, and not repeat past generational mistakes that led to the current spate of social/political/ecological crises. As Lewis (Y) said, "And that's how we're going to actually be able to stop the intergenerational

trauma from happening… So I see that reflecting in a lot of things on social media, I see people wanting to change and I see people wanting to work together as a collective." Subjects pointed to teenage activist Greta Thunberg as a prime example of the type of fearless, speaking-truth-to-power nature of Gen Z engagement with major global issues. Peter (Z) said, "All I'm thinking of is Greta Thunberg right now. She… Was just like something that like, a switch turned on in a lot of people my age where they were like, we need to act on this."

Subjects view Gen Z digital engagement as heightened evenly across political spectrums: they believe positionality towards global/domestic issues is split by Progressive or Conservative ideologies but that Zoomers argue their vested interests with the same level of intensity. As Naomi (Z) put it, "there's a pretty big divide… between people who want to ignore all of these issues of equality or inequality and climate change, and people who are actively working to try to be in that space to help figure out those systemic issues." Lewis (Y) described the Gen Z capacity for "liberated expression" as the key characteristic inspiring Zoomers' heightened interest in arguing positions on global/domestic crises: "And that goes both sides of the political party. There's a lot of people that are Gen Z that are just fucking opinionated. So whether they're like, far right end of the spectrum, far left end of the spectrum, they're like fighting for something."

Participants agreed that because Zoomers are more openly opinionated and argumentative about their values and anxieties, their digital rhetoric practices often result in the toxic, unproductive types of discourse that makes people (like my interview subjects) afraid or unwilling to participate. As River (Z) said, ""I mean, especially… with the clap-backs they come up with, honestly, it's just it's kind of like I'm scared of my own generation. Like… I don't want any smoke from them." Online bullying, doxxing (posting identifying information about

someone online), and hypersensitive responses to content related to identity politics leading to disrespectful interactions were all mentioned as (symptoms) of Gen Z digital engagement. Brandi (Z) noted a disparity between Gen Z engagement with social/identity politics content and wider global crises, which does align with public discourse narratives about young people's hypersensitivity around topics like gender identity: "like, 'if you don't call this non-binary person by the correct pronouns, I'm going to slit your damn throat.'"

However, that level of argumentativeness mixed with digital literacy also allows Gen Z to call out hypocrisy and bigotry in political/cultural figures in ways unavailable to previous generations. Naomi (Z) said,

> "These are people who were raised in the digital age and were raised with the idea that they had a digital footprint the day they were born, because their parents posted on Facebook the picture of them being born. So they have a pretty solid understanding that everybody has something on social media that they probably don't want showing up."

Zoomer participants described the ability of Gen Z to use digital skills to point out contradictions in values and policies of politicians, particularly amidst the recent upswing in identity politics and culture war issues currently overtaking American politics. Naomi (Z) continued,

> "Yeah, there was a woman talking about how we need to like, re-introduce Christianity to public schools, and talking about like, how we strayed too far from God. And someone just quote-Tweeted with an image of her getting arrested for sexual relations with a 15-year-old student… It was just like, is this you? So?"

Subjects across both generations described hope for the future because of how Gen Z uses their lifetime of expertise with digital media to leave behind cultural constructs from previous generations that don't serve them, and take the institutions, politicians, and cultural voices responsible for current crises to task with a ferocity that millennials are too burnt out to embody. As Jessica (Y) stated,

> "The fact that they're coming out in ways of how they identify themselves is different than any other generation: how they don't want to be labeled, how they don't want to be boxed up, how they stand up for themselves. Millennials didn't, you know… When people call them snowflakes, they're like, 'okay, I guess…' You know, like we really didn't have this uprising. But you mess up with Gen Z and you don't give them the appropriate label, they will talk about it. They will stand up for themselves."

Naomi (Z) echoed the sentiment:

> "Those people [Zoomers] have a better handle of like… I know how to get a message out, this is why I can create content to do this… the people who are kind of just raised on it and learned it just by existing are going to have an edge, especially when they're of age to run for office and do things like that."

That Gen Z was raised within the time that the internet was starting to be used as a political weapon makes them more aware of the stakes in play, what rhetoric is necessary to participate, and more importantly, that their fervor around their perceived issues in society gives them the drive to galvanize towards change.

