Millennials, Be Yourself Sometimes:

How a Generation Is Changing the Workplace

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Abstract

Those born between 1981 and 1996 are part of the *Millennial* generation. This age group was raised in a period of unprecedented technological development. During their formative years, personal computers changed from twenty-pound desktop "bricks" (Computer Hope, 2017) to six-ounce mobile phones and led to new expectations in communication immediacy. Millennials can send and receive messages at any hour and have hardly known a time when information could not be transmitted worldwide – in an instant. This shift has led to more blurred lines between their professional spaces and personal paces. Most millennials are tethered to a device of some sort and, therefore, "always on" (Taubeneck, 2006). Organizations need to understand how and why millennials work in a different way than previous generations through qualitative research into their methods and reasoning. Additionally, it is important to understand how older generations view these methods – and millennials themselves. As with any generational or cultural shift, there are positive and negative trends to examine. This project will study those trends to better understand how millennials are reshaping organizational community and conversation.

Keywords: *millennials, technology, communication, workplace culture, organizational communication*

Millennials, Be Yourself, Sometimes:

How a Generation Is Changing Personal and Professional Spaces

Millennials are a topic of much debate and research. This generation is more educated than their parents and slowly taking over America's workforce (Shatto & Erwin, 2017). Many negative words and phrases have been used to describe them: narcissistic, lazy, coddled, apathetic, selfish, and materialistic (Main, 2017 & Jirasevijinda, 2018). All of these descriptors come down to a decrease in workplace identity and a rise in individualism. This is a growing trend, according to psychologist Igor Grossman: "There is a very consistent and reliable trend where all indicators of individualism [have] been on the rise over the course of the last 100 years" (Main, 2017). The purpose of this project is to open a discussion with millennials about their perceptions *in* the workplace, perceptions *of* the workplace, to discover what factors are leading to those perceptions, and to learn how millennials can express their support or disdain for such perceptions and use their reaction to reshape organizational culture. This focus on how millennials identify themselves, and how that identity contributes to organizational communication and interpersonal dynamics, is suited to both the Social Identity Theory of communication (Brown, 2000) and the Systems Perspective on Organizations and Communication (Eisenberg, Goodall, & Trethewey, 2014).

Since most organizations are, on some level, multigenerational, it is vital that healthy interaction among the generations be prevalent. In the film, *Skyfall* (Wilson, Broccoli, & Mendes, 2012), there is an interchange between James Bond and Q where Q states, "Age is no guarantee of efficiency;" Bond replies, "And youth is no guarantee of innovation." These quotes encapsulate the negative and mistrusting narratives of many multigenerational workplaces and how they are, undeniably, two-sided. Though fictional, these quotes reveal a very authentic and common organizational narrative that it is rare for young people to have genuinely good ideas,

due to lack of experience, and rare for more seasoned employees to grasp new concepts, as they are perceived to not follow current trends.Each generation has its own communication methods, contributing to its methods of conversation. These are influenced by factors ranging from world events and economic factors to parenting styles and, of course, technology.

Similarly, each organization has its own notion of purpose and the communication methods which support that purpose (Arnett, Bell, & Fritz, 2009, p. 137). This tension between generational cohorts greatest a dangerous environment for older generations and "kids" (Baker Rosa & Hastings, 2016) in any organization and shows a lack of proper dialogic ethics (Arnett, Bell, & Fritz, 2009, p. 223). Dialogic ethics require certainty in one's position with a willingness to learn and understand the position(s) of other. Social scientists understand these ethics as "willingness to engage our own ground and meet that of another" (Arnett, Bell, & Fritz, 2009, p. 224). With an organizational need for proper dialogue, and realizing that young people are the future, the study of generational "cohorts" has rapidly and widely grown in academic, professional, and popular literature.

Generational cohorts are identified by "unique socio-historical influences affecting that group" (Baker Rosa & Hasting, 2016, p. 52). These cohorts contribute strongly to the dialogue of the organization and can hurt or hinder the system. If a healthy dialogue exists, the cohorts can learn and benefit from each other, creating an ideal sum of all parts (Eisenberg, Goodall, & Trethewey, 2014, p. 96). The lack of a healthy dialogue leads to tension between cohorts, resulting in a dysfunctional system. Millennials are the newest cohort to enter the workplace, and their increasing presence makes them an important area of study. It is vital that this generation is understood, as they will one day be the primary workforce. This research is intended to examine millennial perceptions, motivations, and communication methods and how they are changing organizational culture.

Literature Review

Generational shifts in organizational culture are not new, according to Thanakorn Jirasevijinda (2018), stating, "Misunderstanding and conflicts arising from generational gaps occurred long before millennials arrived on the scene" (p. 83). To assess the current shifts, one must first examine organizational culture types and history. Generational shifts in the workplace are nothing new, but millennials are shifting in new ways. Young workers today feel that the traditional social contract between employers and employees has failed them, and they are no longer willing to work as hard and long as their parents and grandparents did. This shift is leading to greater changes in organizational culture and an increase in related research.

Organizational Culture

Before examining communication methods within organizations, one must first "zoom out" to the greater study of organizational culture. The study of this culture examines "a range of activities within firms, and empirical evidence from management and marketing demonstrates that it impacts performance" (Wei, Samiee, & Lee, 2013, p. 49). Organizations can also be defined as a "collection of groups working to achieve goals and objectives through the use of a codified set of policies and procedures" (Martin, 2012, para. 2). They are defined by an agreed upon set of "rules, practices, and accepted forms of behavior" similar to a nation's laws and customs (Martin, 2012, para. 3). These rules develop over time and depend on the individuals forming them. They play an important role in Systems Theory as one of the operational elements contributing to the success of the whole system. In order for it to run properly, members of the organization must adhere, even if only loosely, to these strictures. The culture is involved in every aspect of an organization's identity (Men & Jiang, 2016).

The study of organizational communication is based in anthropology and management. Scholars differ on whether or not a culture defines an organization (what it *is*) or is merely an

element within an organization (what it *has*) (Men & Jiang, 2016, p. 467). Within the academic community, the mutually agreed upon behaviors are referred to as "rituals, rites, and customs" (Martin, 2012, para. 3). Everything from weekly meetings and coworker text threads to office hours and uniform email signatures fall into this category and contribute to the culture. In layman's terms, the culture is, "how we do it here" (Martin, 2012, para 2).

