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## Millennial Research on Fleek: Suggestions for Improving Generational Research Design

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## Millennial research on fleek: Suggestions for improving generational research design

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### ABSTRACT

This special issue will examine and embrace the uniqueness of millennials. We look at a number of issues related to this generational cohort, examining what makes them unique, challenging and even assets to those they come into contact with in their lives. In our opening article we discuss the unique attributes of millennials, provide researchers a framework for generational research best practices, and provide an overview of the articles featured in this special issue.

### KEYWORDS

millennial; generational research; research design

*Said no one ever, humble brag, can't even, on fleek. Why, because duh.* These are phrases created by the millennial generation (Larkin, 2018) and, like most phrases, continue to evolve to this day. For example, *on fleek* originated as a way to describe someone's amazingly styled eyebrows and is a combination of the words fly and sleek. Since its initial use, it has evolved to describe anything that is considered on-point or awesome. Will phrases such as *on fleek* endure over time, or are they just verbal constructions that will lose their meaning and relevance as the next generation comes to dominate popular culture? Similarly, there is a portfolio of research, relatively young in comparison to other streams in the field of social psychology, that is popular today, but it is unclear what it will yield long-term with regard to the longevity or applicability of our understanding of generational differences and similarities. Yet, we believe that this developing line of inquiry about the millennial generation has durability and relevance that helps to inform the overall literature on generational differences. Our purpose for this special issue of the *Journal of Social Psychology* is to provide a fresh look at the topic from a variety of perspectives, methods, and settings. "Generation me" (Twenge, 2014) has been cited more than 2,000 times since publication just 5 years ago. However, what do we really know at this time about millennials and their similarity to other generational cohorts?

Millennials are under a unique microscope. In 2018, 473,400 tweets, 12,986,111 text messages, 49,380 Instagram photos, and 2,083,333 snaps were posted every minute of every day (Domo, n.d.)! Our society has changed dramatically with the introduction and adoption of social media. The thoughts, behaviors, and attitudes of millennials have been documented more than any prior generation. Millennials face a world where almost every decision they make or have made over the course of their adolescence is preserved and cataloged through social media. This allows us a better understanding of the millennial generational cohort than any previous group and provides exciting and productive opportunities for future research, but it also elicits unfair comparisons with prior generations. Comparing baby boomers and millennials today, we see significant differences between the two generations (Paulin, 2018). However, were baby boomers in their 20s that much different from today's millennials? While social media did not exist to preserve all the mundane aspects of boomer culture, we can gain some insights from 1960s popular culture and see that perhaps there are more similarities than one might expect between these two, often opposing, generational cohorts.

Social media and pop culture have caricatured millennials as entitled individuals who expect trophies for waking up in the morning, wear fedora hats, and eat obscene amounts of avocado toast but only after posting pictures of their toast to Instagram and Snapchat. As if this characterization is not painful enough, there are no shortages of things millennials have been accused of killing. Millennials have been accused of killing off or weakening entire industries such as paper napkins, homeownership, and golf (see Paul, 2017 for a summary). If a once strong company has experienced declining profits or filed for bankruptcy over the last decade, there is a high probability that millennials have been accused of its demise. For example, Toys R Us linked its bankruptcy to millennials not having children at the same rate as previous generations (Garfield, 2018), and millennial preferences for more casual weddings were suggested as a contributor to David's Bridal bankruptcy (Tyler, 2018). Clearly, millennials are different consumers, but what do we really know about this generational cohort?

### ***Millennials are evolving***

In 2019, the oldest millennials will turn 38 years old. Paulin (2018) notes that many millennial characteristics can be tied to their relative youth when compared to other generational cohorts (e.g., in the United States millennials have the lowest incomes, lowest expenditures, and lowest homeownership rates). Youth aside, Paulin notes there are some clear differences between millennials and other generational cohorts. Millennials are more likely to belong to a racial or ethnic minority than any prior generational cohort. Millennials are also more educated than any other generation, with 72% of millennials attending college.

