

On Young People, Missing Pieces and Weaklings: Reflections on Popular Discourses on Young People in Simon Sinek's Videos

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“Youth awakes to a new world and understands neither it nor himself” (Hall, 1931, p. xv)

Literature exploring the enigmatic lives of youth go as far back as the early 1990s and it is a continuously evolving field, not just in research but also in everyday dinner conversations, especially amidst the rapid social changes occurring at a global level (Kriegel, 2016). What is it that makes adolescence such a mysterious life stage for adults? How much do “generalized cultural beliefs about adolescents” (Hines & Paulson, 2006, p. 602) influence how we understand and relate to them?

How we perceive young people influences how we approach them, not just as their teachers but also as their parents and mentors (Camfield et al., 2023; Hines & Paulson, 2006; Kriegel, 2006; Jacobs et al., 2005; Dekovic et al., 1997). It behooves us to ask what shapes our perceptions of young adulthood. Among the many factors of influence, the role of popular media in shaping our perceptions of young adulthood cannot be overlooked (Atay & Ashlock, 2023).

In this paper, I critically analyze two YouTube videos by the British-American author and motivational speaker Simon Sinek, who is often called the Millennial Whisperer (Burnett, 2017). These videos are targeted toward millennials and Gen Z respectively. Through these videos, I explore the positioning of young people in popular discourse with the aim of encouraging educators to make an effort to look beyond these stereotypes, foster spaces for collaboration and explore possibilities for mutual becoming with young learners.

Terminology and Generation Theory: Millennials and Gen Z

Generation theory (Manheim, 1928) is a rapidly evolving field of literature, especially given its usefulness as a tool for marketing (Kriegel, 2017). However, the parameters for defining generational cohorts are not uniform. According to an American think tank, Pew Research Center, millennials, also sometimes known as Generation Y or Generation Me, are roughly categorized as individuals born between the years 1981-1996. The individuals commonly known as Generation Z/Gen Z, iGen or post-millennials are born from 1997 onward (Dimock, 2019). Similarly, the parameters for deciding the age of adolescence have been continuously evolving, especially in the past century (Sawyer et al., 2018). In this paper, the words adolescence, youth, and young people are used interchangeably to refer to the period of transition that is centered around identity formation and is heavily influenced by peers, opportunities, and culture (Higley, 2019).

It is important to note that world events that define the developmental years of millennials and Gen Z are markedly different (Atay & Ashlock, 2023). In particular, while a significant part of the lives of millennials has been influenced by the technological boom, Gen Z “are the very first generation that were born into the new media technologies, and they were given a cellphone or a tablet before they even learned how to write or read” (Atay & Ashlock 2023, p. 2-3).

In this paper, I analyze two YouTube videos, one targeted toward millennials (2018) and the other one targeted toward Gen Z (2022). I analyze the two videos together to explore how

adolescents are positioned in them. At the time of writing this paper, millennials are no longer adolescents. However, millennials have been at the receiving end of generational othering at its peak (Jauregui et al., 2018; Kriegel, 2016), a phenomenon that has only grown since then. It is important to analyze these popular discourses that gained momentum when millennials were teenagers, and these discourses are now finding uptake in popular conceptions of Gen Z. This is particularly relevant for the videos analyzed in this paper because each is complementary to the other in their positioning of young people.

Kids These Days! Simon Sinek on Millennials and Gen Z

It is not uncommon for adults to talk about adolescents and adolescence in ways that portray young people as naive and in constant need of protection (Harris, 2017). This idea is so normalized within North American settler contexts that one would hardly stop to rethink it.

While researching popular content directed toward young people, I found ample examples that talk *at* adolescents, instead of talking *to* them. Influential media figures have the skills to surreptitiously hide their potentially harmful expert views under the garb of commanding control, scientific lingo and overconfidence (Schein, 2018) so that young people look up to them and corporations pay them to fix their bad leadership (Grosaru, 2019).

I want to highlight two YouTube videos by Simon Sinek. Part of what caught my attention were their clickbait titles; the video on millennials (Sinek, 2018) is titled, “*TEENAGERS should see this!!! One of the BEST MOTIVATIONAL videos by Simon Sinek*” (sic) and has more than nine hundred thousand views, while the one on Gen Z (Sinek, 2022) is titled “*Simon Sinek: Are Gen Z The Weakest Generation?*” and has more than thirty-three thousand views so far. Because of the influence that Sinek has as a touted expert on young people and corporate leadership, his views need to be closely analyzed and critiqued. What made critiquing these videos an intriguing process was their popularity among some young viewers, evidenced by the number of views and comments by young people.