The effects of organizational culture are not just internal. Denise Yohn (2014) suggests that branding and customer service are strengthened directly from the "distinctive way employees behave as they turn the brand promise into breakthrough experiences" (Kindle Location 476). The culture and the customer experience are inexorably linked, and each enhances the other. The goal is for organizations to create an internal and external culture where customers "can't see any daylight between what you believe, what you practice, what you offer, and what you say about yourself" (Yohn, 2014, Kindle Location 476).

The challenge of organizational culture is its lack of uniformity. Just as no two persons are identical, no two cultures or organizations are mirror images. There is no "correct, proper, or standard organizational culture," but rather, it "is derived from the history of the organization" (Martin, 2012, para. 3). Despite that, there are similarities within any functioning system. Organizations must exhibit an adaptive nature and willingness to innovate in order to compete and remain relevant in 21st century markets (Wei, Samiee, & Lee, 2013). Despite the importance of culture in an organization, academic research on the subject is "sparse," according to Wei, Samiee, and Lee (2013, p. 49) and Men and Jiang (2016, p. 468). It seems to be a subject which researchers acknowledge as legitimate and important, but not so enough to dedicate their efforts.

Two premiere voices on this topic are Clifford Geertz and Michael Pacanowsky. From an anthropological background, Geertz likened an organization's culture to its worldview – its motive for doing anything. His research defined culture as "quintessentially communicative" and

a “domain of symbolic communication” (Kraidy & Murphy, 2008, p. 336). His research placed emphasis on symbolism within systems and exhibited “commitment to the details of the ordinary … as an analytical means to reach larger conclusions” (Kraidy & Murphy, 2008, p. 339). Pacanowsky also embraced a systems approach to organizational culture as it allows researchers to “complicate” research on organizations (Pacanowsky & Trujillo, 1983, p. 127). He partnered organizations *and* communication as equal parts in a system, only accessible through examining the surrounding culture. In the words of Men and Jiang (2016), Pacanowsky suggests that an organization *is* its culture, and culture and communication are indistinguishable and interchangeable. He echoes Geertz’ assertion that every organization is a “web” spun, and continually being spun, by its members (Pacanowsky & Trujillo, 1983, p. 129). With every new generation, the web takes a different shape, continues to grow, and is never static.

The Social Contract

A key component of organizational culture and the relationship between a system and its members (employees) is the social contract. Until recently, the concept of an American dream existed as the predominant employee-employer agreement. Journalist Sarah Foster Gale and her colleagues (2017) define this dream as “the ability to attain stable employment with comfortable compensation and benefits” (para. 1). Broader Social Contract Theory, however, dates back over four centuries and has influenced multiple aspects of living including our modern understanding of citizen and state. In the organizational culture arena, Social Contract Theory seeks to find “justifications for the exercise of corporate power and the appropriate forms and effects of business decision making” (Dunfee, Smith, & Ross, 1999, p. 15-16).

This theory establishes a basis for corporate morality, employee consent, and the responsibilities shared by the system and its members. Thomas Donaldson, Professor of Legal Studies and Business Ethics at Wharton, argues that “corporations considered as productive

organizations exist to enhance the welfare of society through the satisfaction of consumer and worker interests" (Dunfee, Smith, & Ross, 1999, p. 17). He further argues that for the protection of the system and its members, there is a base level of justice for which the organization is responsible: they must "avoid deception or fraud, show respect for their workers as human beings, and avoid any practice that systematically worsens the situation of a given group in society" Dunfee, Smith, & Ross, 1999, p. 17). According to Gale (2017), this contract has been eroding for years, based on systemic changes to three factors: compensation, management, and development. As a result, organizational culture has been forced to adapt.

Compensation is the basis for any employer-employee relationship. There is always an expectation that workers will receive something in exchange for their work. The most common trade between the two parties has been salary and tenure. In exchange for an organization paying workers a salary, workers have, in the past, felt a duty to stay with the organization for many years, perhaps even their entire careers. That trend is shifting generationally, as captured by a recent survey from the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Their research found that employees aged 55 to 64 had an average tenure of ten years, while 25 to 34-year-olds held positions for less than three (Employee Tenure Summary, 2018). Foster attributes this to younger generations witnessing organizations violate social contracts with their parents during the economic downturn of the early 2000s. Millennials do not place the same trust in systems as their parents and grandparents did (Gale, 2017). As a result, they have an innate distrust for managers, especially if they misrepresent information or fail to provide the complete story when sharing ideas and feedback (Walden, Jung, & Westerman, 2017).

Since the average tenure of an employee is now just over four years (Employee Tenure Summary, 2018), management styles have changed as well. Knowing that an employee will likely only be present for a few years means managers must be more active in their employees'

job performance and make overt attempts to communicate value to their workers. Loyalty is no longer measured in terms of how long an employer-employee relationship will last but how profitable it can be for both parties while it does (Gale, 2017).

In this new workplace environment, engagement is not the same as commitment. Engagement desires a profitable relationship, for whatever time period, while commitment desires work for an extended period of time, without regard for profit (Walden, Jung, & Westerman, 2017). Millennials prefer more engaging terms of employment, even if a job is only temporary. This attitude does not lend itself to a *stick it out* or *wait and see* view of job satisfaction and explains decreasing tenures in the workplace. Bill Sanders, a managing director for Roebling Strauss Inc., states that, "The employer-employee social contract has done more than just shifted. It died — and economics killed it" (Gale, 2017, para. 44). There was a time, after the turn of the twentieth century when skilled labor was difficult to find. As a result, companies invested time and resources to train employees for lifelong careers. Modern organizational culture does not lend itself to employee training. Peter Capelli, Professor of Management at Wharton explains that companies no longer have extensive training budgets and are more likely to hire outside their walls than promote from within (Foster, 2017).

Research from Mishel, Gould, and Bivens, from the Economic Policy Institute (2015), shows that median income in America has increased about $10,000 over thirty years. A position paying $60,000 dollars in 1979 would have paid around $70,000 in 2011. However, a quick inflation calculation shows that the same $60,000 in 1979 would have actually been worth $185,000 in 2011. With compensation levels failing to increase, younger generations job hopping, and companies hardly investing in their own employees any more, it comes as no surprise that organizational culture is rapidly changing as the millennial generation enters, and overtakes, the workplace.

