

Is youth wasted on the millennial generation?

Molly Young | May 15, 2018

Never has there been a group of people so committed to eating healthier; working out harder; or looking better. But what's so wrong with ordering that second margarita?

Tuesday, 8pm, at a bar on a warm summer day: I had plans to meet a colleague for drinks after work. After-work drinks, in my experience, are a circumscribed ritual; each person orders one cocktail over the course of a polite hour, or maybe two glasses of wine—just enough alcohol to make conversation slightly more fun but not enough for either party to say or do anything remotely compromising. The colleague, whom I'll call Emma, arrived already sipping from a bottle of moss-coloured celery-kale juice.

"Are you on a cleanse?" I asked, because the whole point of toting around a bottle of [green juice](#) is for people to ask whether you are on a cleanse and then for you to grimace and say, "Yes, and I'm dying."

"No," she said. "I'm just trying to inject myself with as many nutrients as possible. I was thinking I'd just ask the bartender to pour a shot in here," she said, jiggling the bottle.

"Really?"

"God, no," Emma said, laughing. "I'm not drinking."

Of course. Emma is 29 and wears sunscreen every day. She is not gluten-intolerant but avoids it anyway, just to be safe. She cycles through a wardrobe of luxury athleisure gear that I would value at a really high price on the basis of the Instagram photos in which she wears these items to branded fitness classes. I'm certain she's had preventive Botox. I'm pretty sure she's had subtle lip injections. The idea that she would drink on a weeknight was, to her, literally laughable.

Emma may be a particularly privileged case—Botox isn't cheap—but she's not unusual in her preference for juice and HIIT sessions over drinks and social cigarettes. Millennials are obsessed with "[wellness](#)"—we exercise more, smoke less, and eat healthier than previous generations. Companies like Twitter and Facebook attract young workers with perks like on-site acupuncture and farmers' markets, and households headed by millennial parents are the top purchasers of organic groceries. We're on track to be the glowiest cohort of all time.

Still, I put "wellness" in quotes because I'm not entirely sure there's agreement on what that word means, despite the fact that I, a confirmed millennial, have two meditation apps on my phone and consume more greenery than most herbivorous mammals and haven't had a glass of cow-derived milk in half a decade; (I can't prove that my generation is responsible for getting Starbucks to offer almond milk nationwide, but I have a strong suspicion about it). Wellness, after all, meant something entirely different 40 years ago. Young people in the 1960s knew that cigarettes were bad, but they didn't know how bad. Drugstore foundation did not come with SPF. You couldn't buy tooth-whitening strips on Amazon. There weren't thousands of YouTube tutorials on Pilates arms and barre butts available for free at the tap of a finger. People basted themselves in mineral oil-based solutions and laid out in the sun as a recreational activity,

heedless of the (dermatologically catastrophic) consequences. These days, our knowledge base is immense, and our self-beautification possibilities are endless.

“Young patients are very concerned with preventive methods,” says Melissa Doft, a plastic surgeon and clinical assistant professor of surgery at Weill Cornell Medical College. “They always question what they can do to help delay ageing and to protect themselves. My first recommendation is to always wear sun protection and to never start smoking.” As Doft’s advice suggests, it can be hard to tell the difference between our pursuit of health for its own sake and the pursuit of health for beauty-enhancing purposes. “Stay out of the sun and don’t smoke” is irreproachable as medical advice, but it’s also the credo of every crow’s-feet-fearing woman I know. Our shopping habits bear this out—40 per cent of millennials either currently use wrinkle creams or plan to start using them soon.

“The millennial personality is centred around individualism, high expectations, self-confidence and burnishing an image,” says Jean M Twenge, professor of psychology at San Diego State University and the author of *Generation Me*, a scholarly look at the 23- to 37-year-old set. Sounds good on the surface, right? But a total lack of irresponsibility may not be the straight path to success that it sounds like. For all of modern history, youth has been a time period designated specifically for screwing up. We have a whole vocabulary of phrases devoted to the concept: “youthful indiscretions,” “growing pains,” “sowing wild oats.” Today we’re more likely to soak our wild oats overnight and sprinkle them with goji berries than to sow them. (Tinder notwithstanding, a recent study suggested that millennials are actually having sex with fewer people than Gen Xers did at the same age.)

Whatever the underlying motivations, I can’t help but wonder whether this wellness obsession signals a shift in social values. In 10 or 20 years, will we look back on our youth with virtuous approval rather than rueful romance? Are we quicker to embrace health than fun these days? And if so, why? “I think that image preservation has a lot to do with millennials’ coming into the job market in the recession and being very concerned about presenting the right image to employers,” says Twenge. She also acknowledges that our obsession with exerting self-control could be a reaction to the economic and cultural instability simmering around us: “Millennials have very, very high expectations for jobs and education, yet reality has not really gotten any easier.”

In response, we make decisions where we can, dutifully applying sunscreen and eating our vegetables. This risk aversion leads to unquestionably good behaviours, yes, but also to ones that older generations might see as oddly conservative or limiting. The point of making mistakes, after all, is that you learn from them. You become a more complicated and empathetic person; a person whose imperfections and blunders give way to a nuanced perspective on all the facets of living. I’m not sure it’s possible for anyone to choreograph her life to become that person; it either happens or it doesn’t. I’m equally certain that green juice doesn’t help.