Linda Woodhead: Generation Z

Chapter 3: Modular Belonging (LW 28 April 2019)

The previous chapter leaves no doubt about the critical importance for postmillennials of the imperative to define oneself. In pre-empting how they are defined, these college-age students believe they have a fighting chance of taking control of how they are seen and treated. In some senses, this deep commitment to the project of discovering and securing the unique self can be described as individualistic, because matters of identity become central to navigating the world: but in other ways, as this chapter explores, the ascription of individualism is strikingly inapt. Nowhere will we see any evidence of the kind of "rugged individualism" that used to exalt strength of character, disregard of social convention and the lonely hero, even as an ideal.[1] Nor will we find strong traces of the rampant egocentrism and narcissism with which this generation is often charged. Instead, we we will see an intense concern with a fascinating new experiment in connection, in which belonging is treated as a matter of personal choice and responsibility rather than ascription - as an active discovery more than a passive inheritance. The voluntary dimension is strong, as is the norm is to belong to several groups simultaneously. These vary in size from kith and kin relationships to massive online sites, but allow for personal input and interaction. They are informal rather than formal, facilitating easy participation and a sense of joint authorship. Commitments may be intense, but exit is always possible. The plurality of individual belonging gives flexibility and security, making it easier to leave one or more groups as life and identity change, without abandoning others and finding oneself completely alone.

We describe this mode of sociality as "modular". It is both reflected in the way that social media have been designed and reinforced by it. Like a modular system of building or furniture, individual units can be added, subtracted, rearranged without destroying the integrity of the whole, and in response to changing lifestyles. This, we suggest, complicates the old dichotomy between individualism and community. It undermines the old binary of individualism versus civic virtue. We find instead a culture in which personal empowerment comes through belonging to specific groups and the imperative to define oneself is bound up with the imperative to belong. Fine-grained identities turn out to be closely bound up with fine-grained belongings.

Subtle Asian Traits

In September 2018, a Facebook meme group called "Subtle Asian Traits" was created by four teenagers in Melbourne to share experiences of growing up as the children of first-generation immigrants to Australia. Four months later, when one of the students in Stanford first told us about the group, it had over a million followers.[2] Subtle Asian Traits grew by accident rather than design,

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2 We are grateful to Angela Lee for drawing our attention to this example and for giving permission to draw on her essay 'Generation Z and Collective Online Communities: On "Subtle Asian Traits" (unpublished, 2018).

and without commercial intent, by providing a social space where vast numbers of individuals could post humorous examples of the trials and tribulations of growing up as the child of Asian immigrants. Here, young people poke fun at themselves and their parents and discuss the difficulty of growing up as a minority in uncomprehending non-Asian majority societies.

"Subtle Asian Traits" is a play on "subtle private school traits", a controversial Australian Facebook group which preceded it. It began as a group chat between friends "in real life" using a messaging service.[3] Facebook offered a no-cost, easy to use platform on which to open up the discussion to others. Many Facebook groups remain tiny, sometimes private, but tagging gives them the potential for rapid growth. When a member tags a close Facebook friend to alert them to a post – often a meme they have found particularly enjoyable – the algorithms enable them to see the names of more peripheral friends who are tagging their own close friends. Membership can quickly snowball.

"On December 15th" a Stanford student told us,

> I received 20 Facebook notifications saying, "X has tagged you in a post on subtle asian traits," "Y has tagged you in a post on subtle asian traits," "Z has tagged you in a post on subtle asian traits." They just kept on coming – it wouldn't stop. Before I even understood what page I had just been added to, I was already swamped with posts, comments, and tags from my college friends, high school friends, and even middle school friends that I had not connected with in years."

At first, this student wasn't sure if she wanted to be a part of the group, but as she scrolled through,

> I was intensely struck by how many long-buried memories of my second-generation childhood came bubbling to the surface. It was stunning to see how many people related to fixtures of my life, ranging from the 'plastic bag filled with other plastic bags' that my mom kept stashed away in the kitchen to watching your relatives aggressively fight over the check when they take family out to dinner. There was heavier content too, including memes about strict tiger parenting, struggling to explain mental illness to relatives, and being bullied for being Asian.

Soon she was hooked. She added all her friends who identified as Asian or Asian American, and became an active member of the group.

Subtle Asian Traits (always written in lower case amongst devotees) is just one example of a vast number of experience-sharing sites that provide a new way of making connections at the same time as better understanding oneself. Checking into Facebook throughout the day, followers of Subtle Asian Traits will see memes appear in their feed amidst posts from other friends. These pictures with captions offer humour, light relief and a sense of shared recognition. In one meme, the first of three panels shows a giggling Pikachu (a cute, furry Pokémon) captioned "Me laughing at all your

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[3] Nicholas Wu and Karen Yuan, "The Meme-ification of Asianness", *The Atlantic*, 27 December 2018, https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2018/12/the-asian-identity-according-to-subtle-asian-traits/579037/

relatable subtle asian memes."[4] The second, with a tearful but smiling Pikachu, says "Me realizing I'm not alone in the world." The last panel shows a surprised Pikachu with the caption: "Me, realizing there was nothing unique about my experience."[5]

Some memes poke fun at the uncomprehending ignorance of white people about different Asian cultures and languages. Figure 1 references the current vogue for ancestry DNA testing in the USA, and contrasts many Americans' intense concern about their European heritage with their inability to make even the most basic distinctions between different Asian nationalities.

Fig1

Other memes contrast the second-generation Asian experience with the taken-for-granted realities of majority culture, as in Figure 2.

Fig.2

[4] Pokémon are fictional creatures that appear in an assortment of video games, animated television shows and movies, trading card games, and comic books licensed by The Pokémon Company, a Japanese corporation.
[5] New Yorker, Culture Desk, Kat Lin, 22 December 2018.