Systems Theory

Systems Theory focuses on networks, planning, and community and is especially helpful for studying organizational communication methods because it speaks to the "importance of communication processes in organizing" (Eisenberg, Goodall, & Trethewey, 2014, p. 108). Social scholars define a system as a set of "coherent, evolving, interactive processes" that create stable structures (Wildflower & Brennan, 2011, p. 158). Further, a system must be "more than the sum of all its parts" (Eisenberg, Goodall, & Trethewey, 2014, p. 96). The systems approach is rooted in the biological and physical sciences, as it analyzes disconnected parts working together as a whole while sharing similar elements such as "environment, interdependence, goals, feedback, and order" (Eisenberg, Goodall, & Trethewey, 2014, p. 95).

Organizations should operate cohesively, much like the water cycle. Each stage conducts its tasks on its own, continuously, so that the others can continue. The human body is the same way; while there are a few organs without which we can still survive, each still plays its role independently, contributing to the whole. Similarly, a clock requires uniform performance, or it begins to lose or gain time. These "loosely-coupled" systems operate on a "distributed intelligence" process where information and importance are shared interdependently by all system members (Eisenberg, Goodall, & Trethewey, 2014, p. 99-100). That interdependence refers both to the individuality of each member and the wholeness of the system.

The danger of this theory is the importance on the whole possibly ignoring the individual; interdependence vs. independence. A Social Identity approach would focus on the individuals comprising the system, but a Systems approach focuses on the functions and communication methods of the organization using the individual employees as the elements comprising the system. Rupert Brown (2009) defines Social Identity Theory as "derived primarily from group memberships" (p. 747). This theory views people's actions as motivated by social standing and

self-esteem. This would focus more on the elements, or individuals, within a system (independence).

The systems approach focuses on the sum of the elements and how they need each other to succeed (interdependence). At worst, the theory can be dehumanizing, considering the system more valuable than the components. At best, Systems Theory proves that the success of the system is only achieved through proper treatment and acknowledgement of the components. In this regard, the theory stresses the importance of millennials as the only path to excellence for the organization. Managers can use this method to better understand new generations as individual elements in their organizational culture.

Millennials

Since social scientists have long-noticed that every generation communicates differently and exhibits "distinct characteristics based on their birth years" (Jirasevijinda, 2018, p. 83), each generation requires new study. As noted by Baker Rosa and Hastings (2016), Shatto and Erwin (2017), McDaniel, McKinney, and Kimsey (2017) and others, this subject is of growing concern to employers, educators, and scholars seeking to "actively bridge" generational differences between older and younger cohorts (Shatto & Erwin, 2017, p. 26). One manager writes, "Over the past nearly 20 years of supervising successive trainees in medical education, I continue to receive an increasing number of complaints about millennial learners every year" (Jirasevijinda, 2018, p. 83). This project is for those managers who are struggling to connect the many generations in their organizations.

Shatto and Erwin (2017) have found that millennial students' perceived addiction to technology is not the curse it was once thought to be. In fact, researchers now look to younger generations to forecast the future of technological use and patterns in culture (Botterill, Bredin, & Dun, 2015, p. 538). They have found that multitasking is a noticeable trait in rising

generations, writing, “the number of hours in a day has not changed, yet millennials appear to engage in more media experiences in time by stacking devices” (p. 541). This trend also contributes to an increase in knowledge and awareness. With an internet-enabled device always near, millennials have no reason to leave any question unanswered. Every query can be quickly web searched and answered.

Regular and simultaneous use of video game consoles, televisions, smartphones, computers and tablets teaches multitasking which millennials prefer “to single activities, believing that it helps to speed the process of learning” (p. 2). It remains to be seen if that technology use is pioneering or alienating (Botterill, Bredin, & Dun, 2015, p. 539). This often leads older generations to see them as distracted or unable to focus during face-to-face conversations, but that is not necessarily the case. While they do prefer computer mediated communication over face-to-face for conflict management (McDaniel, McKinney, & Kimsey, 2017, p. 8). However, Mazer and Hess (2016) that, overall, the generation still prefers face-to-face interactions (p. 371). “Stacking devices” allows millennials to carry on multiple conversations concurrently, but important one-on-one conversations still require direct personal interaction (Botterill, Bredin, & Dun, 2015, p. 541).

Tim Eisenhauer (2015) is a businessman and writer specializing in the millennial workforce. His list of requirements for those overseeing the younger generation includes honesty, accessibility, promotion, feedback, equality, optimism, freshness, and technology. In his words, millennials are “the future of business” and bring a unique culture to the workplace (Eisenhauer, 2015, para. 5). From his research, the turnover rate among younger workers is not merely the failure of the social contract, but also the unwillingness of older managers to adapt. A recent article from LiveScience adds flexibility to the list of job requirements and several negative generational traits as well. Millennials are seen by many as selfish and materialistic,

having only a passing regard for others in the workplace. The new workforce has even been termed “Generation Me” by some. (Main, 2017, para. 12).

Research Questions

Whether the truth about millennials lies in the positive or the negative research assessments, there is no way to avoid their eventual takeover of the workplace. Time is an inescapable force, and time makes this generation the culture-forming managers of the future. With this inevitability in mind, I advance the following research questions:

RQ1: What do social media posts tell us about how millennial workers are perceived in the workplace?

RQ2: What do social media posts by the millennial generation tell us about how they want to reshape that perception and organizational culture?

Method

Data Collection

To answer these questions, the research design is a content analysis of social media posts from 2016 to 2018. The purpose of this approach is to examine content from researchers, business leaders in management and human resource positions, satisfied employees, and frustrated workers of varying generational cohorts. Multiple voices within organizations must be heard to fully understand the types of cultural change millennials are affecting. To find these voices, I assembled a group of 1,000 social media posts from Facebook and YouTube. My focus centered on texts covering how employees of this generation function in the workplace compared to other generations. I searched using the terms *millennials, millennial jobs, millennial entrepreneur,* and *millennial workplace*. These basic search terms were merely starting points. Posts containing these terms led to others pertaining to the topics at hand. YouTube, especially,

contains thousands of voices speaking to innumerable related topics. One video examined had over fifteen thousand comments.

I expected to find both positive and negative content from these sources and for most of them to be written from an older generation and employer perspective. Using Facebook and YouTube, I began my search process using the terms *millennial* and *millennials workplace* and followed posts where they lead. I found the majority of my firsthand content from millennials using this search.