Findings from this section indicate significant misunderstanding or mischaracterization within public discourse narratives of the lived experiences of Zillennials and their digital civic

engagement practices. Participants from both generations agreed that millennials are justifiably disillusioned by previous unsuccessful efforts at collective societal change and are justifiably fed up with being scapegoated for the breakdown of American institutions; as such, they've prioritized self-care which deviates from traditional hegemonic ideologies and cultural institutions. Though both generations equally care about our global/domestic crises, subjects described Zoomer's specific potential for galvanizing progress, as they have the digital literacy skills to address these issues in novel ways and aren't too jaded to invest in them as millennials.

Section 3

This section I focused on participants' views towards doomerism and the practices they maintain to mitigate concern for their crisis-anxieties with personal wellbeing, in order to understand the outlook and attitude towards these issues held by the generations that will eventually inherit responsibility for them. As implications of the doomerist ideology are currently being debated in public discourse, such as Zillennial decisions to not have children, I wanted to know where these generations stand on the potential "end of the world," and what it means to negotiate doomerist feelings amidst our current social, economic, and political climate.

Doomerism (and related implications)

For my participants' personal stance on whether the global/domestic crises they prioritized could be solved, or at least curtailed in terms of severity, I applied the logic of Doomerism to any of the crisis-anxieties in the list. I asked participants whether they would consider themselves doomers in terms of their attitude towards our collective capacity to address and rectify any or all of the crises currently facing American society and the world at large. Their responses were not split along generational lines: certain members had more hope for the future than others within both age cohorts, but collectively not one participant believes that on our

current course of mitigation efforts towards any of the global/domestic crises currently facing humanity, we will be able to solve or significantly curtail them. Half of participants [River (Z), Brandi (Z), Quinn (Y), and Lewis (Y)] firmly believe the world is doomed, both in terms of climate change and lack of meaningful progress on social/cultural/political issues. As River (Z) said, “I think since I was able to process and critically think of things I was like, well, it's kind of a no brainer, we're on borrowed time.”

The other half [Peter (Z), Naomi (Z), Jessica (Y), and Steve (Y)] held out blind hope for the future but recognized that to make enough meaningful progress to curtail our crises, we will have to collectively overhaul our entire approach to addressing them. Most of them had no inkling of how those changes could occur within our current governing bodies and public attitudes towards addressing these issues. Most participants like Peter (Z) hold out hope for Gen Z to overhaul our institutions and ideologies around these issues: “I've lost faith in the current people in power and the ones who have like, just who hold and value the traditional, like, approach to things. And so I think it's going to be up to the really engaged, socially conscious people in my generation.” Naomi (Z) believes we will only collectively change our approach to climate change once our supply chain is affected and our economy eventually tanks: “I think that how people's personal dollars function is going to be a big pivot point. I think we've got like, maybe 40 good years… Like maybe before it gets, like very real. Yeah. Like, really, really real.”

Self-reported doomers like Lewis (Y) and Quinn (Y) grappled with their cynicism towards our collective capacities for meaningful change, specifically noting their *desire* to have hope for humanity and recognizing the unhelpfulness of adopting a nihilistic stance. For Quinn (Y), the world ending as we know it just means another chapter in human adaptation, citing the many times humanity has survived cataclysmic events:

> "I think humans have been through extremely turbulent times or plagues, economic revolutions, social upheaval. Now is nuclear and climate threat a bigger threat than all of those things? I don't know. I almost feel like it would be, like, hubris to make a judgment like that. Yeah, despite all my cynicism, it's like humans tend to adapt and get through things."

This is a subtle departure from the public discourse narratives problematizing doomerist ideology, in which doomers are indicted for thinking our current circumstances are worse than they have ever been throughout human history. Perspectives like Quinn's (Y) use that logic as a positive, assuaging feelings of defeat regarding our inability to solve our societal apocalypse with hope that some version of humanity will remain after the damages of climate change etc., have run their course.

For Lewis (Y), the implications of positionality on doomerism involve mitigating cynical rationality with morality and conscience. They rationally believe that humanity can't solve these issues, but do not wish to outwardly project that attitude and mire in the despondency of giving up. "The reality is, we're fucked. Like, that's not, you know… That's just what that is. And I *want* to feel like there can be a change. I just think like, that's a millennial conundrum right there… Like, how do I grapple with the reality of the demise of what we've done?"