Many of the most popular memes depict private experiences that might otherwise be surrounded by anxiety, shame and confusion, as in Figure 3. Shared recognition and lots of "likes" can turn private shame into a positive plank of identity and build solidarity.

Fig. 3

Of course, not everyone feels at home on Subtle Asian traits, even amongst the target constituency. Bilingual plays on English slang – in Mandarin, Korean, Cantonese, Korean, Vietnamese, or Japanese – are frequent. But overall, a bias towards East Asia is clear. This soon grated on some early followers, especially those from South Asia. The answer was to start their own group: "Subtle Curry Traits", which quickly accumulated 330,000 followers in its own right.[6]

Other tensions and boundaries quickly generated a further proliferation of groups – well over a hundred at the last count. They include Subtle Asian Dating; Subtle Asian Pets; Subtle Asian Gaming; Subtle Asian Eats; Subtle Asian Women; Subtle Asian Makeup/beauty Squared; Subtle Asian Ravers; Subtle Asian Cars; Subtle Asian Mental Health Support; Subtle Halfie Traits (for individuals who identify as mixed-race or multiracial); Subtle Asian Adoptee Traits; Anti-imperialist Subtle Asian Traits (self-described as a more woke version of SAT); Subtle Asian Activists; Subtle Queer Asian Christian Traits. An important part of the dynamic in this ever-increasing creation of sub-categories and communities is the desire felt by minorities to self-define, resist being assimilated into larger categories, sharpen their identities, and bond with one another against majorities. One enters communities and learns their rules as one goes along; at the same time the boundaries and character of those communities are constituted within the process of ethical discussion and

[6] Subtle Curry Traits, Facebook https://www.facebook.com/groups/1167300000091005/

consolidation. The fissiparousness is partly a function of moral disagreement and walk-outs, rather like the way that new Protestant groups and sects used to constantly proliferate.

This process of ever finer-grained community-formation and belonging supports the conventional idea that "in groups" need "out groups" to define themselves, but what's more interesting is the range of subtle ways in which the process may operate, many of which involve humour rather than hostility. Whereas Twitter is more specialist in hit-and-run individual hostility, platforms like Facebook, Reddit and Tumblr lend themselves to the refinement of fine-grained identities through humorous expression and mutual-recognition within communities. "We labeled the group as 'family,'" says one of the founders of Subtle Asian Traits, "so that's what the group's purpose is, to allow people to feel like they all belong to something."[7]

Modular, multiple belongings

The growth and rapid diversification of Subtle Asian Traits illustrates many of the distinctive features of postmillennial belonging: how important it is, how much mediated by the internet, how closely tied to identity and identification, how modular and how plural.

It quickly became clear to us that virtually no-one belongs to just one group or invests all their identity in one set of relationships. Like a flower with petals, a unique individual identity is at the centre of a set of social commitments. A community like Subtle Asian Traits will be only one of many others to which its legion of followers belong. For some, family members make up one of their most important modules of belonging, for most, friends are an alternative "fam". Different messanging and social media plaforms are often selected to support different modules of belonging. Thus, a student at Foothill College, most of whose friends are elswehere, tells us that he uses Google Hangouts the most because it just happens to be the group that he and his closest friends from before he came to college still use. It's "basically a group chat with me and most of my close friends." They've been part of it for years and "we're just always talking." Hangouts is for his closest friends, but he's also part of "a little community" with other online friends "that aren't necessarily like super close, but still friends." The platform they use is Discord, on which they have created a channel for text chat and a "voice room" for voice calls. For his "other communities," the student tells us he uses Facebook and Reddit.[8] The actual phone is only "for business things or emergencies, basically" and emails just "for more formal things like professors." He spends small amounts of time every day, most days "constantly like just on social media… just checking chats and stuff."

The proliferation of possible channels of communication that can be curated and managed from smartphone as well as the laptop means not only that constant connection can be maintained, but

[7] Wu and Yuan, "The memification of Asianess"

[8] RO50 p.2

that a pluralism of belongings can be supported, irrespective of where one is physically located. Even as children, Dana Boyd points out, there were many more ways for millennials to connect, more scope for finding and making connections, and more autonomy -- because it was harder for adults to listen in. One of the most exciting features of online life for the first generations of digital teens and pre-teens has been the potential to enter into conversations wider than those with local, school and peer groups. In posting a video in the early days of YouTube when it was a free-for-all, for example, children had the exciting sensation of having a public voice that might be heard in any corner of the globe. However unlikely, the potential was seductive. Children and young people have rarely had any means at all for public expression: suddenly, they did. Before long, they could also tweet or comment on posts by their favourite stars and imagine they might actually be read or even liked by the person in question.

As interactional possibilities expanded in imagination as well as reality, it has become possible this generation to manage their relationships in a new way, keeping some belongings and identities separate from others and hidden from the view of those who might disapprove. From a young age, the excitement and anxiety of choosing and managing one's own unique set of belongings presents itself. In the course of our research we often asked to look at students' phones and for them to "show us around". We soon realized that each one was unique, even though most of the individual apps were widely shared. Every student had a different combination of groups and people they "follow", certain favoured messaging apps, and a different roster of alerts. Several described their smart phones as an essential part of themselves, referring not to attachment to the particular object (the devices are regularly broken or upgraded) but to the way it is tailored to who one is and where one belongs in the world. The smart phone serves as a conduit for belonging, narrowing the overwhelming new world of potential connections into a manageable collocation of elements and belongings that are personal to each individual. It serves as a filter for sociality that chops the various pieces of one's social life into bite-sized chunks. Here family, friends, and other belongings gather to jostle for attention and a share of mind and commitment. Most students said they could cope without out their phone, but their comments about what happened when they had to were telling. One, who lost his phone at a show and went without for one and a half weeks said it gave him an odd feeling "being forced to put myself in reality, I felt, like, slightly disconnected." [9]