Data Analysis

Once I had selected my original post sources, I began the process of coding. I searched for familiar themes, patterns, and keywords that arose in the text. Each new theme became a new concept, with keywords and variations on the themes creating categories. Once all of these were established, I began my search for patterns. Next, I examined the sources behind my concepts and searched for similarities among texts from similar sources (older generations, employers vs. younger generations, employees). As expected, I found both similarities within these subsets and differences between them. From there, I imported my data into tables organized around the central themes I uncovered in the initial coding phases.

This methodology is influenced by the Pew Research Center's long history of content analysis and coding in their work (Suh, 2015, p. 1). Content analysis allows the Pew Center to examine a variety of communication platforms and examine how messages change over time and vary across media. Each analysis and coding effort the center conducts is designed to answer a question or achieve a goal. Through "systemic, objective, quantitative analysis," their research measures the topics covered by numerous media outlets and how the conversations are framed using three criteria: thoroughness, representativeness, and availability (Suh, 2015, p. 1). While thoroughness was my responsibility, social media provided vast representation and availability.

Thematic Analysis

The data analysis process led to themes emerging within and across the categories. To understand how these themes related to each other, I used William Foster Owen's (1984) thematic interpretation to observe behaviors and conclude what they mean. Owen (1984) finds themes to be "episodic, processual, and interactive" ways of sustaining relationships or bettering ones that would otherwise remain static (p. 285).

In his research, Owen (1984) uses three criteria to define a theme: recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness. Recurrence occurs when two or more statements contain the same meaning, even if expressed with different words. A theme recurs if it is at the foreground of a statement – in this analysis, a social media post. While recurrence is more vague, the second criterion, repetition, is specific. If an exact word or phrase is used more than once, it becomes a "key bit of discourse" (p. 275) and offers important insight as to how the individual(s) are representing and interpreting situations. Thirdly, forcefulness "refers to vocal inflection, volume, or dramatic pauses" (p. 275) which stress certain aspects of speech and deemphasize others. In print media, this criterion is communication through underlined, bolded, or capitalized text. Forcefulness can also be expressed through more direct language, the use of expletives, and extraneous exclamation marks. As my data set was entirely firsthand accounts by individuals both satisfied and displeased, there was no shortage of forcefulness in the data set. That fact was also one of the challenges of using social media posts as primary source.

Findings and Interpretations

As memo writing, initial coding, axial coding, and selective coding were conducted, four voices and four themes emerged. These voices were (1) other generations criticizing millennials, (2) millennials criticizing millennials, (3) other generations defending millennials, and (4) millennials defending millennials. Of these four voices, two, understandably, were loudest: the

attack and the defense. The majority of comments centered around other generations criticizing millennials, and millennials defending themselves. The four main themes from these voices were (1) the problems with millennials (stereotypes), (2) the root of the problems, (3) what other generations want, and (4) what millennials want. The comments included below are original writings of various social media users and are shown in quotes to add to the examples of themes that were uncovered. Some texts have been edited to correct grammar and spelling. The voices discussed below directly answer how millennials are perceived in the workplace by other generations and those within their own generational cohort. Later, in the Themes section, the data is not as straightforward but still speaks to the changes millennials want to bring to their own workplaces and the broader scope of organizational culture.

The Voices

Of these four voices, the first two present strong evidence that millennials are, overall, perceived negatively in the workplace. The latter voices rebut that perception on some level, but the majority of the data responding to the video described below comes from voices criticizing millennials. The voices are not four specific characters or individuals speaking, but rather, four main categories into which the majority of comments can be divided.

Other Generations Criticizing Millennials. Having done some research into this topic already, and being a millennial myself, this category was unsurprising. It is no vast secret that many outside the millennial generation have, in general, a negative view of those within. In response to an interview with Simon Sinek regarding millennials in the workplace (Crossman, 2016). In the video, Sinek describes millennials as confounding, impatient, lacking in purpose, addicted to technology, and low self-esteem. User *seenondv* did not even reference the content of the video when posting, “Great video... problem is, that it's fifteen minutes long and the Millennials stopped watching after three minutes.” User *Luke Skyrunner* employs several

millennials and agreed with Sinek's assertions (Crossman, 2016) that the generation is confounding, impatient, and self-centered, "I manage a company with Millennials. They have to be the worst people I have ever tried to manage; they complain, they cannot work full days, none of them are able to function at 6:00 am, but the worst thing they only think about themselves (not team players at all)." Similar comments in the data set speak volumes toward older generations' perception of millennials in the workplace. User *BuffteethrBlog* offered a firsthand experience observing millennials and their tech addiction, "The phone thing was telling. My wife and I went to restaurant near a college campus. There were mostly college kids there and when we looked around we noticed that They were mostly on their phones sitting together at the tables. They were barely talking to each other."

Other users managed to criticize millennials while still recognizing that all of the issues may not be their fault. *PoopDan* commented, "I disagree that it is the responsibility of corporations or companies to accommodate the skewed world view of spoiled, entitled millenials who were raised by the shit parents of my generation. If Millenials can't adjust, too bad. The strong among them will survive." Similarly, *Rain ForevaDJ* blamed parents but still viewed millennials as the problem: "Businesses is at fault...this foolishness makes no sense. Parents are responsible for how they raise kids... not accepting responsibility for one's actions is accepting repetitive failure this is the bs that causes this socialist idealism. Take ownership of your actions that creates wealth and progress. This is the beginning of failure of thought. Stop being a whiny generation and do what it takes to succeed."

Millennials Criticizing Millennials. In addition to older generations having a negative view of millennials, there are those within the generation itself who also subscribe to such views. In response to the same video, *Aaron Orrantia* commented, "Am I the only 90s kid that agrees with him and that isn't butthurt about this awful truth?" With no context as to why he feels this

way about his own generation, his comment seemed, at first, like an outlier and a surprise; however, further data analysis proved him not alone. An anonymous user agreed, saying, “Can't deny how accurate he is when I compare myself to his words, I'm 19 anyways.”

