

# OVEREXPOSED: WHY YOUTH TODAY ARE LESS HAPPY, MORE INSECURE AND LESS SELF-ASSURED

## 過曝世代：青少年為什麼更 不快樂、更缺乏安全感、自 我評價更低落？

*A Taiwan-based adolescent therapist investigates the psychological effects of modern social media on today's youth and provides practical advice and strategies about how Asian parents and educators can help their children rebuild their identity and sense of security.*

The ubiquitous internet, while transforming the way we communicate and learn, has with the advent of today's ever-present smartphones, tablets, and social media brought an exponential and continuing rise in the number of adolescents with physician-diagnosed psychological issues. It is this phenomenon that spurred the author to call the internet-suffused adolescents of today the "overexposed" generation.

Chen Pin-Hao, a long-practicing psychotherapist with extensive experience counseling adolescent patients, recognizes children as particularly susceptible to the opinions of others and peer pressure and sees social media as designed to train user attention on the latest status of peers and other influencers. This unhealthy relationship is a Petri dish for self-contempt, jealousy, and anxiety, robbing teens of a natural sense of security in their interpersonal relationships and, if pressures go unchecked, leading to serious repercussions.



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The author continues first by highlighting key psychological issues faced by adolescents across a spectrum of typical parent-child conflicts. Then, he provides parents and educators easy-to-implement strategies and solutions to assist children to cut unhealthy ties with social media, enhance their resilience against others' criticism, and rebuild their authentic self-identity.

Chen's rational approach to this subject eschews criticism and instead treats everyone's unique situation with empathy and understanding. His use of everyday examples and situations, in addition to making analyses and explanations easier to understand and digest, allows parents and teachers to think more deeply about how to promote healthier perspectives on internet use and selfhood.

## Chen Pin-Hao 陳品皓

Chen Pin-Hao is a longtime clinical psychologist with many years of experience in adolescent psychotherapy, specializing in the treatment of adolescent-related emotional, relationship, learning, and behavioral issues as well as parental education and psychological health. Recent child-parent education-related works in addition to *Overexposed* include *Building Psychological Resilience* and *Put the Emotional Tempest on Take an Emotional Time-Out*.

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#### **Foreword: Do Virtual Communities Make Our Children Less Happy?**

A decade ago, the concept of student counseling was still in its nascent stages. As a professional in this field, I was asked by several schools in New Taipei City to work alongside students, teachers, and parents to help children learn better adaptive skills. Since then, I have worked in almost sixty schools across New Taipei City, with my original role as an independent school psychologist evolving into my current position as supervisor for guidance counselors in Taiwan’s Ministry of Education. During this time, my colleagues and I have, through a collaborative approach, worked to continuously improve and innovate the realm of student counseling. We also witnessed the implementation of the *Student Guidance and Counseling Act* – Taiwan’s first law specific to student counseling – which established a clear legal footing for school counseling in Taiwan.

During the earlier years of my career, it is notable that the majority of students referred to me (by the various schools’ counseling departments) were those struggling with outwardly discernible behavioral problems such as ADHD, impulse control, talking disrespectfully to teachers, oppositional defiance, and emotional outbursts that would cause them to storm out of the classroom. These are, of course, the types of behavioral issues that are easy to spot in a classroom environment.

Over time, the focus of my work has shifted from school campuses to Miruku Mental Health Counseling Center that I now run with several partners. It is in more recent years, therefore, within this setting that I have noticed a shift in the nature of school referrals. Our counseling center now serves an increasing number of children who present problems such as social withdrawal, social anxiety, self-harm, internet addiction, school refusal, and declines in academic performance.

This shift in children’s emotional difficulties over the past ten years has intrigued me, and as such I often mull over possible explanations. The longer I work alongside the team at Miruku and the more children I serve in the counseling center, the more insight I am afforded into this problem. Armed with this insight and having consolidated the views and experiences of my fellow psychologists, I began to discern the broader outline and characteristics of an entire generation of children.

## **The Rise in Negative Emotions Among Adolescents as a Global Phenomenon**

Research increasingly suggests that children today are facing a wide range of emotional challenges. According to Taiwan's Ministry of Education, in 2019, the number one reason elementary and junior high students sought help from school guidance offices was for "emotional distress". For senior high school students, it was the second most common reason after "career guidance". Meanwhile, a 2018 survey conducted by the John Tung Foundation found that one in seven high school students showed signs of depression. In a 2014 survey by the Ministry of Health and Welfare, 20% of junior and senior high school students revealed they had "seriously considered suicide". This finding (reported in an in-depth feature titled "2021 Survey on the Psychological Sense of Security in Children and Adolescents with 10,000 Participants" in *CommonWealth Parenting* magazine) highlights the pervasiveness of emotional distress among children and adolescents today.

