



THE DANGERS OF SOCIAL MEDIA & THE STOIC SOLUTION

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ABSTRACT

In this essay, I have outlined the problem social media influencers pose towards the mental health of Generation Z. I subsequently presented a brief history of the ancient school of philosophy known as Stoicism. Finally, I have given a concrete example of how members of Gen Z can utilize the moral theory of the Stoics to not only avoid the negative mental health impacts of influencers, but use social media to positively impact their and their peers mental well-being.

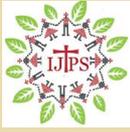
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INTRODUCTION

In the United States for the majority of the 20th Century, there were many critiques of the media. The newspapers, radio stations, and television news channels were all owned by a small portion of the upperclass. As a result of monopolizing the media, this modern plutocracy was able to foreword the interests of the bourgeois and control the governing of the US. They controlled the campaign advertising industry not only by selling adds, but by having the power to donate to politicians who agreed with their interests and defame those who did not.¹ Although it still persists, the reign of the press dynasty is in its finals days. Currently Generation Z is entering adulthood, and in next two decades Generation Alpha will follow. These generations, I can attest to first hand, have no use for the antiquated forms of 20th Century media. We reject reading or listening to the news because “its so depressing”. We pay for streaming services for shows and music with no advertisements; we watch movies on our laptops seeing no point in buying a real television.

This may sound like the start of a golden new era, media no longer controlled by the powerful few who’s only goal is to profit. However, as history has shown, when one nightmare passes another spectre appears. While the youngest generations have rejected the old forms of media, they have only moved on to the newer social media. Social media is quite distinct from the media of the past. No longer do consumers respect the owners of media as they did in the age of *Citizen Kane*; Gen Z regularly refers to the owner of Facebook and Instagram as “the lizard man”. Additionally, we do not care who is monitoring our social media. There is a trend on nearly every platform to joke about what the FBI agents who watch us through our phone cameras think about our posts. Our generation did not live through the Red Scare nor the Cold War; our general attitude towards the wants of capitalistic tyrants is apathetic at best.

¹ Bagdikian, B.H. (2007). Media Monopoly. In *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, G. Ritzer (Ed.)



Yet the oligarchy has been replaced, instead of being controlled by publishing tycoons Gen Z has fallen victim to “influencers”. Influencers themselves are generally members of Gen Z. They have a large social media following, usually in the millions, usually on multiple platforms, and profit either by allowing advertisements on their page or personally promoting products. While to older generations this may sound like being a normal celebrity, there is a clear distinction between influencers and pro-athletes or movie stars. Ignoring a few makeup artists and chefs, influencers have no talents. Their reason for fame usually depends on what platform their career began on.

1. SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

Youtube

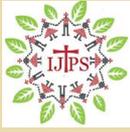
Youtube was created in 2005, when the last of Gen Z was born, and the majority of our generation cannot remember a time before it’s existence. Simply put, Youtube is a mixture of television and social media. Users each have their own “channels”, where they can post videos of any length. Instead of users “following” each other as they do on most social media sites, users “subscribe” to each others channels. While older generations also watch Youtube videos, the utility of the site is completely different with Gen Z. Boomers, Gen X, and Millennials mainly use Youtube for documentaries, how-to videos, and music. While Zoomers also enjoy these channels, most regular users are more interested in influencers’ channels. Members of Gen Z find a youtuber they like the content of, subscribe to their channel, and receive updates when new videos have been posted.

Since Youtube has been around for nearly two decades, it has created something similar to *The Truman Show* for its users. While Youtube influencers usually focus on one topic—makeup, video games, cars, or true crime for instance—their videos also include details of their personal lives. Subscribers learn when their influencers move to a new apartment, break up with their significant other, or become involved in scandals. This occurrence is unique to Youtube as a platform, since no other platform that Zoomers use allows for the posting of videos of any length. The sharing of their personal lives over long periods of time creates a special, one-sided bond between the influencers and watchers. This bond allows Youtube users to trust content creators even though they are in reality strangers. This attachment is shown when a scandal with a popular youtuber crops up, and to the amazement of the older generations, makes national headlines. One of the dangers in this false sense of trust for subscribers, is that influencers can promote products for profit without subscribers realizing it is an advertisement. In the minds of many members of Gen Z, this is just a friend they have watched for years suggesting they try a product they enjoy.