That doesn't mean that online life takes over from offline life for postmillennials, or that all belonging is digitally mediated. Our survey confirms that the vast majority of 18-25 year olds, whether college-educated or not, regard social media as only somewhat important to their social lives and continue to give the highest priority to offline encounters. But the majority of those we interviewed also commented that technology made it easier to have a social life and to find and maintain connections. Messaging services that make it incredibly easy to text, speak, or send a picture to both individual and groups have taken over from the phone and email as a primary medium of communication; social media have made it possible to find like-minded people and manufacture new groups with ease. So central is the connecting function of the internet for students

[9] 45 p.3

today that one Stanford student unthinkingly defined online life not in terms of the digital but in terms of the social, calling the time she spends on a computer *not* interacting with others her "offline" life. For her, offline life includes all the time she spends on the computer doing things like "typing short stories or fan fiction… while having Criminal Minds playing in the background or something like that." Even though she's online she sees this as offline "'cause I'm not associating with anyone, I'm just keeping in my own little world." By contrast, her "online world" is "definitely something you have to be active for: you should be talking to at least one person or a group of people."[10]

For this generation brought up with the internet and acclimatized early in life to mobile, "always-on," connectivity, relationships are not only easier to maintain at a distance, but also a great deal easier to find. One student spoke about a friend they met on the internet -- "an internet penpal you could say" – who came to have great importance at a certain stage in her life. She went on to reflect about "someone that you happen to encounter on the internet who seems to have similar interests, or they have a similar personality. I guess it's essentially like meeting friends in real life except the scope of places where you can meet these people is much wider, because it's not limited to the activities you participate in, or the place where you live, or places that you go."[11] An other tells us about the two group chats he has on the go a lot of the time. One that is his close friends and "we just send memes to eachother all day." Another that is his "video groups" who go to music festivals together and the group chat is essential as it's "where we try to plan everything out."[12]

The various social media platforms extend the pool of people with whom you can make a connection. There is a virtually unlimited potential, and if you can't find exactly what you're looking for you can engage in social DIY: "You can essentially create a community for anything that you want," said one student, speaking about Reddit.[13] If you belong to a tribe of one -- like the gay Scottish Sikh in the last chapter -- you are far more likely to find others like you using social media than you would have been before the internet. More importantly, you are able to explore different groups and identities in the process of defining your own identity and belongings. Platforms like Facebook, Reddit, Tumblr lend themselves to the searching, sorting and connecting process by allowing groups of like-minded people to find one another, cluster, and produce new groups for ever more esoteric interests and ever more fine-grained identities – like the "Numtots" we met in the last chapter and will meet again here (New Urbanist Memes for Transit-Oriented Teens). Taking this to an extreme, a group on Numtots split away over a disagreement about whether it was right for the police to have removed a woman on an LA train for sitting with her feet on the seat. "It still kind of amazes me how many niche groups have been created" says the student who tells us about

[10] Ro8 p.8
[11] RO15 p.7
[12] 45 p.2
[13] RO15 p.6

this, "but the sheeer size of Facebook allows these spaces to be created because with a billion followers you can like find someone who likes anything."[14]

Flexibility is an enormous benefit of modular belonging. You can leave home and move to a new place without having to give up your old ties. Alternatively, old ties can be replaced or downgraded as changing identity and circumstances demand. When we asked one student who told us in great detail about an online community in which he was very active, he hesitates before syaing "I don't really know because I don't think people are usually very invested in it." But then says casually, "I would probably feel some sort of loss." That's different from his Facebook groups, he adds, because he also knows those people in real life and has "so much invested in each individual member of these groups." [15] But with a mem group, he says, "you could literally create one in thirty seconds." If a group or relationship turns out not to be a good fit, it's possible to edit and exchange it for a better match, like those who left Subtle Asian Traits for Subtle Curry Traits or other spin-offs. When faced by major life transitions like leaving home for college, or leaving campus life for paid employment, it's relatively easy to shed some modules of belonging without losing others. The pack can be reshuffled. Family may become more important again (some students move back home), campus solidarities may fade, a new relationship may flourish, new friends and interests may gradually eclipse some old ones; while other belongings persist. "There's a lot of fluidity" comments one student, "there's very low bariers to entry, I guess."[16]

It's not just that belonging is easier to find by way of the internet, it's also less circumscribed by family and local norms and easier to control. When we were growing up in the 1960s and 1970s, connections were limited and subject to parental scrutiny. There was heavy pressure to belong to some, with familial, national and religious affiliations often given particular weight. Belongings were only partially within our control, and friendships and serious relationships could be much more easily monitored and controlled – especially for girls. Serious change could only be effected by relocating, for example by going to college or getting married. For postmillennials, things are a bit easier. Even when physically circumscribed, like a student we spoke with who went to a small all-girls school in Boston that was, in her words, intensely "academically focused", social media provide an alternative arena of connection – "so, like Instagram *was* my socializing," she laughs.[17]

Not only can this provide an alternative set of friendships, it can also be a portal into what many called different "cultures," as if each community, however small, creates its own sub-culture, different from the "culture" at their school, church, temple or home. The nature of proximity has changed. The neighbour – *proximus* in Latin – is no longer just the person next door. in some ways people are less accessible, in some ways more. if those who care for you are virtually omnipresent – just a click away - that adds a massive layer of protection and reassurance. You need never be lost or

