

Who are Millennials?

And what they want from libraries, bookstores, and librarians

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Understanding a generation's "peer personality" provides librarians a unique opportunity to develop services and programs tailored to the needs and unique attributes of a group of individuals. Master of Library Science students enrolled in a graduate research class at East Carolina University in Greenville, North Carolina, surveyed 245 18-to 24-year old members of the Millennial generation at various locations throughout the state to ascertain their use and perception of libraries and bookstores. Most important to Millennials are helpful library staff, good collections, and convenient hours. Least important are bargain items for sale, coffee, and the library or bookstore as a place to be with others.

Millennials and information; generational approach to bookstore and library perception and use

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And what do they want from libraries, bookstores, and librarians?

To understand the Millennial generation and where they turn for information and use and value bookstores and libraries, Master of Library Science students enrolled in a graduate research class at East Carolina University in Greenville, North Carolina, surveyed 245 18-to 24-year old members of the Millennial generation at various locations throughout the state such as restaurants, churches, bars, neighborhood parties and picnics, and stores.

Research questions

This study seeks to understand how 18-to 24 year old members of the Millennial generation perceive and use libraries and bookstores. It set out to answer the following questions: (1) Where do the Millennials who were surveyed turn for information? (2) How frequently within the last year have these Millennials gone to bookstores and public and college libraries? (3) What do they do at the bookstore or public or college library? (4) What do they value most and least about their bookstore and library experiences? (5) In their own words, how do they perceive bookstores and libraries?

Literature review

This review examines two areas of literature. The first is the use of a generational approach to understanding a group of individuals as proposed by William Strauss and Neil Howe. The second is how Millennials perceive and use bookstores and libraries.

What is a generational approach? Over one hundred and fifty years ago, Alexis de Tocqueville wrote that among democratic nations “each new generation is a new people” (2003, p. 547). It is likely that de Tocqueville would concur with a generational approach to understanding a group of people based on the recognition of reoccurring historical patterns (1991). Perhaps the most prolific authors to write about generational differences, Strauss and Howe use an interdisciplinary blend of social science and history to understand a group of people. As Strauss and Howe point out, “Americans habitually assume that the future will be a straight-line extension of the recent past. But that *never* occurs, either with societies or generations” (2000, p. 10).

A generation is a cohort-group of about 20 years or so that “defines itself against a backdrop of contemporary trends and events” that is shaped by history, culture, and the environment that surrounds them (Howe & Strauss, 2000, 46). These trends and events define each generation and help to formulate a generation’s sense of self, also called a “peer personality,” which is a set of collective behavioral traits and attitudes expressed throughout a generation’s four stage lifecycle that consists of youth (age 0-21), rising adulthood (age 22-43), midlife (44-65), and elderhood (age 66-87). Two things occur as a generation ages. First, its peer personality evolves and becomes more identifiable. Second, as a generation moves into rising adulthood and adulthood, its influence on society grows as that of the preceding generations wanes.

Who are Millennials?

Millennials are a generation of children born between the years 1982 and approximately 2002 (Howe & Strauss, 2000, p. 41). Only slightly less numerous than the Baby Boomer generation born between the years 1943 and 1960 that is distinguished for its size and freespirted impact on society, the Millennial generation is expected to be just as influential. Although Millennials is their preferred moniker, other names used to describe this generation are Net, Y, Next, Digital, Echo Boomers, Boomlets, Nexters, and Nintendo. In Canada, Millennials are known as the Sunshine generation; in Germany, the Null Zoff (“no problems”) generation; and in Sweden, it is Generation Ordning (“ordered generation”) (Howe & Strauss, 2000, p. 62).

Strauss and Howe believe that Millennials are unlike any other generation in living memory. They are “more numerous, more affluent, better educated, and more ethnically diverse than those who came before, they are beginning to manifest a wide array of positive social habits that older Americans no longer associate with youth, including a focus on teamwork, achievement, modesty, and good conduct” (2006, p. 26). Generally, they are politically conservative yet more socially tolerant than previous generations. They are cooperative team players, followers looking for consensus. They opt for the good of the group, focus on deeds over words, and are patient and conforming. They are social and use technology to enhance their sociability. On the negative side, Millennials are stressed out, overly scheduled, and require constant stimulation and

reassurances. The defining trend for Millennials is technology and the defining event is the fatal school shootings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado.