While Sinek covers a lot more ground in the video on millennials than he does in the Gen Z video, both videos have common narratives around their positioning of young people’s self-image, employment, and technology use.

Young People’s Self-Concept: Overconfident, Spoiled, and Weak

Sinek (2018) says millennials are struggling because they have been coddled to believe that they are special when they are just misguided, impatient, and unaware of the ways of the world that adults are more attuned to. He credits failed parenting, a lack of resilience, and an inflated sense of self-importance for these traits. He further adds that millennials’ parents constantly told them that they can have anything they want in life. He submits that millennials’ self-esteem takes a hit when they realize that they can’t get everything they want just because they want it (Sinek, 2018). Sinek seems to be concerned strongly about young people’s self-concept. A preoccupation with young people’s self-concept and the factors that influence it could have important implications for strategizing the kinds of mental health and other supports that can be made available for young people. However, interestingly, most research done on millennials’ and Gen Z’s self-concept seems to be about understanding their behaviours and trends as consumers so that companies can tailor their marketing strategies accordingly (Gonzalez-Fuentes, 2019). One wonders then what Sinek’s interest is in young people’s self-concept. Moreover, there is ample research that states that because of cultural differences in

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parenting styles and family dynamics, young people's self-concept varies significantly across cultures (Gentina & Tang, 2022; Chang, 2007), a nuance Sinek has left out completely. Sinek's arguments conveniently overlook the role of race, culture, class, gender, sexuality, and ability, because not everyone has the privilege to be told they are special or feel like they can have anything they want just because they want it (Hall, 2017).

Continuing his condescension in the video on Gen Z, Sinek (2022) states all the same things for Gen Z and declares them to be quitters because they bail in the bad times. He submits that this is the least resilient generation. To begin with, I wonder what he means by resilience because the concept of resilience is neither universal nor without faults especially due to an increasingly "neoliberal Western decontextualising stance in psychology" (Schwarz, 2018, p. 1). Positioning resilience merely as one's ability to cope with adversity is a narrative that continues to be weaponized to blame individuals instead of holding systems accountable for causing adverse situations in the first place due to systemic injustice and oppression (Amo-Agyemang, 2021; Slater, 2022). Thus, weaponizing resilience this way reproduces power imbalances, discrimination, and oppression (Schwarz, 2018). This is also evident when he talks about young people in the workplace, which will be covered later in the paper.

Lastly, Sinek speaks of millennials as the generation that has been dealt a bad hand. This presented a great opportunity to address systemic issues like climate change and the emotional burden that has been placed on millennials and Gen Z (Shiffman, 2022) as well as the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on young people (Ang et al., 2022). However, the biggest issue with Sinek's arguments is that they do not seem to come from a place of leadership, mentorship or empathy, but one of "abuse wrapped in declaration of good intentions" (Grosaru, 2019).

Young People's Technology Use: Dopamine-chasing, Impatient, Helpless

Young people's technology use has been a matter of much debate because of the prevalence and reliance of young people on technology (Ge, 2014; Parent et al., 2022). Admittedly, it is a contested topic given the evidence both in support of but also cautioning against adolescents' technology use (Benvenuti et al., 2023). However, Sinek's comments on the matter are far from helpful in adding to this discussion as they do not "honour young people as creators and citizens who can harness tools of expression to amplify their voices and address the pressing social issues affecting their lives in the 21st century" (Mirra et al. 2018, p. 13). In fact, young people are now actively seeking "people they actually relate to" like "queer activists, trans people and fat-positive commentators", instead of uncritically "settling for the role models presented automatically" to them (Hall, 2017, para. 5).

Sinek (2018) warns against an unrestricted access to technology for millennials. This is a generalization of an unimaginable measure because, as of 2023, the digital divide "equates to 2.2 billion children and youth under 25 who don't have access to the internet in their homes" (United Nations Human Rights, 2023). It thus becomes significant to push for digital equity while also ensuring that young people feel supported in navigating these worlds.

Another preoccupation Sinek seems to have is young people's access to instant gratification through technology. Undeniably, technological giants use a variety of algorithms that make instant gratification a big part of the online experience, but it is a capitalist and thus, a systemic issue. It is a serious disservice to overlook this and say that adolescents are merely impatient, reactive and need to learn patience. He says that job satisfaction and strength of relationships elude instant gratification because they are slow, meandering, uncomfortable,

messy processes. This is laudable, but I wonder why adolescent development is also not considered as such.

Lastly, his most harmful comment on this issue is the comparison of technology addiction with alcohol addiction. According to him, the solution to the much-contested social issue of alcoholism is to take the alcohol out of the house. Perpetrating such misguided views only goes on to shame and blame people instead of acknowledging and addressing the bio-psychosocial factors contributing to addiction (Maté, 2018). This attempt to psychologize youth's technology use by erasing context and disregarding constraining factors is not only insensitive but also irresponsible, especially when it comes to critical topics such as addiction (Lesko, 1996, p. 465).