[14] 01 p7
[15] 01 p22
[16] 01 p21
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abandoned. It also adds agency through more dimensions and choices. At any moment, you can choose what to tune into and what to zone out from. Online channels offer an overlay on "real life" and a social escape hatch as well. Shifting belonging from one module to another gives more scope for identity and greater flexibility. "I don't think people give too much of a damn about any individual one," says a student, because you could always find one or make one."[18]

A platform like a "sub-Reddit" is a natural home for a sub-categorical, fine-grained identity and the group that supports it. It's not that the students we spoke with necessarily first discovered "who I am" and then went about searching for "people like me"; we more often heard stories about how through "lurking", searching and interaction they discovered "who they really were." By working out where they felt comfortable and finding who their "people" were they became clearer about their own identity. The process is dialectical: interactions shape the self and individuals shape the interactions. The degree to which individuals commits time and energy is a free choice, and we found plenty of variety. Most of the students we talked to belonged to a number of different online groups, but most were pretty selective. All said that they took some of them much more seriously than others, even though their loyalties shifted over time. Online and off "I try to be pretty consistent." [19]

Conversational Belonging

For postmillennials it is with the "squads" of like-minded people with shared values, experiences, commitments and humour that one finds belonging. These are the people who "get" you, who "see" you, who support and appreciate you, who go through the ups and downs of life with you.[20] These are the people you connect with with most deeply are the ones that matter, whether they involve kith or kin. They shape identity and are the source of some of the best memories and moments, those times when individuals feel shored-up, part of something bigger, even able to make a difference. More "old-style", formal, institutional belongings count for far less now that affinity, shared experience and emotional closness matter most. If one can reach out to a group when in need, dip in and out when convenient, contribute and be appreciated – then that group quickly becomes more meaningful than the formal belongings to impersonal organisations and organizations that mattered more to earlier generations. Aloofness is shunned in favour of closeness, ritual and convention in favour of spontaneity, the abstract and aloof in favour of the concrete and proximate. Modules of belonging are informal, expressive, non-hierarchical and "flatform". Even email is seen as too formal: "Email is, like, your adult self," says one student: "It's just my most articulate self… It's where I go to ask my professors questions… it's more like writing a paper than it is like texting a friend… It's still pretty formal."[21]

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[18] 01 p21
[19] 45 p.6
[20] Seth Godin, 'Where's Your Cohort?' (14 Dec 2018). https://seths.blog/2018/12/wheres-your-cohort/
[21] 01

This mode of belonging, which the internet has helped to make normal, is a conversational one. In online communities you can listen in before you decide whether to take the plunge and contribute. You belong by expressing yourself and by sharing things you like: "I feel like I only tag my closest friends in memes," says a student, "so it signifies that they're a close friend and that I can joke with them."[22] You learn the rules and norms that govern the ongoing conversations through active participation. If your contributions are well received, your status grows and your connections deepen. You give and take. In the process, your identification with the group deepens. Conversations often spill across offline and online contexts, though some students told is that they found conversation online easier than that "in real life". Sometimes they mentioned reasons like shyness or dyslexia, or English not being their first language. But many said that there is more flexibility of participation and more time to get it right on social media. Online in "a big group chat," one explained, she would just type out her reaction then and there, whereas in person "I would be like, 'Oh no! like the conversation's moving and flowing', so by the time I finish formulating my thoughts the topic is gone… [so] I'll just keep quiet.'[23]

Online it is easier for interested parties to "lurk" silently, just listening, before they can take the plunge and join in a conversation. As with any conversation, interesting contributions made online will be appreciated and engaged with, while others will simply be ignored as the conversation moves on. As such, conversational belonging is generally less demanding and coercive than membership of offline communities and far more easily tailored to individual needs and identity. Individuals can participate on their own terms, or not at all, and exit when they feel like it (unless they are caught in a "drama" or with friends in need). There is more rooom for voice, choice and participation by all. In conversational belonging, one doesn't have to speak out or make a contribution, but it's important to know that can if one wants to. In that sense, conversational beloning is resolutely non-hierarchical, despite or because of the ubiquitous role of "moderators" considered below. The ability to exchange experience, ideas and humour in structures in which authority is distributed amongst all is what is valued and expected. Mutual respect within a group is a pre-condition of participation and violations will be called out immediately. Calling upon "privilege" or assuming a superior stance is taboo.

For those who do take part, the expression of sentiment is part of the currency of much conversational belonging. It expressive and affective. The use of pictures, symbols, and emoticons takes the place of the visual cues and physical interactions of offline conversation. Abstract reflections, detachment, expertise and "objectivity" are less important that the ability to give voice to one's own feelings, opinions and experiences in a way that is felt to be authentic. Speaking from the heart is more important than speaking from the head, even though knowledge, wit and humour are often highly valued. Taking a risk in sharing personal stories and making oneself vulnerable can earns respect – if you pick the right setting to do it in. While most groups are ssupportive, some flare

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[22] 04 p2
[23] R051 p.10

up into "flame wars" all the time, heated debate in which people end up "just yelling at eachother".[24] Even anger and hatred can build solidarity.