While there are clearly demographic differences between generations, it is the shared events experienced by a generation that have the most significant impact on a generational cohort. Millennials have clearly come of age in a world very different from other generations. Millennials grew up in a world with an African-American U.S. President, 9/11, school shootings, wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, gay marriage, and many first entered the labor market during the Great Recession. Millennials connect and consume information differently than prior generations. Millennials are the most likely generational cohort to own a smartphone or use social media (Jiang, 2018). While millennials have grown up in the presence of 24-hour cable news, they are less likely to access their news from television and instead are more likely to consume news from digital and mobile sources (Nielsen, 2018). Millennials access to information is significantly higher than any previous generational cohort. Taken together, these factors may have shaped the millennial generation to be a cohort unlike any other.

### **Generational research**

Modern generational research is grounded on two different perspectives: the social forces perspective and the cohort perspective (Lyons & Kuron, 2014). The social forces perspective views generations as groups of individuals shaped by common experiences and societal events, while the cohort perspective prescribes generational membership simply as a function of birth year. Evidence of both perspectives is seen in even the earliest generational research, where generations were described in relation to chronological, historical, and societal similarities (Mannheim, 1952). Even today, most generational research tends to acknowledge both perspectives by categorizing generational membership as a function of birth year and attributing the characteristics displayed by each generational cohort as a consequence of the social forces these individuals have experienced.

While generational membership does not allow us to predict individual behaviors, we can still learn a great deal by comparing multiple generations. In the consumer behavior and human resource management literature, there are hundreds of studies that have found differences between millennials and other generational groups. For example, in the field of consumer behavior, researchers have found that millennials have different attitudes and tastes than the previous generation of consumers, and that marketing strategies should be developed to target this segment of consumers (Petescu & Gironda,

2014; Petra, 2016; Wolf, Carpenter, & Qenani-Petrela, 2005). The organizational psychology and human resource management fields have also produced findings that reveal specific differences between the millennial cohort and other generational cohorts. Some of these studies have revealed differences in communication preferences (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010), suggested strategies for greater engagement and retention of employees (Ozcelik, 2015), and have found that millennials desire meaningful work and a sense of accomplishment, but prefer less responsibility than managers (Brack & Kelly, 2012). However, a recent study found no support for the popular culture notion that the millennial generation is less oriented toward work than generations before them (Pyoria, Ojala, Saari, & Jarvinen, 2017). While the larger set of studies seem to confirm generational differences and support basic assumptions of generation theory (Bengston & Kuypers, 1971), there are differences in the calibration of certain characteristics of the cohort which can affect the outcomes of the research (Buss, 1974).

Buss (1974) notes that generational difference research should focus on “age, cohort, and/or interactional effects” (p.55). The research on millennials to date appears to exhibit issues that require resolution with respect to each of the three factors identified by Buss over 40 years ago. First, there is no uniform agreement about the range of years that includes the millennial cohort. An annual study conducted by Deloitte (2018) sampled 10,455 individuals who were born between 1983 and 1994. A literature review on millennial nurses used the period 1980–2000 as the target age range (Hutchinson, Brown, & Longworth, 2012). A study on work motivation defined the age group as individuals born after 1982 with no end point for the range (Calk & Patrick, 2017). This one issue highlights the difficulties in conducting research on the cohort as well as comparing results among studies. As we have developed this special issue, we noted several best practices to help scholars better examine and identify generational cohort differences.

## **Generational research design principles**

A review of articles examining millennials will reveal a number of different methodologies, many of which stand out for addressing shortcomings in generational research. While developing the current special issue, we noted a few best practices that we encourage researchers to consider when developing future intergenerational studies. While none of these guidelines are unique to generational research, and most are considered best practices for academic research as a whole, they tend to be especially relevant to generational research scholars.