User *Someone* offered an even harsher critique of his generation, “I’m a millennial apparently. This world is rigged. You gotta work hard for what you want and not give up because there’s a bump in the road. The world isn’t gonna hand you anything for free. You just have to have patience. It’s a race that you may never see the end of. That’s why you must enjoy the journey. You aren’t entitled to anything. You earn it.” In this comment, *Someone* echoed Sinek’s (Crossman, 2016) assertions that millennials are lazy, entitled, and impatient.

Courtney Coyle and *Philip Burrmann* both offered no justification or experience, they simply agreed outright. Courtney wrote, “I was born in 1994 but I 100% BELIEVE and AGREE with everything he is saying... not everyone is the same BUT that majority of Millennials are like this!” she offers a minor caveat that “not everyone” is like this, but she clearly finds that to be the exception, not the rule. Philip echoed, “I'm a millenial and I think most millenials are generally way less smart, poor of experiences, kind of flegmatic and boring compared to people who are not from that generation.”

User *IMONSMOKO* was one of the few commenters in the data set to specifically echo the video’s assertion that millennials are unable to form lasting connections. He has experienced this, writing, “I was born in 1999, during primary school 2005-2011 I formed deeper and more meaningful relationships while I was a kid (pre smart phone, social media world) than what I have now in 2018. I can’t even talk to people about anything meaningful in life anymore, everything just feels so fucked.” This sentiment is a major point in Sinek’s presentation (Crossman, 2016) but not one that is addressed often in the data set. It does, however, contribute

the frequently-occurring critique that millennials are impatient and less capable at life than their predecessors.

Other Generations Defending Millennials. While prevalent, the notion that *all* members of older generations dislike millennials is both over simplified and overgeneralized. In fact, the data showed there were defenders of millennials who were not, themselves, members of the generation. *Matthew The Great Coin Roll Hunter* is optimistic that millennials can actually make the future better, saying, "The young people are not the problem. They are the solution. If you're not empowering them to fix this, then sit down; look pretty!" Matthew's YouTube profile picture suggests that he is only slightly older than millennials, and his attitude toward them is markedly different from his generational counterparts.

Tired of the prevalent negativity, user *ralfov* said, "People talking about millennials annoy me way more than actual millennials." Given the popularity of this video – over ten million views in two years – and the abundance of debate and discussion surrounding millennials perception, it is easy to see why this comment received almost 100 thumbs up reactions. *Ralfov* neither disagreed nor agreed with any of the perceptions, the user merely expressed frustration that the topic has garnered so much attention.

Clearly annoyed with Sinek's assertions, *Dylan Hume* commented, "Every generation decries the doom of mankind at the hands of the younger one. This is nothing new. Simon has just found a way to make a quick buck from worn-out narratives and flashy rhetoric." This sentiment appears many times in the data and is well noted in the first of the themes below – The Problems with Millennials.

These comments, and other similar remarks in the data set, are important in answering how millennials are perceived in the workplace because they are the only "defense" offered by

non-millennials. It is easy to see how the final voice, discussed below, developed to answer these criticisms.

Millennials Defending Millennials. Millennials are not taking criticism without a fight. They are no strangers to negativity, and they have developed specific rebuttals and counter accusations against those who would try to degrade them based solely on age and stereotypes. User *Aniv Khawaunju* summed up the entirety of comments within this voice, saying, "I'm so tired of people hating on millennials. Millennials are probably the most hard-working generation due to the competition and unstable economy that the baby boomers and generation x created. I have to take classes 4 days a week and work 3 days a week and because of college competition, I need to do an internship, do sports, join clubs, have a great GPA and even after all that I still might not get into a good college." In this first quote, Aniv tackles the criticism directly and offers a stern look into the real organizational culture faced by the generation. Later, the same user continues to point out the triviality of one of the most frequently levied complaints – tech addiction, "Literally who cares about Facebook and phone addiction when we have so much more on our plates. At least millennials are the most knowledgeable when it comes to politics and science and technology. What these old people had trouble learning for a decade we grasp in a few months." This first-hand experience speaks to both perception of millennials and how they want to change organizational culture. In his comment, Aniv expresses frustration at the criticisms, an explanation of the challenges millennials face, and even an assertion of superiority.

In response to Sinek's (2015) video, user Alaric noted that generational frustration is nothing new, "What he's saying isn't anything new or novel. Whatever he says about the 'new-fangled kids and they're wacky gizmos' could be said about any other generation. Old people are just as much into their Facebooks and their iPhones as the new kiddos. This whole argument about how the new generation is ruining itself & society is stupid and played out and has literally

been repeated millions of times ever since we've been recording our thoughts." This idea is explored in greater depth in *The Problems with Millennials* discussed below, but it is important to note here that one defense offered by millennials is also an acknowledgment that criticism is not new. Whether realized or not, the implication is that millennials, themselves, will one day be the complaining generation, and, like Gen X and Boomers today, they will have a mixture of valid and invalid complaints. Knowing that, the *Themes in These Voices* emerge as fodder for understanding divisions and finding common ground in the differences.

Themes in These Voices

The themes that developed from the data offer criticism, defense, and bridging material. The stereotypes discussed earlier in this research appear in *The Problems with Millennials* below; the millennial defense and counter critique of the extant social contract are discussed in *The Root of the Problems*; and attempts to work together and restore working systems to organizations with multigenerational cultures are offered in the final two themes. The first theme is primarily a development of the criticizing voices already discussed and speaks to perceptions. It sheds great light on the breakdown within organizational systems when differing age groups have total disregard for each other. The latter themes, however, answer the question of what millennials want to do with these perceptions and how they want more informed coworkers to help them reshape stereotypes and workplace culture. They develop a path toward organizational system restoration if there can simply be more open conversation and a willingness to understand the intricacies within each of the two sides.

The Problems with Millennials (Stereotypes). Many of the stereotypes outlined earlier in this project appeared in the data, as expected. Other generations are not shy about criticizing their younger counterparts. The phenomenon is nothing new, as discussed by BBC reporter Amanda Ruggeri (2017). She writes, "We found that older people have been griping about young

people for more than 2,000 years… throughout the centuries, their criticisms have been remarkably similar" (para 1). Examples date back the first century BC, when Horace mused, "The beardless youth… does not foresee what is useful, squandering his money" (Horace, 2017). Three hundred years later, Aristotle wrote, "They think they know everything, and are always quite sure about it," and "[Young people] are high-minded because they have not yet been humbled by life, nor have they experienced the force of circumstances" (Horace, 2017).