Of course, one doesn't participate in all conversations the same way. One has to learn the rules. Each group has what the students call its own "culture". Many speak about how different these rules are in each internet community and how, as one puts it, you "intuitively" pick them up by lurking in different "territories" before you enter them by participating in the conversation: "I think there's just a lot of weird territories because each groups is like its own little bubble."[25] The content you post may "never be connected to the outside of the bubble." The peculiarities of each group allow people to assign different behaviors and different conceptions of what the space is and how it is to be used. If your primary goal is consumption, you can just browse and not bother too much about the rules of engagement. In some groups with close friends, one student says, you represent your "whole self" but in others "you're just pretending a part." He puts a lot of thought goes into what he says online, even the punctuation. If he reads a comment he considers dumb and think others in the group will too, for exmaple, he thinks about whether to react angrily WITH CAPS and perhaps an exclamation mark! or in a more humorous and sarcastic lower case way, like "oh my god this is such a brilliant idea."[26]

Many of those we spoke to were very reflective about how having a range of modules to belong to, in real time, gave them a range of emotional outlets and different spaces in which they felt "safe" to express and explore different facets of their identity. For some, it was on group chats and Facebook that they could share personal comments like "having a really shitty day today," and know that friends would pile in which supportive comments. Here, knowing eachother well helped. But for other issues, it was on platforms where the posts are mainly anonymous – like Reddit – that they could say things they might not want friends or family to know. One spoke about how important it was to be part of a "depression meals meme," a site where people post pictures of the meals they are eating as a way of signalling if they are feeling "up" and OK or lonely and depressed. He loved the fact that group members will wade in with supportive comments even though "this is like a very public group filled with strangers, right. But people are sharing things on this groups that I imagine some of them wouldn't share even with their friends." He reflects that such intimacy of sharing is possible precisely because particpants are strangers to one another. For him, that is freeing: it means that he can post without "worrying that you're adding some emotional toil to them" because they can leave at any time, "whereas your friends are sort of obligated to help you".[27]

Unlike "normal" offline conversations, online group conversations are often continuous and have an unstoppable momentum of their own. The conversation is larger than those who take part, a social fact in its own right. By posting even a small comment that is appreciated, you become part of

[24] Oa p.11
[25] Oa p.11
[26] 01 p25
[27] Oa p.11

something bigger. As the "Numtot" we met in the previous chapter who belongs to the Facebook group "New Urbanist Memes for Transit-Oriented Teens" puts it, "It's shockingly active and it's shockingly engaging."[28] With about 80,000 members across the globe, the posting never stops. Contributions take many forms. Some are funny, others "get really deep or really technical."[29] He recalls a recent magazine article in which someone explained that they joined Numtots just for the funny memes and after a few months "feel like they deserve a bachelor's degree in urban planning because of how much they've been exposed to."[30] This student particularly values is the way the converssation brings together amateurs with an interested in cities and professional experts: "It's this really interesting dynamic where the less educated are being educated and the professionals are – okay, sometimes they're arrogant, but other times they're actually seeing people who are maybe less educated in formal academic vernacular, but still have intuitive understanding for these isues, and seeing their perspective."[31]

Groups like Numtots break down some of the existing boundaries between institutions and status groups – in sociological terms the "de-differentiate" in a number of ways. Whereas in standard sociological discourse a "group" is considered smaller than a "community", for example, modular, conversational belonging has blurred that distinction. Our respondents use terms like "group" and "community" loosely and interchangeably. Similarly, the "family", which has traditionally been considered a discrete, bounded unit based on legal, marital and biological ties, loses some of its distinctness. Friends may just as close – or closer – than family and labelled "fam" accordingly. Belonging to affinity groups and family groups becomes similar when mediated by the same interent platforms. The scale and size of groups becomes less important too, because the interent makes it so easy to find one's particular "squad" within large communities, and one only interacts with a few at a time. As a flatter style of organisation and authority become the norm, we see a homogenization of the typical social group in form, if not in content. Friends become family and family members (sometimes) become friends. Formal titles and modes of discipline and distinction are dropped. Our corpus of language reveals a plethora of words, old and new, used by 18-25 year olds to speak of the kinds of community they value and belong to, including 'fam', 'sib' (abbreviation of sibling), 'squad', 'cohort', 'team', 'community', 'group', 'people', 'my people'. Some other words, like 'tribe' are used also, but often is a more critical way, to speak of the overly-exclusive belongings of others.

As the conversational mode of engaging with like-minded others – both online and off – becomes the primary kind of belonging, so the norm of sociality shifts. Social spaces and institutions that operate in more formal and impersonal ways, become increasingly alien and distrusted. The normativity of informal, conversational identity amongst postmillennials is both a cause and a consequence of disillusionment with pre-existing and more formal institutions like universities,

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[28] The IGuardian https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2018/jul/05/meet-the-numtots-the-millennials-who-find-fixing-public-transit-sexy-urbanist-memes
Meet the Numtots the Millennials who find fixing the transport system sexy. Elle Hunt Thu 5 July 2018
[29] Oa p.6
[30] Oa p.6
[31] Oa p.7

governments and churches. Such dis-illusionment involves "seeing through" the mystique that such institutions surround themselves with, whether based on tradition or the energetic efforts of PR departments and "postive spin". For those who have found themselves trhough intimate belongings in flat, participatory, affective and family-like groups, other modes of belonging can seem oppressive. Disillusionment arises if large institutions like universities fail to deliver what they often promise – familial inclusion, equality for all, high ethical standards. As we will see in later chapters, postmillennials response is more likely to be tactical or indifferent than outright rebellious. Institutions may be tolerated or used, but less personal energy is invested in fighting them than in nurturing the alternative, modular belongings that are experienced as more existentially meaningful and "authentic".

Value-saturated belonging

The conversational communities so central to postmillennial existence are saturated with values. Ethical norms and behavior are shaped in and by them to such an extent that we are morality itself is changing shape to become increasingly interactional and conversational. Traditional moral authorities like elders and churches are increasingly eclipsed: they become the ones being judged rather than the ones supplying the standards. As morality sinks more deeply into modular belonging, so the weight of universal moral rules and traditional moral authorities – form parents to churches – weakens. Ethics itself becomes conversational, both in form and content. It is forged in the way people speak and treat one another, and its rules are worked out in a fully discursive way. Althoguh there are often common themes, these rules become distinctive to each different group, further undermining the weight of universal commands, laws and rights and increasing the immanent, plural nature of ethics. Morality for this generation is not so much a matter of external authority – whether in the form of institutions, leaders or norms – but of conversational negotiation. Ethics is discursive, and communities are moral. Ethics are integral to communities of belonging rather than transcendent over them.