### ***Avoid common method variance***

Common method variance (CMV) is variance attributed to the measurement method as opposed to the constructs of interest in the study (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). Many studies characterized as generational research depend on participants completing questionnaires. This is especially problematic when both the dependent and independent variables are collected from the same participant, at the same point in time, using the same questionnaire (Podsakoff & Organ, 1986). For example, common method variance could occur in a research study that assesses participant attitudes regarding employer characteristics and their intentions to leave a company in a single survey. The use of self-report data in this situation can create false correlations if respondents exhibit a tendency of providing consistent survey responses to questions from different scales that would otherwise be unrelated.

To avoid CMV, researchers should collect measures, especially dependent and independent variables, using different sources. For example, coworkers can provide responses relating to employer characteristics, and the employee can indicate their turnover intentions. If it is not possible to collect data from multiple respondents, administer the survey at two different points in time to

minimize CMV concerns. If the study relies on a cross-sectional design, we recommend authors perform a common method variance check using statistical procedures. The two most common approaches to check for common method variance are to either use CFAs (Podsakoff et al., 2003) or correlational markers (Lindell & Whitney, 2001).

### **Generational cohort inclusion**

Generational research is a form of cultural research. A criticism of cross-cultural research is its over-reliance of country as a proxy for cultural dimensions (Schaffer & Riordan, 2003). Generational research is similar in that birth year is often utilized as the sole indicator of an individual's generational membership when what matters in generational research are the shared experiences that shape individuals during their formative years, not the year of their birth. For example, rapid changes in technology are often listed as events that have defined the millennial generation. Such a statement implies that all individuals have experienced rapid changes in technology equally. We know not all households have access to smartphones and the internet, especially those located in rural or impoverished regions. In 2017, 4% of U.S. schools still lack the Internet capability needed for digital classroom learning (Education Superhighway, 2018). To say these individuals have experienced the same rapid changes in technology as their peers characterized as millennials would be misleading. Researchers should take care to make certain their sample is truly representative of a generation before classifying a study as generational research examining a specific generational cohort.

### **Utilize comparison groups**

Many authors look at the age of their sample and see they belong to a generational cohort (e.g., millennials) and use this as justification for drawing conclusions about a particular generational cohort. A study that shows millennials have a shared attitude toward a policy does not provide evidence that this attitude is unique to millennials without the use of a comparison group. Without using a comparison group from another generational cohort, it is possible to make only limited conclusions regarding a specific generation's characteristics and attitudes. For example, knowing that millennials scored on average 2.40 on an anti-union attitude measure does not provide a great deal insight. Only when this result is compared to other generations (Boomers = 2.14) do we learn anti-union attitudes have significantly increased over time (Smith & Duxbury, 2019). This is not to say that studying a generational cohort without a generational comparison group does not have value, only that the inferences regarding a generation's characteristics are limited without another generational comparison group.

### **Current special issue**

In the current issue, we have included six investigations that focus on a number of areas in the field of millennial and generational research. Issues investigated and reported in the areas of consumer behavior and organizational psychology include consumer ethnocentrism from a global identity perspective (Gonzalez-Fuentes, 2019), gender effects on the motivation to lead (Porter, Gerhardt, Fields, & Bugenhagen, 2019), and an examination of millennials' attitudes about labor unions (Smith & Duxbury, 2019). The other three studies included in this issue provide insight into how generational differences moderate the relationship between values and generational diversity reactions (Dust, Gerhardt, Hebbalalu, & Murray, 2019), millennials' transition to college and the effects of the parental relationship (Greene, Jewell, Fuentes, & Smith, 2019), and how social media and work values affect expectations and behavior of millennials in a religious group (Kay & Levine, 2019).

One of our objectives in selecting the articles for publication in this special issue of *The Journal of Social Psychology* was to pay careful attention to the calibration issues by encouraging the authors/researchers to clearly define terminology, methods, and the limitations of their studies. In the majority of these six articles, the authors have provided some thoughts about the applications or practical implications of their research. Thus, we trust that the articles in this special issue provide new insight into millennial research while utilizing some of the best practices for generational cohort

investigations. This collection of work highlights the uniqueness of millennials by identifying the underlying factors that influence their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. What we learn from this current portfolio of research on millennials will serve to inform conceptual frameworks, methodology, and understanding of this and future generational cohorts.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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