This latter survey also revealed that, from third grade through junior high, a sense of inferiority, fear of failure, and reluctance to try new things were all more prevalent in children who regularly spent time online. As well, nearly half of the children surveyed viewed the love received from their parents as being "conditional". Likewise, in the realm of interpersonal relationships, almost half were "very concerned" about what others thought of them – particularly in terms of negative feedback (even more so for girls than boys).

Professional bodies around the world have witnessed a troubling rise in mental health problems among adolescents in recent years. In 2019, the US-based *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* reported that, between 2009 to 2017, mental health disorders among adolescents had increased by approximately 50%, concluding that "electronic communication and digital media" may have played a significant role in this. Similarly, the *Youth Risk Behavior Survey Report* released by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in 2021 also showed that mental health issues among adolescents had risen during the preceding decade.

These trends, which match closely with my own clinical observations and those of the rest of the team at Miruku, portray a subtle yet powerful paradox: *Despite the fact they are possibly growing up in the safest era in history, our current generation of children are haunted by a profound sense of insecurity.*

Although these children reliably present vibrant personas on social media, have the latest information at their fingertips, enjoy a wide range of fashion choices, and interact enthusiastically with their peers online, they nonetheless frequently struggle with feelings of insecurity. They worry they aren't good enough, that their relationships aren't strong enough (that love is conditional), and that they aren't liked (fear of negative feedback).

## **A Generation Raised on Social Media**

So what exactly is behind the mental health crisis among adolescents today?

In 2023, the US Office of the Surgeon General (a body responsible for providing healthcare guidance to Americans) published a twenty-five-page-long report titled "Social Media and Youth Mental Health". The report noted that substantial evidence already points to modern social media

as a source of potentially serious harm to the mental health and wellbeing of children and adolescents.

Similarly, Common Sense Media, a non-profit organization focusing on media and content safety issues, recently published a report titled “The State of Kids and Families in America 2024”, which showed that more than half (53%) of children and adolescents considered mental health their “biggest problem” at school.

In its 2023 “Health Advisory on Social Media Use in Adolescence”, the highly regarded American Psychological Association (APA) recommended – for the first time ever – that parents should monitor and manage their children’s use of social media platforms such as TikTok, Facebook, and Instagram.

In conclusion, all the aforementioned reports indicate **a strong connection between mental health and social media use in youth.**

I privately refer to these children – heavily reliant on the internet since birth and raised on a diet of social media – as the “overexposed generation”. Of course, the term “overexposure” comes from the field of photography, describing what happens when too much light reaches a camera sensor and results in images that are too bright. By “overexposed generation”, I refer to a generation of children that has been “overexposed” to the digital world throughout childhood. While my generation needed only the basic elements of oxygen and carbon dioxide to survive, the “overexposed generation” requires a third element: WiFi. Indeed, WiFi has become so integral to their daily lives that its absence can trigger a range of troubling physical and psychological symptoms.

### **A Generation-Wide Delay in Psychological Maturity**

What presents outwardly as mental fragility reveals the deeper issue of children who are susceptible to emotional distress and struggle to concentrate. They tend toward simplistic, fragmented thinking, finding it difficult to engage in deeper, abstract thought. At the same time, for their age, they show exaggerated concern for what other people think of them, which leads to a lack of purpose and low motivation. In light of these combined traits, we see a generational phenomenon of delayed psychological maturity.

Hidden behind these tendencies, I see a theme central to the mental development of these children, specifically: “Digital natives; disordered boundaries; compromised time resources.” These three components, in my opinion, form the psychological axis for the maladaptive behaviors of this entire generation. They are also the basis of the preliminary framework I have developed by consolidating my learnings from numerous research reports, my extensive clinical experience, and collective, comprehensive feedback from my colleagues.

In this book, I delve into various aspects of the “overexposed generation”. These include the key characteristics and challenges faced by these children; the impact and underlying causes of these challenges; and, finally, potential solutions. I begin by examining the role of the internet – a critical starting point in this journey.

Many readers will recall in the years leading up to the millennium the internet becoming more pervasive and the ways in which we used it proliferating. The dot-com boom saw the rapid growth of internet companies with record-breaking market valuations and, along with it, an influx of readily available capital. Although the stock markets crashed soon after, the internet – by then a prominent fixture – was here to stay. Its applications expanded significantly and, in 2007, we witnessed the release of the first truly game-changing smartphone. The internet, now bonded to our cellphones, began rapidly and dramatically transforming our lives. We transitioned from fixed internet access to a mobile-centric lifestyle in which the internet could be accessed anytime, anywhere. This significantly altered our attention processes – even if we were not fully aware of it at the time.