Regarding the implications of doomerist positionality on the prospect of having children, another thread of alarmist public discourse in response to the doomerist trend, participants were almost uniformly aligned around the position that having children amidst our current crises is impractical or unadvisable. Some subjects in that camp, like Lewis (Y) harbor desires to have children despite acknowledging how bleak the circumstances might be, economically or culturally: "I'm so far removed from like, my child reaching 18 and like, walking down the road

and just having like, an active volcano that they have to step over… I'm so far removed from that, like, I'm fucking living in a blissful ignorance-based thinking about a child." Some were firmly against the concept of bringing children into the world due to the circumstances their children would face, the biggest factor being finance: among those who believe the world is doomed, all of them agree that being economically privileged would shield potential children of Gen Y or Z from the adverse effects of our collective spiral. As Naomi (Z) said, "for me, personally, I don't see myself as ever being able to create enough personal wealth and security in this world to be able to survive what's going to come next with a child."

Idealized "care" for global/domestic crises

A new question arose during the course of the interview process which puts into perspective the dilemma faced by the population represented by my participant pool (Zillennials who care about global/domestic crises, who use social media, and who do not consider themselves outliers of their dominant local culture): *What does it look like to "care" about these issues in a sustainable way, given the circumstances in which Zillennials are tasked with caring?* In other words, how should one practice care for these issues given participants' attitudes towards doomerism, individual or collective senses of agency within current systems of institutional and ideological hegemony (which are also enmeshed with digital culture), and the hardships of economic survival? The crux of "mediating the apocalypse" for my participants became mitigating their conscience regarding care for these issues against the realities of their economic responsibilities and disillusionment with our individual or collective agency to enact systemically transformative progress. Lewis (Y) encapsulated the dilemma:

> "At the end of the day, I don't want to feel like a shit person. But I'm trying to fucking keep myself afloat… And I don't know where that balance is because I

> don't know if I have the ability to step into my power position and be like, 'I'm gonna make a fucking environmental or political difference. And I'm also going to pay my rent on time, I'm also going to be able to get gas so I can drive to work.'"

Two Zoomer participants, Naomi (Z) and River (Z), focused their approach to practices of care around reflexivity within digital engagement and rhetoric, or maintaining self-awareness towards our fixations on influencer culture, digital consumerism, and the divisive and outraged rhetoric of cancel culture. Naomi (Z) recontextualizes their digital content engagement back to its emotional affordances of entertainment and coping mechanisms, citing the recent "de-influencing" TikTok trend[6] as an example of how digital media can be used to self-correct away from over-consumption and dishonest identity performance.

> "I try to maintain that, like, I enjoy this content, not because I need to purchase these things. But I like watching someone, like, go through these things. Like there's something soothing to me about watching someone go through their chore list, maybe because it's something I've never been able to do in my life by successfully completing a to-do list or something like that."

River's (Z) prescription for care is simple but in opposition to the overriding argumentative tendencies of social media and cancel culture: practice listening (i.e., give thoughtful consideration for others' perspectives online) and empathy.

> "The culture, I think, has a duty to sort of promote changing. Like I think that's what it should be about. It's not shunning people. It's about wanting them to do

[6] "De-influencing:" A viral TikTok hashtag in which content creators tell followers what not to buy, giving honest reviews of products and calling out disingenuous advertising by beauty influencers "who post misleading reviews and promote overconsumption" (Arshad, 2023).

better and advocating for them to do better for themselves and for other people. And then bringing them back in."

Both their approaches centralize a type of expanded media literacy, an awareness of (and reorientation away from) the systemic mechanisms of our digital attention economy which exacerbate our inability to solve global/domestic crises and discourage participation in productive debate and advocacy around those issues.

From the most extreme doomer perspectives of the subject pool, Quinn (Y) and Brandi (Z) orient their practices of care around prioritizing ethical personal health and happiness, not investing their lifestyle or identity into digital activism. Quinn (Y) cited the "grill pill" trend on Reddit, a subversion of the conspiracy theorist concept of "taking the red pill,"[7] as a way to prioritize community and personal joy: "You know…'Take the grill pill,' go outside and grill some food and like, hang out with your friends. Right? And that's become, like, really popular for good reason." Brandi (Z) agrees, suggesting going offline as a way to re-introduce community and social change outside of the dynamics of social media: "I think probably more like offline actions to create a sense of community… Like the online stuff is helpful. What is more helpful is, you know, actual human interactions. But how do we do that? I don't know."