A characteristic of Millennials is their feelings of uniqueness and being special. Unlike the preceding generation, called Generation (or Gen) X, in which divorce and abortion rates were high, Millennials have grown up in a pro-child culture in which “parents became parents because they wanted children”—and this sentiment was conveyed to their children (Eubanks, 2006, p. 1). Some parents of Millennials become so overly involved that a new word to describe this phenomenon—helicopter parents—has been coined. An example of hovering parents is seen in the results of the online poll conducted on January 11, 2006 at the Experience.com Web site. Thirty-eight percent of the four hundred students and recent college graduates who completed the survey admitted that their parents either had called, or physically attended a meeting with academic advisors and 31% reported that their parents had called professors to complain about a grade (Experience, Inc.).

How Millennials use information Each generation interacts with the world differently than preceding ones based on how they experienced society and culture and trends and issues while growing up (Strauss & Howe, 1991). Although generational proponents such as Strauss and Howe do not address library use, it is logical to assume that each generation likewise interacts with libraries in ways particular to them. Abrams and Luther (2004) provide three-insights into Millennials’ use of information, learning, and beliefs that differs from Gen Xers born between 1961 and 1981. First, Millennials are format agnostic, and to them information is information, no matter its format. They expect information to be available anytime/anywhere and 24/7. Technology is integrated into their lives and must support their penchant for multitasking. Second, Millennials are experiential and collaborative learners who believe that “content and knowledge are inseparable.” For them, “technology has blurred the distinction between private and public domains” (p. 37). Third, this generation is principled, civic minded, and direct and “demands respect and finds no need to beg for good service” (p. 37).

Curtis and her colleagues (2000) at the University of Georgia conducted focus groups among undergraduates to discover how Millennials’ find and use information. Their findings indicate that most of these Millennial-aged college students begin research on the Internet, not by using library databases; search remotely rather than physically going to the library; and are unable to transfer their Internet search skills to other library resources (Curtis, 2000). Similarly, a survey by the Online Computer Library Center (OCLC) found that 80 percent of undergraduates use Web search engines for all or most assignments, while only half used the library’s subscription-based resources (OCLC, 2002).

According to the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) study, *Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America*, in which more than 17,000 adults were surveyed about their reading habits between the years 1982 and 2002, Millennials are reading literary works less than previous generations. Dana Gioia, chairman of the NEA, summarizes the findings of in one sentence: The literary reading of fiction, poetry, and drama in America is not only declining rapidly among all groups, but the decline has accelerated, especially among the young (Bradshaw, 2004, p. vii). However, recent evidence suggests that reading of fiction and nonfiction written specifically for youth has

increased among the youngest members of the Millennial generation. According to a March 7, 2007, article in the Seattle Post-Intelligencer, sales of teens books to 12- to 18 year olds are up by a quarter between 1999 and 2005 (Goodnow, 2007).

Given this generation's preference for 24/7 access to information and the Internet, librarians must wonder if Millennials might stop using libraries. The findings of Sweeney's (2004) focus group research on Millennial generation college students and soldiers in America suggests that this might already be occurring. Sweeney asked college students and soldiers, "When was the last time you went to the public library or a bookstore?" These Millennials responded that they had not typically been in the public library in more than a year. For the bookstore, it was "within the last few weeks" (p. 167).

Methodology

In November 2007, graduate students taking an online course at East Carolina University conducted face-to-face structured interviews with 245 18-to 24-year-olds throughout North Carolina to ascertain their information preferences and perceptions as well as frequency of bookstore and library use. Each graduate student in the class was required to survey 10 18- to 24-year olds, but two interviewed several more. Criteria included interviewing no more than two individuals at on one type of venue and interviewing an equal number of males and females. Interviews were conducted at a variety of venues such as restaurants, bars, churches, parties, job sites, car washes, university athletic events, and stores.

Limitations

Although the selection of Millennials to interview represents a convenience sample, the size of the sample and the geographic distribution of graduate students across the state of North Carolina ensured a diversity and variety perhaps not attainable in convenience surveys conducted primarily in one geographic location. The results are not assumed to be generalizable, but are a first step to understanding how a particular generation uses information, bookstores, and libraries.

