

## The Malaysian Millennials' Characteristics: An Investigation on Selected Public Universities

Las características de los Millennials de Malasia: una investigación sobre universidades públicas seleccionadas

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### ABSTRACT

This paper aims to explore the characteristics of millennials as espoused in most literature. There are seven characteristics of millennials and each characteristic became the focus of the present study. As most literature on the millennials' characteristics is based on western context, this paper looks into the resemblance of the millennial characteristics' descriptions among the Malaysian public university students. Employing a survey, data for the study were collected using an adapted questionnaire. The respondents for the study were selected Malaysian millennials who were social sciences undergraduates in nine public universities. A cluster sampling method resulted in a total of 646 respondents who took part in the survey. It was discovered that the selected Malaysian millennials confirm some of the attributes in the seven characteristics of millennials.

**Keywords:** millennials, characteristics, higher education, undergraduates.

### RESUMEN

Este artículo tiene como objetivo explorar las características de los millennials tal como se defiende en la mayoría de la literatura. Hay siete características de la generación del milenio y cada característica se convirtió en el foco del presente estudio. Como la mayoría de la literatura sobre las características de los millennials se basa en el contexto occidental, este artículo analiza la semejanza de las descripciones de las características millennial entre los estudiantes universitarios públicos de Malasia. Empleando una encuesta, los datos para el estudio se recopilaron mediante un cuestionario adaptado. Los encuestados para el estudio fueron seleccionados millennials de Malasia que eran estudiantes universitarios de ciencias sociales en nueve universidades públicas. Un método de muestreo por conglomerados dio como resultado un total de 646 encuestados que participaron en la encuesta. Se descubrió que los millennials de Malasia seleccionados confirman algunos de los atributos en las siete características de los millennials.

**Palabras clave:** millennials, características, educación superior, estudiantes universitarios.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Howe and Strauss (1992) first coined the term 'millennials' when describing the latest cohort of generation starting their schooling years. At present, the millennials form the majority of higher education students for the past few years. Born between 1981-1996 (American Psychological Board (2018); Federal Reserve Board (2019); Ernst and Young (2015), the oldest of the millennials would have completed their undergraduate studies. Mannheim's sociology of generation or theories of generation (Pilcher, 1994) and past studies on generations have confirmed that different generations experience their lifestyle differently due to unique set of characteristics (Assimon, 2016; Anderson, 2013; Gentry et al., 2011; Dols & Wieck, 2010; Howe & Strauss, 1992; Howe & Strauss, 2000). Vast literature has outlined and described the characteristics of the millennials (Kaifi et al, 2012; Bannon et al, 2011; Deal et al., 2010; Ng et al., 2010; Twenge et al., 2010; Rawlins et al., 2008). However, it is important to note that most of the literature review is mainly derived from western contexts. Interestingly, the proponents of socio-economic theories propose that social, cultural and economic factors could influence the common lifestyle of a community (Burns & Roszkowska, 2016; Burns et al., 2013; Von Bertalanffy, 1968). This brought light to the conduct of the present study.

Malaysia is a country that has shown rapid growth in higher education sector over the last few decades (Ministry of Education, 2018). Besides the local students, Malaysia has seen a gradual increase in the number of foreign students' enrolment in the tertiary institutions across the country. The establishment of new universities, public and private alike, further confirms the popularity of higher education in Malaysia. This in turn, results in the mushrooming number of millennials in the local higher education institutions.

This current concern becomes the focus of this paper - the understanding of the tertiary educators and policy-makers on their latest cohort of students namely the millennials. As not much has been explored about the characteristics of Malaysian millennials studying in local higher education institutions, this paper provides empirical data that support the characteristic descriptions of selected Malaysian undergraduate millennials.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding the definition of 'generation', in particular those that cohabit, is important. A generation is a product of certain period of time and its social, economic, and technological trends. The environment in which the generation developed their experiences (and values) shapes who they become, how they see the world, and what they do. The traits and characteristics pose huge societal implications especially to the field of education.

Howe and Strauss (1992) provide a definition of 'generation' as a cohort-group, comprised by all the people born in a limited span of years. Howe and Strauss (2000) have affirmed that millennial students started entering college in 2000. They propose a span of approximately 22 years. Each generational cohort represents a group of people impacted by their context, who will have an impact on the context in which they prospectively participate. In 2000, they further define the term 'generation' in terms of social and economic trends, perception of work, values or common beliefs and behaviours. Different generations hold different attitudes and expectations, creating a deep level of diversity that impact their manner of interaction and its results (Burns & Roszkowska, 2016).

The term 'millennials' is referred to the latest generation educators are dealing with. Besides being known as 'millennials', this generation is also known as Digital natives, Nets, Nexters, Internet generation, iGeneration and Nintendo digital generation (Assimon, 2016; Anderson, 2013). These terms are associated to the millennials as they are the native speakers of technology, fluent in the digital language of computers, video games and the Internet (Twenge et al., 2010).