For college-age postmillenials, values are involved in both the choice of where to belong and how one people conduct themselves in their social settings. One of the students we interviewed speaks about how she and her friends "align" around "values." "I kind of group myself with with people who kind of share similar views since we were exposed to the same things or we at least share common values."[32] Many explain how they find their "people" – select their modules of belonging – on the basis of shared "aesthetic" and shared values. As one says, after the 2016 truck massacre in Nice, France he looked out for people who posted with the French tricoleur symbol because it signalled to him that these were people with shared values. That was important because "It tells me if I want to interact with this person or not." [33] Generally this leads to considerable moral conformity within groups – even groups like 4Chan that take delight in attacking their opponents. "I feel like the majority of things that people post publically are aligned with like the popular, socially acceptable

[32] R051 p.16
[33] 04 p.4

opinions," says one student, "but there is (sic) always the occasional few that don't."[34] Another comments that, "I feel like for me, since I'm normally on the opposing side of most people, I just have to kind of go in with humility and like knowing that I'm probably not going to persuade the person." [35]

The value-saturation of belonging is tied up with the value-laden nature of identity for this generation of young people. As we saw in the last chapter, when identity becomes a matter of choice, commitment and performance, it becomes weighted with personal and ethical significance. For an earlier generation like ours, much of identity – like being British or female – was a matter of sacribed "fact" rather than chosen "value". It was neither particularly good or bad, it just "was". But once such tihngs become far more a matter of choice and commitment, more is invested. Now, if you question or disrespect my identity, you question and disrespect my choices, my values, my self and my people. Amongst postmillennials, such disrespect is considered particularly culpable in relation to minority groups who have had a much greater struggle to gain a voice in public conversastions and to escape from shame, self-doubt and unequal treatment. In reaction, however, some members of majorities now employ the same logic to defend their identities as fathers, sons, poor white Americans and so on, as we saw in the USA after 2013 in the rise of hashtags like #alllivesmatter or #bluelives matter (police lives) in response to the #blacklivesmatter campaign.

What in earlier generations might have remained wholly private or buried, changes tone and significance in being shared amidst amongst those who may "like" and identify with it. Private experience becomes shared experience and vice versa. Shame and self-doubt can be alleviated and turned into something positive, as with the young man who posts "depressive meals" when he's down, and who supports others doing the same when it's their turn. Even anonymous belonging can help turn experiences and traits that might have made people feel problematically different into the basis of a clearer sense of self and a more confident stance in the world. Sometimes, as with the notorious "Pro-ana" sites that shelter people with anorexia and other eating disorders, that can be a mixed blessing when it comes to recovery.[36] But moral solidarities also form around less personal or problematic topics, like shared interests, like and fandoms. As the Numtot student mentioned already says of this "nerd" group: "So it's like a real interesting community that came out of nothing, and I feel it weird calling it a community, because I generally hold the belief that online virtual communities are not as real as real life communities, but this really changed my perspective a lot because this enabled a community that could never form in real life, like actually form. And they have these real life gatherings now. I saw this picture: there's a bunch that got together in Boston."[37]

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[34] 04 7
[35] 03 16
[36] "Pro Anorexia Sites: The Thin Web Line", Web MD, no date – accesssed 28 April 2019 https://www.webmd.com/mental-health/eating-disorders/anorexia-nervosa/features/pro-anorexia-web-sites-thin-web-line#1

[37] Oa p.7

The integral ties between individuals and their squads mean that in the case of some groups, belonging carries the responsibility of represention. When the member of a minority group speaks they will often do so with the sense of representing not only personal opinion, but the wider group. Once I have committed to a group and made it integral to my identity I take on the responsibility as well as the privileges of speaking in the name of the collective as well as the individual – or being very clear if I am only speaking "for me". I become an integral part of the module and help make it what it is. This sense of collective responsibility is then attached to majorities as well, whether they like it or not. Even if I don't try to promote the interests of privileged, white middle-class "Anglos", for example, that may be how I am received. This helps explain why post-millennials have such a strong taboo around what they call "cultural appropriation", which covers the use of cultural products that are not one's own for one's own purposes. Cultural appropriation is regarded as especially problematic when privileged majorities appropriate the cultural products of subjugated minorities. An example that was brought to our attention when we were doing the research in Stanford was celebrity white women wearing corn-rows and gelled-down baby curls. These hairstyles were deeply frowned upon not just because they "belong" to African-American female culture, but because when young black girls display them they're stignatized as "ghetto". Insult was piled on injury when white women wearing them were complimented as " cool". The appropriatiom of native American cultures was regularly cited as another example of the same process.

Sensitivity to representation extends to the realm of non-human objects. Some of the more activist members of this generation have been involved campaigns to take down statues and other symbols of colonial power on campuses, like the campaign to remove the statue of Cecil Rhodes in Oxford that was live at the time of writing. There have also been oppositional protests by opposing groups who feel that their cultural histories and identity are being disrespected – a tension that exploded on a wider stage in Charlottesville, USA in 2017 in the first year of the Trump presidency. An interesting feature of these disputes is that previously unmarked "privileged" identities, like white male, are outed in the process of defending themselves and embracing the underlying logic of the postmillennial position that regards identity as a commitment to a particular group, with the privileges, liabilities and moral responsibility that implies.