Instagram

Instagram is arguably the biggest social media platform for members of Gen Z to post their own content on daily. The app gained mass popularity almost as soon as it was put on the market in 2010, and retained that popularity, eventually being purchased by Facebook in 2012.² Instagram began as a platform where users made accounts, and were only able to post a singular pictures with captions. Accounts are followed by other accounts, and accounts could “like” posts by other accounts; both of these actions are numerically shown on the site. There were two key factors that attracted younger users to Instagram. First, unlike Twitter which caps posts at 140 characters, there is no word limit to how long Instagram captions can

² Mattern, Joanne. *Instagram*. Checkerboard Library, an Imprint of Abdo Publishing, 2017.



be. Second, and more important to Gen Z who were mainly preteens at the time of its creation, unlike Facebook, their parents did not have Instagram accounts nor knew how to use the app. Also unlike Facebook, there is no limit to how many accounts one person may run. Instagram influencers saw the ability to profit from this. In addition to their personal accounts, where they would post to attract followers, they could have a link to a second account in their profile. For instance, influencers whose main draw is flaunting expensive “street wear” on their personal account, often have second accounts where they sell clothes and sneakers at inflated prices.

Over the decade the app has existed, it has adjusted itself to fit our generation. Instagram added the ability to post videos, which led to the bankruptcy of its competitor Vine. Similarly, Instagram added the ability to post “stories”, posts that disappeared after 24 hours unless saved, in order to compete with Snapchat. Once a story is saved, it can be archived, “highlighted”, into different categories at the top of the users profile. This highlighting feature is unique to Instagram. The introduction of this feature also allowed for increase in the effectivity of influencers. For example, lifestyle influencers use their story highlights so people can immediately look at the parts of their accounts that interest them: diets, workouts, travel, style, etc. This categorization leads to an increase in followers, and thus likes, since users who may only have interest in one aspect of an account can immediately see that interest rather than having to search through older posts. Additionally, the story feature allows influencers to post advertisements or promotions that only last for twenty-four hours. By not having promotions indefinitely linked to their account, influencers are able to market themselves as simply interesting people rather than people attempting to profit off of their followers.

TikTok

TikTok, the newest of the most popular forms of social media for Gen Z, came to the United States from China in 2018. The app, where people post videos that are sixty seconds or less, was virtually unheard of until the Covid-19 pandemic. The new abundance of free time for Gen Z, who are mainly still in high school, college or graduate school, allowed the app to radically increase in popularity. Similar to most platforms, TikTok allows users to follow each other, and like each others’ posts.

What sets TikTok apart from Instagram and Youtube, which also have video content, is the “For You Page”. On the For You Page part of the app, users are shown a never ending stream of videos that TikTok believes the users would enjoy. Although Instagram and Youtube have similar sections, TikTok’s is more enjoyable and addictive to its users because of its algorithm. Youtube suggests videos based on videos you recently watched. Instagram suggests posts based on posts you recently liked. TikTok gains access to your device’s clipboard history, meaning all of the text you have copied and pasted, and creates a For You Page from them.³ Where Instagram shows you a picture of a beach because you just liked the one your high school pal posted; TikTok shows you videos about Joe Biden because you texted your family a link to a political article.

This algorithm has not only created extremely relatable content immediately viewable to its users; it has also subdivided its users. Since the content shown on the app is so precisely chosen, it is common for members of Gen Z to talk about which side of TikTok they are on.

³ Doffman, Zak. “Beware If You Use TikTok On Your iPhone: Here’s Why You Should Now Worry-New Security Report.” *Forbes*, Forbes Magazine, 13 Mar. 2020.



For example, people refer to the “gay”, “straight”, “liberal”, “trump”, sides of TikTok. The sides can become so specific as to being about one brand of shoe or a particular children’s TV show that has been off the air for more than a decade.