Most participants, however, orient their practices of care for these issues around taking small, actionable steps towards enacting positive changes that make activism and advocacy less overwhelming. Peter (Z) focuses their engagement with social change to the arena they're most passionate about, their career. "It's just like, you can talk about it all the time, but you never feel

[7] Red-Pill (v): "to give someone information that allows them to see the world as it really is. This word is often used on the internet by people with views on the political right, especially people who are against feminism (the belief that women do not have the same rights, power, and opportunities as men and should have them)," (Cambridge University Press, n.d.).

like you're doing anything. It's just frustrating. But I think sports is one industry that I think I can make change in… It's like, tangible, you know?" Steve (Y) enacts small-scale activist engagements with demonstrable effects, digitally or otherwise:

> "I feel like instead of just feeling overwhelmed, and in an existential pile of doom, there's a way in which I'm activated… It's like, you know, okay, at least this maybe bought some someone or a family a meal or, you know, I dropped off some supplements to an encampment."

Several participants like Jessica (Y) advocate for making their dissatisfaction with our approach to progress on global/domestic issues heard, both socially and politically—through voting:

> "I think talking about it, posting about it, and just not forgetting that it's there is really important. That's the only cathartic outlet I have, is just making sure that I'm not forgetting it... But at the end of the day, it's really about large government regulations. So voting people into power that have your same values. That's the only thing that's gonna make any difference. It's not you saving water while brushing your teeth. Sadly."

For Zillennials like my participants, negotiating how best to care for the issues that matter to them while maintaining financial stability and personal wellbeing has become a constant dialectic in their lives. Overall, participants felt confused and frustrated with the available options for enacting progress, especially as the digital apparatus which is meant to facilitate collective action and productive communication continuously fails them in that regard. Beyond the social media platforms which no longer serve as outlets for productive rhetoric and interpersonal communication, confidence in the integrity of the actual governmental institutions

responsible for implementing any potential changes towards progress is extremely low. Zillennials whose lives are inextricably linked to digital life can't forgo digital engagement and are thus left grasping at digital straws for any actions which could help shorten the gap between their intentions for care, and the realities of our digital ecology's dysfunction.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Before discussing the implications of my analysis findings, it's important to contextualize the findings of this project within the broader scope of generational anxieties, values, and identities towards the issues in question. The size of my sample population was never meant to be comprehensively generalizable to the population of informed, digitally-engaged Zillennials who care about global/domestic crises, as the limited scope of this subject pool negates the potential for broad generalizations. As a case study of Zillennials who represent that category, the project was intended to shed light on the dynamics of mediating an unprecedented societal situation through the ecology of digital media and its rhetoric, especially from first-person accounts of those generational cohorts that have not been the focus of scholarly research.

A matrix of rhetorical dysfunction

The findings from my methodology section collectively answered the research question of this project, *"How does Zillennials' usage of digital rhetoric function in their relationship with the calamities facing humanity?*" Unexpectedly, the significance of the answer concerns the ways Zillennials *aren't* using digital rhetoric to address the issues which matter most to them. Through cross-referencing answers regarding digital rhetoric practices, conceptions of digital media affordances, and attitudes towards doomerism, an unexpected dynamic emerged which I have termed a "matrix of rhetorical dysfunction." This matrix is a self-sustaining feedback loop that represents the greatest impediment to Zillennial civic engagement, at least from the demographic perspectives implicated by my participant pool. Three interrelated components comprise the matrix of rhetorical dysfunction: 1) the crises of political/cultural polarization and systemic inequality, 2) the business models of social media platforms, and 3) belief in the efficacy of progress on *any* global/domestic crisis via digital media. The first two factors feed

into and sustain one another, and work in tandem to affect the third, but all three elements produce the current dysfunctional role digital rhetoric plays in the relationship between Zillennials and the calamities facing humanity. I will break down each element of the matrix in respective order.

Based on participants' average crisis-anxiety priorities, the calamities facing humanity that matter most to Zillennials (political/cultural polarization, systemic inequality, and climate change) concern systemic issues about the entire world or domestic society at large, not self-oriented issues such as personal health or economic success. Between both generations, polarization and systemic inequality ranked as the issues of greatest concern.