After the turn of the twentieth century, not much had changed. From the 1925 Hull Daily Mail, one could read, "We defy anyone who goes about with his eyes open to deny that there is, as never before, an attitude on the part of young folk which is best described as grossly thoughtless, rude, and utterly selfish" (Horace, 2017). Eleven years later, the Portsmouth Evening News published, "Probably there is no period in history in which young people have given such emphatic utterance to a tendency to reject that which is old and to wish for that which is new" (Horace, 2017). Finally, the Washington Post claimed, merely 25 years ago, "What really distinguishes this generation from those before it is that it's the first generation in American history to live so well and complain so bitterly about it" (Horace, 2017).

While this theme still speaks to perception, it is important to examine specific critiques and concerns lobbied against millennials before looking at their efforts to change those perceptions and culture. Specific criticisms found in the data range from general to detailed and from gentle to severe. In response to a video found both on Facebook and YouTube, the comments below were posted. In the video (Brea, 2017), an older man is interviewing a millennial for a position in his company. The interviewee rarely looks up from her phone, is unintelligent, and makes ridiculous demands of her potential new employer. Viewers would be hard pressed to find any part of the video portraying millennials positively.

Kollin101 has experienced millennials like this in his workplace, “Oh, there a lot of millennials like this. They give you this vacant look when you mention anything to do with responsibilities. I had one millennial I was training ask if it was ok for him to sleep at work during the nightshift.” Similarly, *Frank Mosey* wrote, “My workplace has hired close to 2000 people in the last 3 years, and this video is dead on. We are in trouble. I deal with discipline for cellphone use a minimum of 10 times a day.” User *Why me?* offered no explanation or data for his comment, but merely agreed, “Ain’t it the truth.”

Eric fregoso eschewed tact entirely to say, “Millennials are WAY worse than gen z. Millennials are lazy ass entitled fucks.” *Jason W* tried to be less direct and critical, offering, “Is this all millennials? Certainly, not. But read some news, get outside and talk to some of them. These people are out there now, and they are out there in absolute droves.”

The Root of the Problems. In response to these critiques, millennials continue to fight back. They often cite a multitude of challenges unique to their generation as the true cause behind their unfortunate reputation(s), including unprecedented student loan debt, an economy wrecked by previous generations, no financial expectation to ever own a home, “entry-level” jobs requiring both experience and education, poor parenting, and the traditional aversion to younger generations.

There are those outside the millennial generation who also recognize and understand these challenges. They constitute the aforementioned voice of the “Other Generations Defending Millennials.” In response to the same job interview video (Brea, 2017), *Annette Vander Heide* replied, “My kids aren't like this, thankfully. They have always had a strong work ethic and still do. Too many kids have this attitude of entitlement, no thanks to their parents.” User *deltahalo241* agrees, “The amount of people thinking this is the norm goes to show how out of

touch they are," and that the example in the video "certainly doesn't seem to be the case where I live. But who knows. Perhaps it's different in America. America is a weird place."

Millennials want an organizational culture that understands and appreciates the challenges they have faced to both educate themselves and enter the workforce during a time where neither is easy. *Vadaski* wrote, "More like the generation after. A proper millennial interview goes... *sees entry level position*... requires 5 year's experience...wut," and *Michael Slotter* expressed, "Entry level, 5 years experience, bachelors required, masters preferred. Starting salary 48k a year 1 week vacation for the 1st 3 years." These and other similar comments express frustration at the disconnect between perceived and actual culture regarding education and experience. There is no longer a culture where a college degree is enough for an entry-level job. Michael's statement, echoed by others, outlines the actual hiring culture where entry-level candidates are expected to have a college degree and a solid employment history, yet they'll still receive minimum compensation and benefits.

Similarly, on a Facebook post decrying stereotypes, student loan expenses, and the misclassification of the millennial generation (Ufot Coleman, 2018), *Erika Suzanne* wrote, "I go through this every day. It's annoying and frustrating. It's like because we are young, we can't do anything right-spoiler alert many of us are doing great things." *Tiff AG* has heard the criticisms and is fighting back, "Right?! Folks stay sending me articles about millennials and it's irritating. It's easy to say because we're younger and do stuff differently that we're spoiled. None of these people have asked for my resume though lol. Let's bring some facts to this conversation if you wanna talk about it." *Elizabeth Ufot Coleman*, the original post author replied, "Fascinating when the economy was tanked by the generation who wanted things they couldn't afford." Older generations' perceptions have led to an organizational culture that devalues the struggles millennials face, and these users want that to change. *Charli Martin* even offered a warning for

the future, “Statistics show that by 2020 knowledge is going to be doubling every 12 hours with Gen Z. It’s not going to matter “who lived through what” or “who’s older”. They see things differently than anyone else. They process things differently than anyone else. And they are definitely about to blow alllll of us out of the water.”

What Other Generations Want. It is challenging to dig through the criticisms of other generations and decipher what exactly they want from millennials and organizational culture. The clearest recurring theme in the data was a desire for millennials to invest more deeply in their workplaces. One of the many criticisms was the notion that millennials are self-involved and do not exhibit the same dedication to the employee-role of the social contract. Some comments included more constructive criticism than mere critique, like *Rona Aragon,* “No matter how hard you work, there’s a possibility you still won’t get promoted. If everyone works hard, not everyone will be promoted. The message I would rather tell millennials is always do your best, set standards of excellence for yourself, keep working at your craft to achieve a level of mastery. No one can take away from you the sense of pride for a job well done and certainly developing your expertise is a lifetime asset.” Facebook user *Michelle Wong* is certain the culture is changing based solely on millennials bucking the perceptions and proving themselves worthy, “I always tell my subordinates that you work hard and do everything, it's not only for the company, it's for your own self. Take the company as your own company, see the business as your own business. One day, you will be promoted until you want to say STOP.” Her outlook is more positive than many others’, but she was not the only millennial in the data to assert hope and potential for change.

What Millennials Want. In a word, the data shows that millennials want to be understood. If that is untenable, they would settle for merely being tolerated without constant derision. They want older generations to realize that the workplace, and especially the job

market, has changed, and millennials, for the most part, are doing the best they can. They seek an organizational culture that embraces, rather than shuns, their uniquities and experiences.