Postmillennials, whether college-educated or not, seem to have swallowed sociology's attention to categories of class, gender and race with their mothers' milk. Whether on the right or the left politically – and those divisions no longer matter for many – they are extremely aware of the wider social categories that people represent and the power relations implied. They read not just the surface meaning of what someone says but what they see as the deeper agenda. Even before you have opened your mouth you are likely to have been ascribed a good deal of cultural baggage that may act to enhance or undermine what you say and do. When both personal and collective identity are so value-laden, expressing an opinion carries the danger of offending or upsetting someone. Arguments are less likely to involve cool discussion of rational principles in a stylised debate, and more likely to draw out deeply-felt statements about who I really am and the people and groups I cherish. The idea that an argument that could get "too personal" makes little sense when everything

is "ad hominem" and it's assumed that I can only speak out of my own group interests, however conscious I might be about them.

Belonging amongst postmillennials carries obligations and responsibilities that cut both ways. These are felt particularly sharply in relation to the people one elects to have as "friends" – which, as we have noted, may include family. That category implies that they will care for me and I will care for them. Here, belonging is more than just a playful or merely aesthetic matter, and it is not as easy to exit from one's commitments. Some students in Lancaster tell us about his burdensome it can become when caring for friends struggling with "mental health" issues, or even just not wanting to hurt someone's feeelings by being the first to end a Snapchat "streak" (long online chat). Even in groups with less special friends, many students talk about taking care not to offend or hurt. Self-censorship is common. Avoiding hurting people's feeings is important to many. One tells us, "I think I'm very accountable, so it would stress me out to not.. text back… just because I really appreciate it when people are responsive and communicative and available."[38] Several of our intreviewees said they are increasingly fearful of posting anything on group sites rather than simply scrolling and reading because, as one put it, "almost anything you say can upset someone." She adds, "Unless I'm posting some loving or angry activist message, I just don't really use it." Trigger warnings are used to alert people that they might not want to be exposed to what comes next, and new protocols have arisen to "keep people safe." Serious belongings come freighted with responsibilities: "You just know that it's like if people aren't held responsible for what they say and think, it's just going to go wrong," comments one student.[39]

This concern for ethical behavior in conversational belonging finds its most formal expression in the increasingly sophisciated art of "moderation", something in which several of the students we spoke with spoke of with pride as an example of how they have built a lasting legacy for those who follow. "Moderation" represents the most important face of ethical authority in the world of conversational sociality. Moderators are elected by the group because of their perceived ability to prevent the conversations from getting out of shape. Their activity consists in constant monitoring and flexible adaptation of the rules to what is being posted. New rules may be created in the process, rather like the way in which common law develops. Group morality is never finished, never closed, never a fixed set of commandments, but an active and constant negotiation.

Some groups have really stringent rules, including entry screeing. Numtots, for example, has a "hyper formalized team of mods" who vet every post before its appears, one in every time zone across the world.[40] The depression meals group also has very stringent rules " 'cause, you know, it is a vulnerable space so you don't want people to feel harmed or threatened in any way."[41] Very "leftbook" (politically leftist and activist) groups were also singled out as having a lot of heavy

[38] 01 p7
[39] O1
[40] Oa p.7
[41] 01 p.19

ethical screening, for example, one student explained, they might ask a prospective member " 'how many genders are there?' with the correct answer being something along the lines of, like, 'gender is a spectrum.'" If you just answer "two", he says, "You won't get approved, right!" That, he explains, is a good example of "when mods are very intentional about the spaces they want to create and it's like self-segregating in a way, but it's also... creating the atmosphere they want to create."

It's not only the moderators who are responsible for ethics. The ethical protocols of a group are widely shared, as the post from Subtle Asian Traits reproduced in Fig.X shows. Fig XX, a screenshot of Subtle Asian Meme's rules, shows the intensely ethical nature of even such a large and rather light-hearted meme-group:

Figure X

FIGURE XX

Group Rules from the Admins

1. **No Hate Speech or Bullying**
   Make sure everyone feels safe. Bullying of any kind isn't allowed, and degrading posts and comments of any sort (especially colourism and racism) will not be tolerated and you may be kicked.

2. **Be inclusive**
   Try to be inclusive in your posts to all Asian races and refrain from being too exclusive. We encourage you to report any posts you deem offensive to get quicker attention to it!

3. **Relevant content**
   Please keep posts relevant to this group. If your post is not deemed relevant it may be removed. Your post might not be approved because something similar might have been posted many times before

4. **No Promotions or Spam**
   Give more than you take to this group. Self-promotion, spam and irrelevant links aren't allowed. Please do not edit your Instagram or other links into your post or serious consequences may apply

5. **Credit where credit is due**
   If you are sharing a video or a photo which is not yours, either use the 'share' button or provide a link back to the original creator. Contact a mod/admin if there are problems.

6. **Be Kind and Courteous**
   We're all in this together to create a welcoming environment. Let's treat everyone with respect. Healthy debates are natural, but kindness is required to keep our group enjoyable for everyone.

Often, the boundaries between procedural and ethical rules blur and disappear. The FAQ from Subtle Asian Memes for example, moves seemlessly from one to another:

> Q – Why did I get muted/removed?
>
> Deleted comments, mutes and removals are handed out based on a person's inappropriate behaviour within the group and punishment is decided on a case-by-case basis by admins/mods and are non-negotiable unless evidence is provided.
>
> Q – I would like to do an interview, who should I contact?
>
> Please email interviews@subtleasiantraits.com or feel free to contact any of the admins listed below!

This is an important way in which young peole learn how to "do" ethics and take responsibility. Roles of moral authority previously reserved for adults are now played by peers. Moderators/ "admins" are selected for their perceived integrity and deepen their reputation by discharging the role well. They have the ability to decide which posts are allowed to go through, which ones are rejected, and they can turn off commenting for certain posts. They essentially run the group and are charged with making sure that the group continues to function, including navigating the tone of the community. On the whole, though, their work is rather invisible since it consists in removing or blocking posts and stopping things from happening, or escalating. They make relatively few announcements about the site.