As a generational cohort, the millennials display a number of characteristics and preferences that in some instances mimic the values of previous generations, while in others have never been observed before. Millennials are noticeably display high self-confidence, optimistic, multitaskers, and more independent than their previous generation (Howe and Strauss, 2000). Their experiences, values and preferences are likely shape a different world and challenge old paradigms.

Howe and Strauss (2003), claim that millennials live by a number of characteristics that differ from other generations. Technology is everything to the millennials. Further descriptions that distinguish the millennials from older generations include their technological sophistication, constant internet connection, community consciousness, team-orientedness and strong connection with their parents (Howe and Strauss, 2000; Matney, 2006; Dede, 2005). The millennials are also described as those who are achieving, optimistic and multitask (ibid.).

It is important to note that currently millennial generation has reached college level. This is a new breed of students who are likely to challenge paradigm shifting in higher education. Thus, it becomes relevant, given their unique characteristics, to address the challenges that this new generation poses to higher education. Matney (2006) asserts that the millennials will most certainly shape higher education nationwide.

The abovementioned discussions have highlighted the characteristics of the millennials by several researchers based on their theories and past research findings. In summary, it could be deduced that basically the characteristics are similar. The list of characteristics provided by Howe and Strauss (2003) is seen as best to summarize the identified characteristics. For the purpose of the present study, the seven characteristics identified by Howe and Strauss (2003) are referred. The following are the descriptions of each characteristic in brief, as summarized from Howe and Strauss (2003):

a) Feeling special. The notion that the millennials believe that they are collectively important to the nation and parents' sense of purpose hence they are treated special and could make demands.

- b) Sheltered. The millennials have always been subjected to various forms of protection since birth in terms of their safety, well-being and health.
- c) Confident. Possessing high levels of trusts and optimism, the millennials are general happy and believe they could be successful in life.
- d) Team-oriented. Placing high value on friendship, the millennials maintain their friendship and bonding with friends regardless of distance through the technology and internet.
- e) Achievement-oriented. Millennials are students who value activities in and out of campus and eager to attain values and success in fulfilling their life plans.
- f) Pressured. As the millennials are achievement-oriented, it is also easy for them to feel pressured from failing, taking risks and making mistakes.
- g) Conventional. The millennials are conventional in their attitudes and behaviour as portrayed in their taste for appearance and lifestyle.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

The present study is a part of a bigger research that employed a mixed method research design. However, the paper discusses only a part of the bigger study that focused on the quantitative data obtained through a student survey.

In determining the samples, a cluster sampling technique was utilized. The target population of this study was undergraduate students of social sciences faculties in Malaysian public universities. A total of 9 public universities offering Social Sciences program were selected for data collection. From the 9 participating universities, a total of 646 respondents took part in the present study. Table 1 below summarizes the demographic profiles of the respondents.

**Table 1: Demographic Profiles of the Respondents**

		Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	186	28.8
	Female	460	71.2
	Total	646	100.0
Age	24 and below	559	86.5
	25 and above	87	13.5
	Total	646	100
Race	Malay	563	87.2
	Chinese	34	5.3
	Indian	22	3.4
	Others	27	4.2
	Total	646	100

A survey questionnaire was distributed to the respondents. For the purpose of this paper, two sections in the questionnaire; Part A: Demographic Information and Part B: Millennials' characteristics are provided. The questionnaire was adapted from Howe and Strauss (2003). The items on Section B were built based on a 4-point Likert scale; 1 being 'Strongly Disagree' and 4 being 'Strongly Agree'.

The Cronbach Alpha value for each construct obtained from the pilot test ranges between .761 - .857, suggesting the questionnaire as a reliable instrument. The following Table 2 provides a summary of the information in the questionnaire and the Cronbach Alpha value for each construct in the questionnaire.

**Table 2: Cronbach Alpha Value**

Part	Category	Number of items	Cronbach Alpha Value
A	Demographic information	10	
B	Characteristics of millennial		
	Feeling special	10	.761
	Feeling sheltered	9	.778
	Feeling confident	10	.881
	Teamwork	7	.686
	Achieving	10	.785
	Feeling pressured	15	.857
	Being conventional	10	.785
	Total	81	

In interpreting the mean scores, the present study refers to the following levels;

**Table 3: Mean interpretation**

Scale	Mean interpretation
1.00 - 2.00	Strongly disagree
2.00 - 2.50	Disagree
2.51 - 3.00	Neutral
3.01 - 3.50	Agree
3.51- 4.00	Strongly agree

#### 4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The discussions on identifying the characteristics of the millennials who are undergraduates in several selected public universities in Malaysia are guided by the mean scores for each construct based on Howe and Strauss (2003) descriptions of the seven characteristics.

In terms of 'feeling special', the Malaysian millennials in the present study claimed that they had to fulfil their parents' expectations (mean = 3.59) despite them wanting privacy (mean = 3.47). On top of these, the millennials also stated that they did not feel that they were treated as important (mean = 2.80) or special (mean = 2.78). This perception is further supported by their claim that others did not take time to celebrate important events in their life (mean = 2.68). The following Table 4 provides a summary of their perception of 'feeling special'.