Today, the jury is still out as to exactly how – and to what extent – the smartphone affects us, especially when it comes to the physical and mental development of our children. Indeed, we are still very much in the process of “adapting” to the internet, navigating both its benefits and shortcomings. It is evident to me that our efforts in this area have, so far, met with limited success – meaning that we still struggle to define our relationship with the internet. Every year without fail, parenting workshops held by Taiwanese schools address the “hot topic” of how parents should deal with their children’s internet addiction and, every year without fail, I am invited to discuss this subject. Yet perhaps rather than viewing it as a “hot topic”, it would be better to acknowledge that this topic’s prominence is fueled by the ongoing struggle to understand and manage our children’s internet usage. Lacking universally accepted perspectives and guidelines, we find it difficult to know what to do, and therefore turn to experts and scholars for advice.

While we continue to unravel the meaning of the internet’s omnipresence, our children are birthed into and grow up in this digital landscape. Our relationship with them as parents – and also their physical and mental development – all take place against the backdrop of the internet. It is, as such, in light of the numerous uncertainties, contradictions, and concerns I have mentioned above, that the premise for this book came about.

I begin in Chapter One by looking at how the internet affects the physical and psychological development of adolescents – paying particular attention to their emotional wellbeing and interpersonal relationships. To offer readers a better understanding of this topic, I must first introduce some of the basic psychological traits of adolescent children before bringing in the added factor of “the internet”. I aim to present a holistic and practical overview of the role of the internet in the lives of adolescents today, while taking into account that some readers may be relatively unfamiliar with the fundamentals of children’s psychology.



## Chapter One: Understanding the Overexposed Generation

### The Adolescent's Contradictory Nature: A Tug-of-War Between Feeling "Awesome" and "Awful"

I will begin this chapter by outlining, in the most straightforward fashion, the general psychology of adolescents. Doing so will lay a foundation for exploring the psychology of the "overexposed generation" that will be continually referenced throughout the entire book.

The central cause for "conflict" in adolescents, namely: a constant tug-of-war between "self-expectations" and "feelings of inadequacy". This is a highly unstable, dynamic, and constantly changing process, with neither force fully able to gain the upper hand. These dual standpoints exist in tireless opposition and, even if one manages to dominate for a while, they are destined to be superseded by the other at any given moment, resulting in an ongoing, dynamic phenomenon.

It is therefore important to understand that this internal struggle can manifest in your child at any time.

Although the terms "self-expectations" and "feelings of inadequacy" are relatively self-explanatory, I would still like to break them down a little further.

#### Self-Expectations: What I Expect of Myself

The concept underlying self-expectations refers to the outcomes a person imagines for themselves: how they hope to perform, what goals they hope to achieve, and what kind of person they hope to become. This necessarily embodies a person's overall perception of their own worth. Self-expectations may be described as an inner psychological "force" that drives a person to proactively embark upon a series of actions. Almost always, this continuous, natural drive from within – derived from a desire to fulfil one's own expectations – is far more powerful than external rewards and punishments.

For example, let's assume a person's self-expectations are "I want to be a good person", "I am worthy of being liked", "I hope to achieve this", and "Even if I fail at this, I know people will still like me". When this person is challenged in a way that exceeds their experience or abilities – even in the absence of external, tangible rewards – they still feel motivated to take on the challenge. This is because *simply confronting the challenge itself* fulfils their self-expectations. In turn, this feeling (which is very similar to sense of accomplishment) continues to fuel this inner motivation.

**Every child is born with an innate drive to fulfil their self-expectations: a desire to be liked, to be capable, and to be "good".** These internal self-expectations necessarily become a person's primary source of motivation. It is, however, important to distinguish between "self-expectations" and "self-worth". Self-expectations refers to a desire to be worthy, and is an ongoing process that propels one along the appropriate path. In comparison, self-worth presumes a person *already possesses* a sense of their own worth. (To better understand how to foster a stronger sense of self-worth, readers may like to refer to another of my books, *Building Psychological Resilience*, for its detailed, practical insights.)



Here, some readers may begin to wonder whether some children harbor no self-expectations at all.

In my many years' experience as a clinician, I have rarely encountered a child who lacks self-expectations. Rather, the main issue in every child I have worked with is that they struggle in meeting their self-expectations. They feel that no matter how hard they try, they are incapable of achieving their goals. Over time, this creates a disconnect between their aspirations and reality, which leads to various emotional challenges and troubling behavior.

### **Feelings of Inadequacy: I Doubt Myself**

Let's now turn to the topic of "feelings of inadequacy". Although teenagers have strong, deep-rooted self-expectations, they also possess limited self-awareness. While on the one hand they aspire to excel – to be both unique and exceptional, on the other they lack the real-life experience that can help them fulfil such lofty expectations. As these children are still very much in the early stages of their lives, their experiences are still relatively limited. To put it more simply: their successes have been few, their setbacks many, and they lack perspective.

Because of this, adolescents seek self-affirmation from just a few sources, which generally include the limited opportunities they have had to showcase their abilities, feedback from others, and self-comparisons with their peers. However, these experiences are often fragmented and unconvincing, leaving adolescents vulnerable to self-doubt. In time, as doubt accumulates, the child is left with the feeling that they are quite simply inadequate.