The algorithm is also an immense help to TikTok influencers. No longer must they promote their pages as they have to other platforms; TikTok guides users who relate to an influencer directly to the influencer’s content. Influencers on the app profit similarly to how they do on other platforms, by promoting products or selling their own.

Others

While there exist social media platforms other than Youtube, Instagram, and TikTok, these three are the most relevant to both Gen Z and the development of influencers. Sites such as Facebook and LinkedIn, are mainly used by older generations and their utility does not allow for influencers to exist on them. Snapchat, while used routinely by Zoomers, is a messaging app with pictures and videos. Since Snapchat does not allow for profiles or publicly saved content, it is not apposite in our discussion on influencers. Twitter, which is also popular with Gen Z, limits the amount of words and photos that may be posted at one time. The app also does not allow for easy access to older posts. These factors make Twitter unattractive for influencing.

2. NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

So Zoomers have access to social media platforms which continually show them advertisements: does that make the members of Gen Z victims? Aren’t they just having fun on their phone and looking at nice pictures and videos? While some Zoomers may not be victims, many are and for a clear reasons. The influencers are influencing us. We look at an influencer’s account, on any platform, and we see someone who looks happy. In Western philosophical terms, everyone wants to be happy. The essence of ancient Greek Epicureanism is to seek pleasure and avoid pain. Even Nietzsche wanted to create meaning in life for the sake of feeling joyful. So we see the profile of this person, and we want to be happy like them, the next question is how do we do that. The first thing that is noticed is that they are well liked. This popularity is a quantifiable fact since we can view how many followers and likes they have. Next, we notice that they are conventionally attractive, and usually have an equally attractive partner. Finally, we see that they are buying extortionately priced clothes, food, houses, and trips. They may even be purchasing expensive versions of things we enjoy: eyeshadow palettes, Jaguars, or gaming monitors. We want to have what they have to be happy, so we start placing value on these things. The valuing of wealth, beauty, and celebrity becomes detrimental to our beings. We can either afford to buy what their buying, in which case money that could be spent pursuing an education for a career that would fulfill oneself or that could be saved or donated is being spent on brand name clothing that is not even a genuine expression of oneself. Or, more likely, we cannot afford to buy what they have and begin to feel negatively about ourselves or the people who provide for us. Furthermore, it preserves the ethos of capitalism that we should value money for the sake of money. This ethos becomes catastrophic as people continue to value money over the lives of others. The value of beauty is dangerous not because some people are not beautiful, but because it emphasizes a euro-centric heterosexual idea of beauty which perpetuates both racism and homophobia. Additionally, for all genders, it presents attractive people as having only thin body types. This has created a generation where body dysmorphia is more common than not and disordered eating is considered the norm. Furthermore, valuing celebrity is inherently destructive because the concept of being loved by all does not exist. Even if an influencer is



well liked according to the internet they may not be in their personal lives. And as for celebrities in any field, being publicly known results in being publicly criticized.

These critiques of the media are not entirely new. People calling out the media for promoting racism, heteronormativity, and unhealthy body images was occurring before the first Zoomers were born.⁴ However, social media influencers are unlike the celebrities of the past. Being jealous of the wealth, body, or partner of a star in the early 1990's was normal and easy to rationalize. Those VIPs had some talent to make them famous, whether that be acting, athleticism or singing. Those celebrities were also removed from their fans daily lives. They likely lived in Los Angeles, and aside from being watched on television occasionally or seen in a magazine, they were not encountered often. While jealousy may have occurred with celebrities of the past, ordinary people could understand why some people were famous and others not. Furthermore, their access to famous people was extremely limited.