A message from the admin and moderator teams reproduced in Fig.XXX shows the iterative process at work. There was an initial backlash towards moderators taking a harsher line on individuals who they see as engaging in hate speech and bullying, which was followed by a community response towards this backlash. What is particularly important is that the moderators are outlining their duties and responsibilities as part of the group, from which their authority derives. They articulate the core group values while appealing to the community. While some individuals mocked the post, the vast majority of reactions were positive. Some affirm the need for these regulations and their belief that rule-setting is necessary to maintain a large online community. The final comment employs the typical comical, sub-cultural tone of Subtle Asian Trait posts ("submit to our mum and papa mods") with a message of support for the moderators and their moral project.

FIG XXX

Ai-Ling Khoo
Moderator · January 11 at 3:55 AM

Hi SAT community,

Recently we have seen an increase in racist, homophobic and transphobic content which has been brought to our attention. As our group grows everyday, we would like to kindly remind you all of the guidelines that are part of our group.

1. No Hate Speech or Bullying
2. Be Inclusive
3. Relevant content
4. No promo or spam
5. Give credit when is due.

As your team, we aim to do our best in moderating all posts. We may approve posts based on the belief that we think this will encourage USEFUL discussion among the group. It has been rewarding to see topics such as white washing, talks of racism, sharing of stories be discussed. However, when discussing controversial topics, we ask that you are considerate towards the other people that you are talking to or making reference to in the post. Be mindful of your language and be respectful. This is a community that is meant to bring us together, to share our experiences, and to induce conversation about topics that would normally remain silent. Despite where we come from, our backgrounds, and our stories, we are all humans. We should all treat each other with DIGNITY and RESPECT.

As a result, if there are any future comments with homophobia, racism, transphobia, they will be dealt with the highest of consequences. Provide evidence and name and shame in a DM.

Mod out.

Fenix To Ahh yes, all good things must come to an end. When did this funzy group become so cereal?

Like · 1w

Andy Zhang When people start being assholes in a private group, the admin/mod team should try to enforce some rules. Lack thereof has killed so many other groups.

Like · 1w

Resa Le come on fam we've been brought up by strict parents all of our lives, submit to our mums and papa mods 🙌 u all should be used to some rules by now lol
Srsly tho these rules r fine and normal u all need 2 chill out

Like · 1w · Edited

It was significant how many students in our interviews spoke about moderation with a sense of pride and commitment to the enterprise. The "mods," one explained, work as teams and "a good mod team tries to represent a number of demographics." [42] If they're good, mods "participate in the group and post fun things and stuff'. [43] If they make a good contribution and share pesonal things, respect for them grows. What really counts, however is the judicious use of their power to ban people from the group. Mods who are able to handle a conflict well gain respect, but those who are too lenient or too harsh become a problem. We were told about a number of groups are now introducing anonymous feedback systems so you can criticise a mod without getting banned yourself. What was interesting was the care with which this system had been worked out – it was a matter of "figuring out the rules and coining the rules" of social media as we went along, the student says with condsiderable pride: "it's we who have developed the etiquettes, so younger people can just take them for granted and adapt them to their own needs."[44]

Conclusion

Some of the moral panic surrounding "iGen" concerns a perceived individualism, atomization, even narcissism. Some worried commentators have spoken of them as a generation of "snowflakes" gazing inward, cherishing their specialness, totally unprepared for adult life. The evidence assembled here paints a different picture. Concern with individual identity is indeed intense, but so is commitment to moral belongings. Disillusionment with existing institutions and organizations is real, but should not be mistaken for anti-social and antinomian atomization. Certainly some individuals may fall between the cracks of modular belonging, but many others are finding and forging new modes of belonging that seek to remove the contradiction between being a "me" and a "we". When asked on our survey whether caring for self or caring for others should come first, a plurality of 18-25 year olds in both Britain and the USA said "both". This upsets the old binary between individual and group. Far from "bowling alone" or gazing narcissistically into their screens, this is a generation that is as anxious about belonging as about individualizing, but rarely views them as separate. If there's a danger, it's too much identification rather than too much individualism: "if you wish that you were in that person's life instead of yours," as one student put it.[45]

By creating and combining different "modules" of belonging in keeping with their identities and values, postmillennials are taking part in a fascinating new experiment in sociality, mediated by the internet but not consumed or constrained by it. Such modularity allows voice, choice and active participation. Combining them in a package virtually unique to oneself gives one a variety of social supports without becoming entirely dependent on any one, while also enshrining one's uniqueness. As Maffesoli puts it so well, 'Participating in a multitude of tribes, which are themselves interrelated, allows each person to live his or her intrinsic plurality'. Individualization takes place through the

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[42] R013
[43] R013
[44] R013
[4545] 46.p.5

pluralization of belonging and identification that the internet has facilitated. Such belonging is inherently flexible, informal and conversational. It prioritizes forns of community in which everyone who wants to can have a say, and polices this possibility with new means of moderation. In the process, it enshrines a new ethic and a new, conversational, way of being ethical.

What we observe in communities like Subtle Asian Traits has to do with learning, within a collaborative, creative and conversational setting, how to build solidarity by being honestly and humorously oneself. That can be a very important part of the process of fine-grained self-definition. One learns who one is by finding others amongst whom one feels comfortable and comparing oneself with them, as well as with those with whom one doesn't feel at home. What, in earlier generations, might have remained wholly private or buried changes in tone and significance by being publically-articulated amongst those who "like" and identity with it. Private experience becomes shared experience, and vice versa For many, this helps to turn experiences and traits that might have made them feel problematically different into the basis of a clearer sense of self and a more confident stance in the world. Security is found in small groups and strong solidarities. Many individuals we spoke to wanted to find their people, and in the process wre finding themselves.