Currently, the crises of cultural/political polarization and social inequality manifest on social media in ways that stop the Zillennial users who are invested in solving them from attempting to do so. Recent upswings in culture war issues pit hegemonic, heteropatriarchal, Conservative ideologies against "woke"[8] Progressive ideologies and policies, enabling increasingly hostile rhetoric on the platforms most used by my subject pool. Even among Zillennials like my participants, who care about these issues and actively want to make progress on them through the means available to them, (e.g., social media platforms), their personal experiences with efforts towards digital activism were met with such derision, pettiness, and openly hostile rhetoric that they've stopped attempting digital engagement with the issues that matter most to them. Despite acknowledging that their social media audience is strictly for their immediate circles of friends, family, and acquaintances (as opposed to public-facing "influencer" accounts), their fear of toxic reprisal for commentary on social issues dissuades them from voicing opinions, engaging in debate, or making advocacy/activist posts regarding those issues.

[8] Woke (adj): "aware of and actively attentive to important societal facts and issues (especially issues of racial and social justice)" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

The second element of the matrix of rhetorical dysfunction concerns the epistemology of digital culture, the ways of knowing formed and *informed* by the dissemination processes of social media platforms, and the business models which direct them. Multiple participants cited mistrust of factual information from news media, political pundits, and algorithms biased towards sensationalism as their reasoning for not engaging with global/domestic crises. In the "post-truth[9]" era, Zillennials can no longer base their judgments on an agreed-upon basis of facts; if opposing sides of political/social/cultural issues do not agree on the very nature of reality or cannot operate on good-faith intentions to progress, any claims to progress on these issues becomes immediately suspect of ulterior motives to an unprecedented degree.

Acknowledging the algorithmic bias of digital media's attention economy, in which user data is sold to advertisers in an ever-increasing bid for user attention, means acknowledging that the information regarding global/domestic crises may be incomplete, misleading, or patently false. As record-breaking numbers of Zillennial social media users receive most of their news of global/domestic crises through these social media platforms (50% for Zoomers, 44% for millennials) (Watson, 2022), the problematized veracity of that news makes Zillennials like my research subjects distrust their own grasp of these crises, undermining confidence in their ability to make informed arguments or opinions about these issues. The threat of misinformation or information bias also obscures any birds-eye view of current progress on these crises, since subjects are aware that their feeds are propagated by the most viral, sensational, or polarizing content possible.

The matrix of rhetorical dysfunction prevents the social transformation potential of digital media from reaching fruition, relegating digital affordances and rhetorical practices to

[9] Post-truth (adj): "relating to a situation in which people are more likely to accept an argument based on their emotions and beliefs, rather than one based on facts" (Cambridge University Press, n.d.).

self-care, coping, and identity curation/self-writing (but not identity *formation*, as suggested in my literature review). When the overriding impression from social media is that it's impossible to tell if we're making progress on the issues which matter most to us, or if any personal efforts will have any effect (and that if one *tries* to engage, they will be met with open hostility and bullying) … People stop trying. As such, almost none of my subjects use social media to engage with these crises directly, instead making digital rhetoric decisions based on the self-soothing, innocuous, and therapeutic affordances of digital media.

This dynamic suggests an unfortunate deviation from the findings of previous studies outlined in my literature review regarding the affordances of digital rhetoric for identity and activism; instead of using networked communities for collective action, or to explore new avenues for identity formation, my participants no longer invest care into wholeheartedly developing their identity online. Instead, they begrudgingly follow the implicit obligations of contemporary societal norms that demand individuals have some form of social media presence. With my participants' awareness of this taken-for-granted aspect of digital culture, their usage of social media's identity affordances is restricted to identity performance: subjects reflexively disclose certain curated aspects of their lives but are not personally invested in projecting their entire identity into social media or allowing it to significantly affect their identity. Subjects knowingly maintain a digital footprint of selective posts and engagements which are meant to be attractive to their audiences, but this type of self-writing keeps only surface-level curatorial elements from Weisgerber and Butler's (2016) definition.

The dynamic of surface-level identity performance and lack of meaningful engagement turns the digital sphere into a backdrop for innocuous cultural expression, simultaneously an outlet for attention, distraction, entertainment, and therapy/coping mechanisms. Because of the

matrix of rhetorical dysfunction, the role of digital rhetoric for Zillennials is not as a tool to address and make progress on the important issues facing society, but as a salve against the pain of internalizing that our digitally-mediated communication practices are purposefully structured in a way that negates online participation towards progress on these crises. The rhetorical fervor digital media facilitates about the systemic crises of polarization and inequality also contributes to the crisis of climate change, the third crisis priority for my participants, which has become an increasingly polarized issue along the battle lines of the culture war. Recent examples of cultural polarization centered on small steps towards climate change progress continue to emerge from Conservative politicians and media apparatus like the (Rupert Murdoch-owned) *Wall Street Journal*, with editorials like "The Coming Gas Stove Culture War" making kitchen appliances into ideological battlegrounds (WSJ, 2023).