Young People as Employees: Quitters, Undeserving, Lazy

In both videos, Sinek's (2018, 2022) paternalism toward young people seems to be at its peak when he talks about employment. From both his videos, he thinks young people are undeserving of being employed because they are neither capable nor reliable.

It is thus essential to challenge who he thinks is deserving and how uncritically he calls upon the contested and flawed notion of meritocracy while completely obfuscating the effects of systemic injustice and oppression (Markovits, 2019). He expresses much discontent about Gen Z's inability to stick it out at a job. Taking the liberty to speak for all employers everywhere, Sinek (2022) claims that hiring Gen Z would pose a huge risk for the employer because they will not stick in the bad times. This seems like an extension of his comment on the dissatisfaction that millennials feel in their jobs on discovering that they are not making an impact. This comment again scoffs at young people's desire and willingness to work for social change and transformation.

Sinek (2022) also mockingly talks about Gen Z trying to establish and affirm boundaries by refusing to work beyond a certain time of the day while supposedly trampling on others' boundaries by being emotionally unprofessional. This is a classic trope of dismissing rightful discontent and anger by calling it emotional and makes most workspaces unsafe and toxic for racialized and historically marginalized workers (Ahmed, 2014). By deeming adolescents "oversensitive for standing up to discrimination" and toxic work cultures while declaring them self-absorbed to make a difference (Hall, 2017), Sinek is conveniently trapping them in a double bind. He is reinforcing and enacting systemic racism and White male privilege, by dismissing all workplace dissatisfaction as oversensitive without clarifying that historically marginalized folks are addressing very real gaps in employment and equity while experiencing racism and micro-aggressions on a regular basis (Bowly et al., 2004). Sinek's panic about the unemployability of young people speaks to the utilitarianism with which young people are approached for their potential to fulfil the capitalist gains of big corporates. Youth populations that are not cisgender, White, male, and able-bodied, especially those who refuse to conform to discriminatory practices are met with disapproval, condescension, discrimination, and harassment in the job market (Fibbi et al., 2006). However, changing work conditions because of the COVID-19 pandemic coupled with the refusal of millennials and Gen Z to be silent onlookers to inequitable and exploitative work conditions have pushed employers to reassess (albeit gingerly) their company policies and cultures (Bai, 2023; Foss & Klein, 2023; Aggarwal et al., 2020; Schroth, 2019).

Learning from/with young people: a mutual becoming

The narratives about young people furthered in Sinek’s videos are indicative of a much larger problem with how we conceive of adolescence. Despite ample critiques of generation theory and the generational stereotyping that emerges from it (Jauregui et al., 2018), its prominence and appeal do not seem to dissipate, especially when it comes to adolescence. Popular media continues to thrive on “predominantly negative portrayals that do not often acknowledge the problems they face” (Esposito & Raymond, 2023, p. 175) and instead further the same negative stereotypes that disproportionately affect young people marginalized by race, gender, sexuality, and class (Muhammad & McArthur, 2015).

A lot of these stereotypes seep into teaching and learning spaces, not just in the form of young people’s academic self-concept, but also in the form of teacher perception, assessment (Camfield et al., 2020) and teacher responsiveness (Hines & Paulson, 2006). A common thread running through both of Sinek’s videos is the supposed lack of grit in young people, which “fails to recognize the systems of inequity that have marginalized too many students” (Camfield et al. 2020, p. 129).

However, young people have repeatedly resisted these stereotypes and affirmed that such stereotypes do not fairly and/or appropriately represent their lives, their issues, and their worldview (Esposito & Raymond, 2023; McDermont & Jacob, 2023; Muhammad & McArthur, 2015). Truisms about young people are created and perpetuated from a place of authority but we need to pause and reflect on what purpose they are serving and for whom. When we disregard the lived realities, the fluidities, and complexities of navigating the world in general, and as a young person in particular, a lot of nuance gets missed out only to further stereotypes in increasingly insidious ways. With the speed and rate at which our worlds are changing, especially given the digital revolution and the global pandemic, it is unimaginable to think how these changes are shaping young people’s lives and it is important that they have supportive spaces for their processes of identity formation and meaning making. As educators, it is important to recognize students’ agency and resilience in their processes of becoming while also being open to step into a state of becoming *with* them; “in connection, we begin anew, each of us knowing less than we will and growing more than we thought possible” (Schwartz 2019, p. 147, as cited in Camfield et al., 2020).

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