Results

The 119-item survey consisted of qualitative, quantitative, and open-ended questions. Graduate students received online training from a faculty member with extensive knowledge of research design and survey techniques. Five questions are described in this paper. Several answers total less than 100 percent due to rounding. Table 1 shows distribution by age and gender.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

Question One: When you need information to solve a problem or find the answer to a concern, where do you turn? Select as many as apply.

Altogether, the 245 respondents made 677 selections, but almost all respondents selected multiple information sources. Table 2 identifies the number of responses, percentages, and rank. Thirty-five respondents elected to identify “other” such as faculty, professors, and teachers (10), the college library (9), Bible and church (3), colleagues and teammates (3), and one each for magazines, Discovery Channel, online encyclopedia, inward, professionals, and medical doctors. Although the Internet is the single most popular response, summing the preferences for communicating with people (i.e., friends, family, faculty, professors and teachers, colleagues, and teammates) is 53.4%, or 355, of total responses. This is not surprising since one characteristic of Millennials is their sociability and penchant for social networking.

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

Question Two: How frequently within the last year have you gone to bookstores and public and college libraries?

Responses to this question support similar findings by Sweeney (2004) that young adults are more likely to have recently visited the bookstore than the public library.

INSERT TABLE 3 HERE

Question Three: Which of the following have you ever done at the bookstore or public or college library? Choose as many as apply.

Respondents were asked to choose from a list of 20 activities those they had ever done at a bookstore and public and college library. The 20 activities (which have been grouped together for this article in order to save space) are: check out a book, magazine, music CD, or movie DVD; read a book or magazine without checking it out; read the newspaper; hang out with friends; attend a program; browse by looking at many different materials; ask for help to find a specific book, topic, or subject; play board games such as chess or Scrabble; study by myself; study with others; purchase coffee or food; use library computer; use library’s wireless Internet; use the restroom; and other. Responses to activities were summed and the highest responses are identified in Table 4.

INSERT TABLE 4 HERE

The activities the respondents were least likely to participate at the bookstore are playing a board game such as chess or Scrabble (17 or 2.9 percent), attend a program (32 or 13.1 percent), or purchase a newspaper (39 or 16 percent). At the public library, respondents were least likely to purchase coffee or food (each at 9 or 3.7 percent), or play a board game (10 or 4 percent). At the college library, respondents were least likely to play a

game (4 or 1.6 percent), check out a music CD (17 or 6.9 percent), or purchase food to eat in the library (35 or 14.3 percent).

Question 4: On a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being the most important to you and 5 being the least important, how important are each of the following to our bookstore or library experience?

Respondents were asked to rate on a Likert scale of 1 to 5 (with 1 being the least important and 5 being the most important) the importance of the following 11 factors to their bookstore or library experience: quality of materials, helpfulness of staff, convenient hours, convenient location, access to computers, comfortable chairs, access to Internet, place to be alone, place to be with others, bargain items to purchase, and coffee. The most important aspects of the bookstore and library experience were determined by summing the 4s and 5s on this Likert scale. Likewise, the least important aspects of the bookstore and library were determined by summing the 1s and 2s. See Table 5 below for responses by Millennials.

INSERT TABLE 5 HERE

What respondents value most is quality of materials (books, magazines, and newspapers), which is followed by a tie for second place—helpful staff and convenient hours. Respondents identified coffee as least important to their bookstore and library experience. Bargain items for sale and the library or bookstore as a place to be with others ranked as the second and third least important factors. Conversely, 50% of the respondents answered a 4 or 5 to the library or bookstore as a place to be alone. This group of Millennials values the library or bookstore as a place to be alone more than a place to socialize and be with others. This is surprising given the Millennials' penchant for socializing.

Question 5: When you think about the bookstore or library (public, college, and high school), what word or words come to mind?

For this open-ended question, respondents were asked to furnish a word or words to describe the bookstore or library. Each respondent was asked this question four times—once for the bookstore, public library, college library, and high school library—and in that order. Almost all respondents provided one word or words to describe bookstores and libraries.

A qualitative analysis of key themes was conducted and responses were coded as positive, negative, or neutral. Examples of positive comments are “helpful librarians” and “relaxing environment.” Examples of negative comments are “mean librarians” and “large and confusing.” Examples of neutral comments are “quiet” and “books for sale.”