None of this is the case with modern influencers. Apart from being wealthy and attractive, a majority of influencers are not particularly talented. Additionally, influencers are never far away. First, members of Gen Z have constant access to influencers' accounts via cell phones. If Zoomers only want to text back their parents, or like their friends new profile picture, when opening their phone they will likely stumble upon some influencer's content. Second, influencers are high school and college students like the rest of Gen Z, thus they attend school somewhere. Since the prerequisites to influencing are beauty and affluence, they live in every state in the country. If a Zoomer doesn't know of an influencer in their classes, it is likely they know of one in their town. So while comparing oneself with a movie star they have never met seems ludicrous, comparing oneself with the girl they went to summer camp with eight years ago is not. To make matters worse, the tools for comparison are given to one on the social media platform itself. In the past, no one was precisely aware of a stars net worth or any other quantifiable metric for comparison. Now, in a matter of seconds, members of Gen Z can know the amount of followers and likes an influencer has and directly compare it to their own.

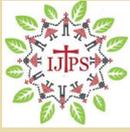
For the reasons stated in the previous paragraph, social media, and influencers in particular not only perpetuate the toxicity and hatefulness that has permeated from the media for decades; it does so at a much higher and an extensively more constant degree, thus endangering the mental health of many members of Gen Z.

3. STOICISM⁵

At first glance, it would seem a tautology to affirm MN as a presupposition in science. In fact My last section showed how influencer-social media culture is harming Gen Z in a multitude of ways. What is the solution? In the spirit of American individualism, I believe the solution is a pragmatic philosophically based one that we all must assume for ourselves. To stop wanting to be happy like influencers, we have to stop trying to be happy. Nietzsche got

⁴ Hébert, Lisa P., and Dwight E. Brooks. "Gender, Race, and Media Representation ." *Gender and Communication in Mediated Contexts*, Corwin Books, 2005, pp. 297–317.

⁵ Séneca, Lucio Anneo. *Letters from a Stoic*. Translated by Richard Mott Gummere, Pantianos Classics, 1925.; Sellars, John. *Stoicism*. University of California Press, 2020.; Long, A. A. *Hellenistic Philosophy; Stoics, Epicureans, Sceptics*. 2nd ed., Scribner, 1974.; Algra, Keimpe, et al. *The Cambridge History of Hellenistic Philosophy*. Cambridge University Press, 2005.; Long, Anthony A., and David N. Sedley. *The Hellenistic Philosophers*. Vol. 1, 2, Cambridge Univ. Press, 2003.



it wrong and so did the hedonists. So instead of listening to Epicurus, I suggest we look at the philosophical school that opposed him: Stoicism.

Stoic History

Before I begin on the Stoic solution to the issue of influencers, I will detail what exactly Stoicism is and give a brief history. Stoicism was founded around 300 BCE by Zeno of Citium, the contemporaries of this philosophic school included, Plato's Academy, Aristotle's Lyceum, and Epicurus' Garden. The word "stoicism" is derivative from the word "stoa", which meant porch, which is where the founding members of the school met to discuss philosophy. In Ancient Greece, philosophy was not seen as the abstract theories in academia we have today, philosophy was seen as a way to live one's life. In this way ancient philosophies, including Stoicism, were similar to modern religions. Each school of thought had distinct theories on ontology, metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics. For the purposes of this paper our main focus will be Stoic ethics, but since the different parts of Stoicism are all interconnected for a full explanation of ethics the other parts of the school must be discussed.

Zeno began studying philosophy under the Cynics. The Cynics main ethos was to "live according to nature". For them this meant a complete rejection of society and its customs. Zeno left the Cynics to study at the Academy, where they discussed heavily on morality and metaphysics. Finally, Zeno studied logic with the Megarians, before leaving to found his own school at the Stoa. Zeno and his students formed their own philosophical notions about logic, metaphysics, and ethics. Zeno wrote texts on these theories, which over the course of history were tragically lost. When Zeno passed away, he left his school to his students Aristo and Cleanthes. This inheritance of the Stoa continued for decades, eventually Diogenes of Babylon, the fifth head of the Stoa went to Rome in 155 BCE to share Stoicism.

Stoicism thrived in Rome, many of the most eminent Stoics being Roman: Seneca the Younger, Epictetus, and Emperor Marcus Aurelius. After the death of Marcus Aurelius in 180 AD, the Stoic school began to decline.