Systemic inequalities, polarization, and their related public discourse dominate our political landscape and as such, relegate widespread policies regarding climate issues to the periphery of our political system's priority list. As climate efforts thus far have been underwhelming even before the onset of increased polarization and the post-truth era, my participants' current outlook on our chances for major progress on any of their top crisis priorities is clear: in the near future, the world as we know it is coming to an end.

Generational roles in the coming "apocalypse"

Between both generations, participants reached consensus that the world is ending as we know it. Whether that fact scares them or not (as some have already made peace with that eventuality), everyone agrees that we are not currently doing the work necessary to curb or reverse the damages of climate change, social inequality, and political/cultural polarization (the top crisis-anxieties among my participants). In terms of discourse that positions doomerism as a

Zillennial excuse to completely give up on addressing societal and global issues, the “as we know it " conditional of that consensus is key. Though many of my participants believe we’ve crossed the point of no return for reversing the damages of climate change, for example, they haven’t given up on hope for our ability to collectively change our ways for the better and adapt to whatever circumstances result from the length of time it will take to start implementing those changes. Participants had varied levels of confidence in what those changes might look like, or how bad societal/global circumstances might have to get in order to provoke them, but both generations agreed that Zoomers and subsequent generations will be the ones to spearhead those changes, and they will do so through digital rhetoric.

Despite agreeing that currently, digital rhetoric is overwhelmingly standing in the way of progress on our crises, both generations agree that digital rhetoric practices will be a critical function in future progress on social/cultural/political/ecological issues, and that the generational values and attitude of Zoomers, along with their singular propensity for digital rhetoric, will make the difference. In my introduction I described both millennials and Zoomers as digital natives, since the bulk of millennials were born during or after the ubiquity of digital media. As my participants have attested however, there is a significant difference between adapting to the early evolution of digital media and being born *after* society was already completely oriented around digital life. Because of the seismic shifts within digital advances that occurred within only a decade or so, Zoomers’ relationship with digital rhetoric practices is significantly deeper, and that difference in orientation towards digital media and its rhetorics is what demonstrable ideological (and eventually actionable) progress toward our global/domestic crises will depend on.

As such, Zillennial is an apt term for linking the two generations' attitudes towards the end of the world as we know it and their consensus in positioning around generational roles for potential progress in the face of it, but beyond that, my participants pointed to certain stark differences between the characteristics defining each generation. Though Zoomers and millennials represented by my participants share the same concern for our global/domestic crises and the rhetorical dysfunctions currently hampering progress via digital media, the trajectory of digital advances and disillusioning events during the course of millennial lives resulted in a significant gap between *their* stamina for civic engagement and digital savvy, and that of Zoomers. All of my participants agree that millennials won't be the ones to potentially save us: after suffering recessions, disillusionment with our political system, and a general sense of being scapegoated for the breakdown of American society, millennials are too cynical and exhausted from continually struggling with our global/domestic crises to collectively overhaul our approach to addressing the "apocalypse."

My participants hold out hope that Zoomers, and generations after them, will have the digital skills and fearlessness to break away from outdated cultural artifacts, institutions, and ideologies which don't serve them. Subjects noted the intensity with which Zoomers collectively galvanize around the issues which matter to them, in ways that millennials never felt empowered to. Though millennials' general lack of optimism for the (permanent) effects of collective action has dissuaded them from belief in their self-efficacy to shift progress on these issues, both generations' conceptions of millennial psychology does not align with public discourse narratives about their entitled, performative victimhood any more than that of Zoomers. Much like Zoomers, millennial priorities for the crises which matter most revolve around societal and global issues; what's different is how they've internalized cynicism for affecting widespread

progress and learned from that experience where, and how, to let go of investing personal effort and anxiety into cultural/political struggles they can't win on their own.