In the sections below, a summary of the comments is provided and comments for each type of organization are compared with others.

Bookstore Comments about the bookstore were overwhelmingly positive and more positive than responses about libraries. Typical of positive comments were “comforting, calm,” “quiet, smart people, eclectic,” and “comforting, calm, peaceful.” The bookstore is viewed as a comforting and peaceful place with many books and resources. It is described as intellectual, knowledgeable, informative, and interesting. Nine negative comments were made such as expensive, crowded and confusing, commercial, boring, and expensive. Respondents offered no negative comments about bookstore staff. Neutral comments included “coffee and quiet,” “store that sells books, many books,” and “knowledge.”

Public Library Comments about the public library were mixed and more negative than those made about the bookstore. Although “boring” was not used to describe the bookstore, it was for the public library. In addition, this was the first time that negative comments such as “I hate to go to the library,” “nerds,” and “dirty” were made. Approximately 20 positive comments were made which included “puts a smile on my face,” “easily accessible,” and “helpful.” Negative comments included “not very popular,” “old and smells like an attic,” and “lonely and boring.” Neutral comments include “studying,” “quiet,” and “children.” Compared to the bookstore, the comments were considerably more negative. It is interesting that seven respondents made positive comments about free access to books and information, which indicates that some respondents recognize that a public library provides free information while the bookstore does not.

College Comments about the college library were the most positive of all the libraries (but not as positive as the bookstore.) Positive comments were “helpful,” “convenient,” and “useful.” Negative comments were “busy,” “overwhelmed,” and “big and unorganized.” Neutral comments were “a place to study with others,” “quiet,” and “productive.” Respondents view the college library as a comfortable place, studious, and a place to study by oneself or with others. Respondents did not refer to librarians, which could mean they either did not notice them or librarians were unobtrusive and not bothersome. In addition, respondents are more likely to use the library on their own or as a place to study, meet with friends, and sleep. Comments indicate that a perceived role of the college library is to support group and individual studying.

High School library Of all comments about libraries, the most negative were used to describe the high school library. There were 75 negative responses such as “boring,” “library had a limited collection,” and librarians are “unhelpful,” “rigid,” “mean,” and “grouchy.” Terms used to describe school librarians are “prudish,” “mean,” “crazy teacher,” and “teacher required.” Several young adults found the high school library to be dirty, dark, and disorganized. The single most negative comment was about the “horrible” high school research paper. Even though these research papers may not be developed in collaboration with the classroom teacher, their unpopularity is nevertheless associated with the media center and negatively influences the respondent’s view of the

library. This is one reason to suggest that media specialists collaborate with classroom teachers to ensure that the required paper is a positive experience and research skills are taught in such a way that students can successfully complete this assignment. In the neutral category, many Millennials remember the high school library as a quiet place for research, study, homework, reading, and book checkout.

Where do we go from here?

Collegiate librarians clearly have the advantage over school librarians because they are able to observe a cohort of students as it makes its way through primary and secondary education and have time to develop services tailored to them. By the time students reach college age, librarians have had time to create programs and services that meet a generation's "peer personality." Consequently, academic librarians have been the most aggressive in modifying services and programs to draw Millennials to the library. Because school librarians receive no forewarning, opportunities to teach to a generation's strengths may be lost. It behooves librarians to understand each rising generation.

Although respondents were more likely to have visited the bookstore in the past year, the commercialism of bookstores was not lost on respondents. Several respondents noted the democratic nature of public libraries and that they were free and available to anyone in the community. This is a marketing strategy that public librarians may want to employ with these civic-minded Millennials. A second marketing strategy is to use bathroom space to promote the library's services and programs. For bookstores and libraries alike, respondents consistently ranked using the restroom near the top of their list of activities.

To learn what clientele want from the library, it is important to observe, survey, and compare generations, not individuals. Librarians are warned not to group all generations together but to consider their "peer personalities" and their place in the life cycle—youth, rising adulthood, adulthood, and elderhood. High school librarians (and to a much lesser extent public librarians) need to improve their people skills. The number of negative comments, and their forcefulness, was discomfoting.