There were a multitude of reasons for the decline: most of the earliest texts had been lost, the modern Stoics were mainly focused on living a Stoic lifestyle and were not writing thus no new texts, civil unrest, the school faced harsh criticism from its contemporary schools, and finally Christians began to take over Rome and were opposed to Stoic theology. The only surviving, complete, first-hand Stoic works are those of Seneca the Younger and Marcus Aurelius. Modern scholars believe Aurelius' *Meditations* was actually his personal journal where he tried to work through his life troubles and apply Stoic virtues. Thus the main surviving texts on Stoic theory were written by Seneca.

Stoic Theory & Beliefs

Since Stoicism was a philosophical school that developed over five-hundred years, there are disagreements on some of the nuances of the theories. That being said most of the general parts of the theory are widely agreed upon among the Stoics, as far as we have evidence for. The main tenant of Stoic ethics is "to live according to nature". If you remember from earlier, this was also the belief of the Cynics. Where Stoicism diverges from Cynicism is that the Stoics believed Nature was fundamentally logical where the Cynics were similar to modern nihilists. Nature for the Stoics referred to a divinity: some thought it was a pantheistic God which permeated everything, others were less theological and simply thought there was a logic to everything. Stoics thought that Nature gave each creature a certain level of logic, or rationality. Only Nature itself had full rationality, but humans had a higher degree of rationality when compared with plants or other animals. This focus on a logical structure of the world was likely a result of their intense study of what we now refer



to as formal logic. Although advances have been made in classical logic, the Stoics created what is known as predicate calculus which has not had any significant changes since its creation.

In addition to believing in a logical structure for the world, Stoics were also strict materialists. Materialism is a theory in which only the physical world, and physical beings exist. Their belief in materialism was what opposed many other schools of thought to the Stoics. Originally disagreements were found in Plato's thoughts on the immaterial Realm of Forms, and Aristotle theories of immaterial souls; later their were various disagreements to materialism from the Christians. Even though they were materialists, Stoics believed in souls. Souls for Stoics are similar to how we now conceive of minds: physical parts of the body which house our personalities, beliefs, and thoughts.

Since the Stoics believed they must live according to Nature, and the nature of Nature was rationality, their goal in life was to live to the highest degree of rationality individually possible. Living to the highest degree of one's rational potential meant making the most rational choice in every situation they could. They also believed in sages, people who developed their rational skill so perfectly that they only made rational choices. Between the Stoics there were many debates on who was and was not a sage, but most agreed that Socrates, even though he died before the existence of the Stoa, was one.

To develop one's rationality, and hopefully become a sage, one had to learn to control their emotions. Stoics viewed emotions, of any kind, as antithetical to rationality. They thought that emotions caused one to make irrational, rash decisions. Even what we think of as positive emotions, such as happiness, they thought were dangerous to rationality since they led to dangerous levels of optimism and the potential for great disappointment. To deal with the problem of emotions, Stoics practiced the removal of them, not repression as people modernly think of the word "stoic". Stoics believed that when we perceived the world through our senses, we formed judgements that entered our soul, our mind, that then became propositions we believed. A simple example of a judgement would be stepping outside in the morning, seeing the blue sky, and thinking, "the sky is blue", and then believing it. Emotions were not themselves judgements, but false beliefs that attached themselves to judgements. The key to rationality was to practice removing these false beliefs from the judgements, until it became so habitual one did not have to consciously do it anymore. For the Stoics, the ability to be completely free from emotions, to be a sage, gave one a feeling of joy that was not itself an emotion but rather overwhelming peace, similar to the Buddhist goal of Nirvana. Becoming a sage was seen as the absolute goal because once this joy was attained it could not be destroyed by any occurrence in the world, since the world cannot induce emotion in a sage. Of course removing judgements sounds simple, but how does one do that pragmatically? The Stoics had many suggestions for how to do this. One was to write about one's emotions about a situation, dissect out why they were in fact false judgements, and think of how one could act more rationally in future similar situations. This is what Marcus Aurelius was doing in his journal that we now call *Meditations*, and explains why many people find the text to be extremely repetitive.