However, participants' conceptions of both millennial and Zoomer characteristics *do* align with public discourse narratives about putting personhood and identity before "duty," at least in the sense of duty meaning sustaining American society through conventional institutions of capitalism (like buying houses and having children). These generations no longer feel the wider institutions and politics of the US represent them or what's best for addressing our spate of crises (and, as many subjects pointed out, the economic and political policies of previous generations made participating in those institutions economically unviable). Participants from both generations describe how Zillennials take ownership of diverting from cultural norms and ideologies, focusing on making social/cultural change on their own, unapologetic terms. They're unconcerned with proving their societal worth and strength of character to a hegemonic establishment which does not understand, much less reflect, their interests or values.

Regardless of generational differences in cynicism or digital expertise, Zillennials like my participants who care about these crises still have to survive the hardships of contemporary society while attempting to find happiness in whatever way makes sense for them. The dialectic between caring about these issues within the circumstances of the matrix of rhetorical dysfunction, and negotiating economic survival/personal wellbeing, inspired a second and equally important question, which could be a focal research question for future projects: *What does it look like to "care" about these issues in a sustainable way, given the circumstances in which Zillennials are tasked with caring?*

What does it look like to "care?"

Both generations' outlook on the apocalypse and our relationship with it falls under the "rational pragmatism" side of public discourse on Zillennial doomerism: Zillennials are aware of the direness of the situation; the events, policies, and ideologies that led us into the situation; and the systemic cultural/economic obstacles preventing us from solving it (the basis for my matrix of rhetorical dysfunction). For Zillennials the question then becomes, given the intractable nature of digital media as a facilitator and forum for our lives (whether we like it or not), how to best practice care towards these issues in ways that are sustainable to personal mental/physical health and livelihood while at the same time honoring their conscience and values. "Care" in this case has a double meaning: "care" in the sense of investing personal concern for the issues in question, and "care" in the sense of doing so with concerted attention to minimizing personal harm. Everyone agreed that we need to shift the ethos of digital rhetoric, and that Gen Z is leading the charge on shifting values of internet culture back to authenticity, honesty, and ethical entertainment, and away from divisive, harmful rhetoric and rampant, performative consumerism.

That process is far from complete, however, and in the meantime, my participants prescribed several ways for Zillennials to position themselves around sustainable practices of care towards these issues, no matter how disillusioned one might be around our capacity for widespread progress. A Zoomer-oriented practice of care prioritizes investment in dismantling the matrix of rhetorical dysfunction through an expanded form of media literacy, focusing on critical awareness of how the structures of social media and the polarizing ideology and rhetoric of the culture war enables and exacerbates disaffection with engagement towards global/domestic crises. By not falling victim to the overwhelming face-value impact of the

algorithmically biased doomscroll, and by mixing practices of empathetic discourse with targeting hypocritical or unethical content, Zillennials could shift the gridlock of the matrix of rhetorical dysfunction and potentially save digital rhetoric from itself.

From a characteristically millennial orientation towards practices of care, for those who've given up on societally-transformative digital rhetoric practices, the focus prioritizes self-care and disengagement from investing oneself in polarizing ideological arguments or attempting to galvanize progress. The purpose of digital rhetoric then solely orbits around digital media's therapeutic/emotional affordances, to find avenues for optimism and contextualized gratitude.

For most of my participants, however, the prescription for practices of sustainable care towards these issues comes down to small, actionable steps that help Zillennials make the changes they know will do *some* good as the best possible thing they can do in the face of such extreme opposition and odds for success. Even if they don't believe we can curtail the crises impending upon us, or if they do, they don't have any idea of how that could happen, Zillennials are using the digital tools at their disposal to find whatever contentment, equanimity, or small stab at assuaging our societal situation that is tangible and attainable. And however widespread progress might occur in the future, Zillennials believe digital rhetoric in the hands of Zoomers will be our best hope for it.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This project was limited in scope and sample size, and as such the findings relate solely to the attitudes, values, and identities of Zillennials from Leftist ideologies, and their positioning on digital engagement towards the issues in question. Opportunities for future research would benefit from expanded sample populations with a spectrum of political leanings and cultural heritages, with possible focus on how various demographics and geographic backgrounds affect positionality towards digital rhetoric practices and negotiating concerns for our future with sustainable practices of care. The exigence for this project was the entirety of global/domestic crises currently impending upon Zillennials, and despite analysis of participant's top crisis-anxieties, many of my interview questions concerned participants' attitudes towards our myriad crises as a collective. However, as certain participants de-prioritized specific crisis-anxieties *because* they felt the crisis unsalvageable, future research would also benefit from asking the same set of questions for each individual crisis-anxiety, as subjects orient their digital rhetoric practices and practices of care differently depending on their crisis-anxiety priorities.