CyberDesMKIV held no punches in responding to the interview video (Brea, 2017), "Wow you guys have no grasp of the struggle of millennials! We are underpaid, and in a housing market where the cost of an average home especially in California is about $380k- $580k and don't get me started on the Bay Area where a starter home goes for $1.2-$1.5 million dollars! Most of my generation only makes somewhere between $34,000 and $50,000 a year. Even when looking at paying for something that cost as little as $380k you have to contend with student debt payments, credit card payments, car loan payments, and rents that range from $2000 to $3700 for a damn STUDIO APARTMENT especially if you live in any of CA's coastal cities. Laziness is not a factor in this issue. Most of my peers hustle, driving for Lyft and Uber, or delivering people's food on top of working a 9am-5pm all to be broke by the end of the month. I am sick and tired of the damn millennial bashing you guys do without fairly representing the entirety of our current generational situation!"

Again referencing the disconnect between culture's perception and reality, *Hypothetically Speaking* argued, "This generation: Multiple rounds of online testing, video interviews, case studies, etc. for every graduate job before you even get a chance to be interviewed by a human, and don't bother applying if you haven't got loads of extracurriculars/internships by the time you're in third year. My parents' generation: 2 interviews were the max. Online tests and case studies were unheard of." *Hannah Therese* continued, "Hi, I'm a millennial, I am proficient at basically all computer programs, have a bachelor's degree, and will spend a good chunk of my time fixing basic technological problems your older employees can't or don't care to figure out."

Hannah continues and sums up the entire predicament facing millennials using three perspectives: (1) employer: "Sorry you need at least 5 years of field-specific experience to work

in this entry-level job that pays $10 and hour, and you'll need to be available 60 hours a week to work a maximum of 29 hours so we don't have to provide you health insurance," (2) millennial: "Wait, that doesn't seem quite right..." and (3) other generations: "So entitled!! I can't believe kids these days think they should be able to actually get PAID for JOBS after graduating college. What? Never mind I was able to buy a house and raise a family on my first job straight out of high school…"

The sarcasm used in these last quotes is not unique to any of the four voices or within any one of the four themes. Comments in every area of the data set held hubris, scorn, blame, defense, and sarcasm. However, many of the areas also contain forgiveness, understanding, and camaraderie. It might be easy to focus on the more negative traits in the data, but I believe the implications are entirely positive. There are two overarching takeaways from the voices and themes: perception and plea.

Discussion and Implications

From this data analysis, it would seem the answer to RQ1 agrees with the research presented in the literature review: millennials are perceived as entitled, lazy, addicted to technology and are destroying both organizational systems and the long-held social contract. They are viewed negatively by many people of older generations and even by some of their own generational cohorts.

The posts analyzed from users born before 1981 essentially indicate that the world and organizational culture as unchanged since they were young, and the struggle of millennials to adapt is their own fault. There is little allowance in their view for millennials' complaints: economic instability, higher education costs, a disparity between inflation and wage increases, or dramatically higher housing prices. The data suggests a general "we did it, why can't you?" mentality toward younger workers. As discussed in the analysis, this sentiment toward the next

generation is not specific to the users analyzed in this research or any specific cohort. In fact, if history is to repeat itself, millennials will one day decry those born after 1996, choosing specific traits they do not understand and using them as fodder for critique.

Meanwhile, in answer to RQ2, millennials are anxious about these misconceptions and eager to change them for the better. Social media posts by this generation suggest, at best, a deep sense of being misunderstood by older generations and, at worst, an animosity toward them. They feel blameless in the breakdown of systems and failure of the social contract. Instead, they view this organizational shift as the fault of previous generations due to broken promises. They were promised jobs after education, and instead, they received debt. They were promised a life similar to their parents', whose generation is now criticizing them, but instead received low wages, seemingly insurmountable education debt, and stricter mortgage qualifications.

The primary desire seems to be understanding; that action would shift organizational culture enough to restore working systems. At present, the enmity expressed in the data blocks each generational cohort from interacting openly with the other. This makes a functional system difficult and creates an organizational culture teetering on the brink of hostility. It is unclear how long organizations can function with such a culture, and every voice in the data expressed a desire for change.

Theoretical Implications

Earlier in the research, Systems Theory was defined as a focus on networks, planning, and community (Eisenberg, Goodall, & Trethewey, 2014, p. 108). From the data, it is clear that there is a breakdown in community between differing generational cohorts. Though organizations are facing cultural discord, there is no mass trend of workplace failure due to generational differences. This fact indicates a strength within organizational systems that supersedes mere community breakdowns. Whether the continued success of organizations stems

from workers' desires to thrive individually or corporately, that continued success proves that a system can withstand considerable strain without breaking.

This implication is a positive one for theoretical and practical applications. Practically, organizations can absolutely succeed without total conformity. Theoretically, systems supersede individuals and system divisions. All four voices in the data set contain frustration – two voices frustrated at other generations and two frustrated at their own. Similarly, two themes center around problems. What the data lacks is any hint of these problems ruining a business entity or individual. While employees and managers are frustrated, there were no comments reflecting generational differences causing a company to fail, workers to lose their jobs, or any system to collapse. Despite a sense of impending doom, there was no actual evidence of doom.

Therefore, a strong system, which was earlier compared to a clock or human body, is most like a human body. If a clock has broken parts, it will cease to tell time. However, while many organs are dependent on each other for peak performance, they are not all necessary, nor do they all have to be in peak condition for the human body to perform. One can still function with a heart murmur, high blood pressure, or after a gallbladder, kidney, or liver portion has been removed. In the same way, an organizational system can continue to function even with strain on or between some of its individuals. The data contains much strain on and between employees but no destruction of functioning systems.

Secondly, the data implies that Social Contract Theory is, in fact, being again rewritten. Each generation has defined its own social contract, but the longstanding American dream defined earlier by Sarah Foster Gale (2017) has died. This sentiment is expressed in the two voices defending millennials and in the theme *What Millennials Want.* Multiple users in the data railed against current workplace systems in contrast with those their parents encountered as young adults. Wages have not risen with inflation, and home ownership costs have outpaced

both. In a recent article, Patrick Sisson (2018) calculated that the median cost of purchasing a home is more than double what it was fifty years ago. In 1970, average home prices were equivalent with approximately two years' salary. In 2010, home prices equaled four and a half years' salary, and the disparity continues to increase (Sisson, chart 1). Millennials are keenly aware of this struggle, and the data shows that some in other generations are as well. In their posts, *Other Generations Defending Millennials* cited some of the struggles they recognize their children and younger colleagues facing and that they are significantly enhanced from what they themselves faced decades ago.