Other Stoics, such as Seneca, suggested an approach through virtue ethics. Virtue ethics is a broad category of ethical theories, in which one should only take actions that adhere to specific moral virtues. The category is broad because there are many different theories on what are and are not virtues. Aristotle considered wit and friendliness as important virtues. For Stoics there were four critical virtues, that when practiced led to a heightened degree of rationality. These virtues were: wisdom, self-control (or temperance),



justice, and courage. Virtues were not separate actions to be taken, but were all to be used in decision making. For example, imagine you are shopping for groceries and you see a fellow customer who is not wearing a mask. First, you must use self-control to not immediately act out of anger. Next, you should use wisdom to think about what the most just action to take would be. Finally, you use courage to take that action, which by the way is to politely offer them the extra mask you carry and explain why its important to wear them, and thus you have materialized justice.

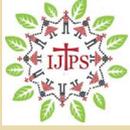
Before we move to the next section of the paper, it is important to note the individualist aspect of Stoic ethics. For Stoics, and most moral theories which utilize virtue ethics, living a virtuous life must be done by oneself. To make decisions according to virtue, is a choice singular persons must make everyday when faced with challenges. Thus the commitment to living according to nature, is a solitary resolution rather than any kind of collective action.

4. STOIC ETHICS APPLIED TO THE PROBLEM OF SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS

Having outlined both social media influencers' impact on the mental health of Gen Z and Seneca's Stoic virtue ethics, we will now apply these virtue ethics to a practical example of a negative social media experience. We will go through an example from Youtube, which can similarly be applied to other social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok.

Imagine you are watching a Youtube influencer's video of their "makeup haul". This makeup haul consists of the youtuber unboxing several hundred dollars worth of cosmetics, and explaining what they plan to use them for. There are multiple common first reactions to this video, without applying a Stoic perspective. If you are interested in makeup, which is assumed since you are watching this channel in the first place, you are likely to be envious of the influencer's purchase, desire to buy the same products, or both. The material result of these feelings are either a loss in self-assurance or buying the items from the video. Both of these reactions are harmful. A loss in self-assurance is injurious to one's mental health, and from a Stoic perspective makes focusing on making rational decisions more difficult. Purchasing the products from the video is most likely damaging to the financial stability of members of Gen Z, as the majority of us are still students and thus do not have expendable income. If you do have dispensable earnings, it is preferable to consider what the best options are to spend your money on, instead of impulse buying because of an influencer.

The outcome of watching makeup hauls from a Stoic frame of mind is quite different from the reactions noted in the previous paragraph. First, one would stifle the immediate feelings of envy and desire by using the virtues of courage and self-control. Next, use wisdom to think through these feelings. Envy is irrational in this situation since you do not really desire the cosmetics in the video, the influencer has simply made them momentarily attractive to you. If you are actually interested in the products, add them to the list of items you plan to purchase in the future. Continue using wisdom to remember that long-term financial stability is more valuable to you then the instant gratification of online shopping. Finally, use the virtue of justice to research dupes, cheaper products with the same function, and leave links to these products in the comment section of the video. Thus if other viewers are put in the same position as you, they have more reasonable options and if you truly want a product you can still buy it. The outcome of the Stoic approach to the Youtube makeup influencer is entirely positive. First, you have thought through why negative feelings you may have towards the situation are not appropriate, and thus are not affected by their harmful



impacts. Second, you have maintained financial stability and have created opportunity for others to do the same. Therefore you have a sense of pride in taking moral action. The situation, which originally may have been detrimental to your mental health, when approached through Seneca's virtue ethics heightens one's sense of self as they have done something good for themselves and others.

CONCLUSION

In this essay, I have outlined the problem social media influencers pose towards the mental health of Generation Z. I subsequently presented a brief history of the ancient school of philosophy known as Stoicism. Finally, I have given a concrete example of how members of Gen Z can utilize the moral theory of the Stoics to not only avoid the negative mental health impacts of influencers, but use social media to positively impact their and their peers mental well-being.

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