Through the interview process, the connective themes between analysis points shifted focus away from participants' views on generation-specific digital rhetoric like contemporary meme series, which was a digital rhetoric focal point from my literature review. Future research would certainly benefit from continuing the work done by authors listed in my literature review, like Carter's 2021 analysis of the Old Economy Steve meme series. Researching the social frame dynamics and emotional currency of current series like the, "No, you're still cute, it just surprised me when…" format could result in equally meaningful insights into the affordances of memetic digital rhetoric for Zillennials.

Identifying the matrix of rhetorical dysfunction could serve future research concerned with salvaging the damage done to social media's socially transformative potential. Possible avenues towards shaping more productive digital spaces could come from analyzing the combination of attention economy dynamics with social issues like polarization and systemic inequality, which contributed to phenomena like cancel culture, the post-truth era, doomerism (the fatalistic kind), hate speech, corporate virtue-signaling, etc. Until avenues to break through the gridlock of digital culture emerge, digital spaces could become increasingly divided between forums for hostile rhetoric through weaponized politics, and mechanisms for coping with Zillennials' lack of agency to enact change. Though my participants remain hopeful that digitally-savvy, impassioned Zoomers and future generations will find novel ways to shift the dynamic, further research into the interplay between Zillennial crisis-anxieties and the dysfunction of digital rhetoric will become increasingly important to investigating the evolving ecology of digital culture.

In terms of better understanding the intersections and divisions between the attitudes, values, and identities of millennials and Zoomers, naming the dialectic between 1) concern for our intensifying spate of calamities and 2) the circumstances which make acting on those concerns difficult (or seemingly pointless), could be key to reframing public discourse and opinion on Zillennial psychology, behavior, and societal roles. By investigating practices of sustainable care towards these issues, and the constraints that make such negotiations so nuanced, we can better understand why millennials and Zoomers care about the issues they do, their ideology regarding hegemonic societal norms, and their attitude towards civic engagement (namely, why it looks different from previous generations').

Findings from this project could also be useful to future research on the evolution of generational differences by digital divides, as the differences highlighted by my participants between *adapting* to digital culture and being born *within it* can attest. The millennial-Zoomer connection might be the first example of generations so similar in values, attitudes towards global/domestic crises, and positionality on the way digital culture works, and yet so different in terms of digital nativity and disposition towards solving the crises facing them. As a research entry point into the values, attitudes, and identities of Zillennials as they relate to the "end of the world as we know it," this project gives insight into how millennials and Zoomers will function in the coming struggles with global/domestic crises, and how critical their use of digital rhetoric will be in that process.

Appendix

Interview script

1. What platforms of digital media do you use the most?
2. Do you use certain platforms for certain types of engagement? Why do you use one platform over another?
3. Do you use digital media to engage with (top anxieties selected in your pre-screening questions)?
4. Have you ever posted content regarding those anxieties? Why or why not?
5. Do you have separate personal accounts and "finstas"[10]?
6. Do you censor your own posts, and/or scrub profiles/rhetoric depending on audience/context collapse? If so, how do these practices factor into public-facing utterances/engagements regarding anxieties/world issues?
7. To what degree do you identify with your generation as a group?
8. What would you say characterize the values of your generation?
9. How would you differentiate your generational identity from (either millennials or Zoomers, depending on participant's age/identification with one or the other)
10. How do you think your generation feels about issues like social inequality, economic disparity, our political divide, and global issues like climate change?
11. How do you personally feel about those issues/climate change, specifically our ability to curb the current trend towards climate instability?

[10] Finsta: "a term many users ascribe to secondary accounts they create for themselves on Instagram, where their identities — and, often, the content of their posts — are obscured to all but a small, carefully chosen group of followers" (Weaver & Issawi, 2021).

12. Where did you learn the characteristics of your shared generational identity? To what degree was digital media involved?
13. How do you feel when you see content involved with doomerism (i.e., that the climate is past the point of saving)?
14. What are your current thoughts on having children, and are they related to the state of the world and climate change?
15. How do you personally feel about the prospect of your generation inheriting issues like climate change, and your generation's responsibility to handle those issues?
16. What do you think about your generation's role in addressing climate change/universal-level issues? What do you think the role SHOULD be?

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