The social contract between employer and employee is no longer a lifetime or decades-long agreement of mutual benefit; it is shifting toward shorter spurts, greater benefits, and cordial parting. What older generations see as a short attention span, millennials view as a constant search for better opportunities. This implication is not one to bemoan or attempt to stop. Rather, it is an eventuality to study and perfect until the next generation(s) rewrites the theory yet again. Employers and managers can use this knowledge to better motivate their young workers and achieve greater organizational successes. Using the data outlined earlier, there are three practical ways organizations can improve workplace culture and soothe the divides between their opposing generational cohorts.

Practical Implications

While each generational cohort assigns blame to the other, there are errors and truths on both sides. To remedy the divide, members of each generation must drop their current perceptions of the other and focus on the group membership ideal from Rupert Brown (2009, p. 747). The fact that organizations can still succeed while employers and employees hold such divisive views as contained in the data gives hope for the future. Organizations can clearly

operate productively even with their systems under duress, but how can the data be used to minimize that duress and create a satisfactory culture for all generational cohorts?

I stated earlier that it is unclear whether continued organizational system successes, despite generational differences, are the result of individual or corporate goals. For managers, this is an important distinction. If a manager can answer this question within his/her organization, the culture can be shaped around the goal(s). If employees are working to better themselves, with no regard for the organization, managers can structure a system that centers on individual reward rather than the betterment of the organization as a whole. If, however, employees are working to achieve a common goal, despite generational divides, managers can handle such divides by reminding workers of the common ground and "big picture" outcomes that will better the whole system, and therefore, benefit each member of the system. Sarah Foster Gale (2017) describes this management style as "culture fit" (para. 28). When managers understand their employee's motivations, they can offer benefits and incentives to match. Management consultant Chip Espinoza advises, "If HR wants to keep turnover down among this generation, they have to teach managers how to support and engage them" (Gale, 2017, para. 31).

Regarding the shift in the social contract, millennials are redefining "loyalty." Where it was once considered an employee giving a lifetime of work for healthy retirement compensation, younger workers are more near-sighted and want results they can see and feel sooner rather than trusting the organization to one day provide rewards. Business Professor Yih-tin Lee defines loyalty as not simply "a measure of time, it is measured by how committed a person is to their work, and how engaged they are in achieving the goals of the company" (Gale, 2017, para. 27). Millennials have traded "full-time, on-site, uninterrupted, long-term and exclusive" jobs for "lots of advancement opportunities and flextime options, as well as ample paid time off to volunteer in

the community" (Gale, 2017, para. 28 & 29). Since priorities for each workplace cohort are both generational and individual, it is imperative for employers and managers to have open communication lines with employees not just at quarterly or annual reviews, but throughout the workday as issues arise and new solutions emerge.

A second implication is that millennials need to take criticism less directly and personally. Both the literature review and the data show that this ill will from older generations is to be expected and, on some level, ignored as a part of youth. While the 22 to 37 year-olds in the millennial generation may struggle to consider themselves "youth," to Generation X and Baby Boomers, that is exactly what we are. Understanding that such curmudgeon-like is even in millennials' futures, it becomes easier to excuse the misperceptions and poorly-expressed angst of those who feel the future overtaking them and are unsure how to react. This idea is presented in *The Problem with Millennials* most forcefully, in *Other Generations Defending Millennials,* and more subtly in *Millennials Defending Themselves*. There is a recognition among all generations that the millennial plight is not new. While older generations can more easily recognize workplace culture shifts, simply because they have been alive longer to observe them, some younger workers in the data also exhibited an awareness of change being difficult.

Finally, there is a greater societal shift implied in the data analysis. While millennials will slowly become the majority of America's workforce, they also will become the majority of the electorate. Beck and Kitchener (2018) saw a 188 percent increase in young-adult voter turnout in the recent midterm elections, compared to 2014 (para. 3). The frustration expressed in the data set – education costs and debt, high housing prices, income stagnation, and lack of employee appreciation – will be expressed in organizational culture and at the ballot box. Just as previous generations changed the workplace by creating 5-day work weeks, a minimum wage, and labor unions, future generations will seek legislative remedies to their burdens.

Challenges and Limitations

The greatest limitation to this research was the wide swath of information available on social media. My searches not only resulted in firsthand accounts of how millennials act and are treated in the workplace, but there was also office gossip, personal rants, and biased diatribes. It was my challenge to properly code this information without partiality from my own millennial experience, and I had to rely heavily on patterns and themes in the data for validation.

A second challenge to this project was the simple newness of the topic. Millennials have only been a part of organizational culture for the past decade, and thus, research into their effects is still developing. Over the next decade, this subject will gain more attention as the rifts between generational cohorts become more noticeable and public. This analysis is intended as a starting point for future research and a synopsis of current views toward the generation from those outside and within.

The final challenge was validating data sources. While Facebook profiles are typically informative, comments on YouTube are practically anonymous. The best way to deduce a user's age is using their profile picture. Even then, there is no guarantee that the picture is recent or even real. As a result, I only used data containing keywords and sentiments expressed multiple times by multiple users. Through repetition, I found validation in the sentiments expressed by even nondescript profiles.

Conclusion

Our differences do not define us. In fact, they make us stronger. While there were many generational gaps found in this research, there emerged such a commonness to this trend, historically, that the differences lost their seeming insurmountability. This does not mean the differences are to be ignored, however. There is a clear need for an emergence in open communication between the generational cohorts.

Older generations must open themselves to the possibility that the workplace, educational system, and economy have changed and that younger workers have not, as a group, had the same experiences they had in life. Whether it has been more or less challenging matters less than the simple fact that it has been different. This understanding will soften the "we made it, why can't you?" mentality often exhibited in the data and cause millennials to be less anxious about sharing their experiences.

Similarly, millennials should understand that this gap in understanding is cyclical and not worth the strain of workplace discord. The greatest asset older generations possess is experience, and younger workers can gain valuable wisdom from open communication them. As the future of the system, it is our responsibility to establish organizational cultures that function well for us as the emerging workforce but will also continue to do so as we age into the managers of tomorrow. In short, millennials, we can be ourselves, sometimes.

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