Librarians must keep in mind that one characteristic of Millennials is they have options and demand respect. The literature is replete with studies about Millennials who choose to search the Internet rather than library databases. Millennials have choices and are already choosing search remotely from the comfort of their space rather than go to the library. What Millennials want is comfort and a relaxing place to "chill." They want to be around adults who are respectful of them. Therefore, it is up to librarians to change the environment.

A continuation of research on this topic will provide clearer understanding about Millennials and why they are bypassing the library in favor of the Internet. Although Howe and Strauss (2002) identify 2002 as the last birth year of Millennials, in a phone interview with Neil Howe on Marc 24, 2008, he said that it is difficult to determine the exact beginning and end date of a generation because generations transition in and become noticeable by looking backward at events. Therefore, children born in 2008 may be members of the Millennial generation rather than the next unnamed generation. The

message from Strauss and Howe and de Tocqueville is that change happens and librarians must be prepared to provide programs and services that attract the rising generation.

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Biographical Notes

Dr. Jami L. Jones has served as a school librarian in Florida, North Carolina, and Delaware, directed public libraries, and worked in state libraries. In 2002, Dr. Jones became a member of the first cohort of media specialists to achieve National Board Certification. She coauthored *The power of the media specialist to improve academic achievement and strengthen at-risk students* (Linworth, 2008) with Alana Zambone, and is author of *Bouncing Back: Dealing with the Stuff Life Throws at You* (Franklin Watts, 2007) and *Helping Teens Cope: Resources for School Library Media Specialists and Other Youth Workers* (Linworth, 2003).

Statement of Originality

This statement certifies that the paper above is based upon original research undertaken by the author and that the paper was conceived and written by the author(s) alone and has not been published elsewhere. All information and ideas from others is referenced.

Table 1: Respondents by age and gender $n=245$

Age	No.	%
18	40	16.3
19	32	13
20	29	11.8
21	36	14.7
22	32	13
23	39	15.9
24	37	15.1
Gender		
Male	117	47.8
Female	128	52.2

* Percents total less than 100 due to rounding

Table 2. Where Millennials turn for information $n=245$

Information source	No. of responses	%	Rank
Internet	204	30.1	1
Friends	175	25.8	2
Family	162	23.9	3
Public library	62	9.2	4
Bookstore	39	5.8	5
Other	35	5.2	6

Table 3. Did you go to the bookstore or public or college library within the past year?
 $n=245$

Bookstore

Yes

No

223	% of <i>n</i> 91.0	22	% of <i>n</i> 9.0
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Public library

Yes		No	
	% of <i>n</i>		% of <i>n</i>
135	55.1	110	44.9

College library

Yes		No	
	% of <i>n</i>		% of <i>n</i>
165	67.3	80	32.7

High School library*

Did you go to the high school library when you were in high school?

Yes		No	
	% of <i>n</i>		% of <i>n</i>
219	89.4	26	10.6

*This question was changed to recognize past actions.

Table 4. What Millennials do at bookstores and and public and college libraries? *n*=245

Bookstore		% of <i>n</i>	Rank
Purchase a book	224	91.4	1
Browse	173	70.6	2
Purchase coffee	160	65.3	3
Read magazine w/our purchasing	154	62.9	4
Use restroom	150	61.2	5
Public library			
		% on <i>n</i>	Rank
Ask for help to find book/information	233	95.1	1
Check out book	214	87.3	2
Use library's computers	162	66.1	3
Use restroom	148	60.4	4
Browse	146	59.6	5
College library			
		% of <i>n</i>	Rank
Use library computer	182	74.2	1
Study by myself	167	68.1	2
Check out book	161	65.7	3
Study with others	159	64.9	4
Use restroom	149	60.8	5

Table 5. What respondents value least and most about their bookstore and library experiences

	Least						Most
		1	2	3	4	5	
The quality of materials		0	6	20	52	167	
Helpful staff		1	2	31	69	142	
Convenient hours		3	5	26	90	121	
Access to computers		17	14	28	54	132	
Convenient location		4	9	47	100	85	
Comfortable chairs		20	32	59	63	71	
Access of wireless Internet		40	25	47	56	77	
As a place to be alone		29	25	69	56	66	
As a place to be with others		54	61	53	57	20	
Bargain items for sale		85	59	45	28	28	
Availability of coffee		121	53	36	17	18	