**Table 4: Feeling special**

	N	Mean	S.D
I have to fulfil my parents'/guardians' expectations.	648	<b>3.59</b>	.63
I want privacy.	648	<b>3.47</b>	.67
I expect frequent positive feedbacks.	646	3.12	.75
I am important to the nation's development.	646	3.09	.73
I want attention.	649	3.02	.88
I deserve to make demands.	647	3.01	.79
People around me take time to celebrate important events in my life (e.g. birthdays, good academic results, entering a university.)	650	<b>2.88</b>	.86
I have always been treated as important.	649	<b>2.80</b>	.77
I have always been treated as special.	650	<b>2.78</b>	.77
I am here to solve world problems that older generations have failed to solve.	649	<b>2.63</b>	.83

The millennial undergraduates in the present study commented that they were 'sheltered' especially by their parents as they claimed to feel connected to their parents (mean = 3.46) and that their parents protected them from unpleasant experiences (mean = 3.46). Interestingly, although they felt 'sheltered' by their parents, the millennials did not depend on their parents for decisions (mean = 2.78). As undergraduates, the millennials in the study suggest that the university should provide relevant 'shelter' as they required their university to provide a support system accommodating their needs as students (mean = 3.27). The information given in Table 5 signifies the findings as discussed.

**Table 5: Sheltered**

	N	Mean	S.D
I feel connected to my parents.	647	<b>3.46</b>	0.74
My parents/guardians protect me from unpleasant experiences.	649	<b>3.46</b>	0.72
I was highly protected when I was a child.	650	<b>3.34</b>	0.79
University should provide a support system that accommodates my needs as a student.	649	<b>3.27</b>	0.69
University should find solutions to my learning issues and problems.	649	3.15	0.79
As a child, I was rarely left unsupervised.	649	3.12	0.85
University should establish policies and rules that take my needs into account.	649	3.00	0.80
I grew up in a time of high safety measures (car seats, baby on board signs, school lockdowns).	649	<b>2.96</b>	0.90
My parents/guardians decide for me.	649	<b>2.78</b>	0.86

The findings on 'Confident' had resulted in strong mean scores in several items. Generally, the millennials in the present study were confident. Some of the items to support this claim include their opinion about themselves namely being confident of themselves (mean = 3.26) and on their generation's potential (mean = 3.27). Additionally, the millennials were goal-oriented (mean = 3.30) and they expected the university to help them achieve greater heights (mean = 3.31). Nonetheless, despite these strong opinions on their confidence, the millennials did not think highly on their ability to represent the majority (mean = 2.84). This fact is supported by their low opinion of their ability to be assertive (mean = 3.03). Table 6 provides a summary of their findings.

**Table 6: Confident**

	N	Mean	S.D
I expect the university to help me achieve greater heights.	649	<b>3.31</b>	0.75
I am goal-oriented.	649	<b>3.30</b>	0.70
I think highly of my generation's potential.	649	<b>3.27</b>	0.69
I am confident of myself.	647	<b>3.26</b>	0.72
I am motivated.	650	3.20	0.67
I am optimistic.	650	3.17	0.70
I am a highly capable person.	650	3.12	0.67
I am confident of my future.	647	3.12	0.79
I am assertive.	649	3.03	0.77
I believe my opinions represent the majority.	650	<b>2.84</b>	0.80

Following their low opinion on their ability to be assertive and representing the majority, the selected millennials in the present study also had concerns on their team-orientedness. As displayed in Table 7, the millennials did not like to work with people their age (mean = 2.89) neither were they ready to change their personality in order to adapt with a group (mean = 2.53). All in all, the millennials were seen as not keen to work in a group (mean = 3.02).

**Table 7: Team-oriented**

	N	Mean	S.D.
I want to be seen as part of the group.	646	<b>3.32</b>	0.66
I am loyal to the group which I am in.	648	3.23	0.68
I like to do voluntary activities.	648	3.20	0.75
I am not afraid to voice out my opinion when the group is making a decision.	647	3.18	0.74
I like to work in a group.	648	3.02	0.83
I prefer to work with people of my age.	644	<b>2.89</b>	0.86
In order to adapt to a group, I am willing to change my personality.	648	<b>2.53</b>	0.94

Table 8 below provides a summary on the millennials' opinions on their 'Achievement-orientedness'. It could be deduced that the millennials in the present study were quite achieving as portrayed in their opinion on the importance of their academic grades (mean = 3.44) and their focus on getting good grades (mean = 3.32). Additionally, they also agreed that university degree is important in order to succeed (mean = 3.17) and that it could guarantee a high paying job (mean = 3.10). Nonetheless, despite these high regards of themselves and their academic pursuit, the millennials did not share similar opinions when it comes to their extracurricular activities (mean = 2.76).

**Table 8: Achievement-oriented**

	N	Mean	S.D.
Academic grades are important to me.	649	<b>3.44</b>	0.67
I focus on getting good academic grades.	647	<b>3.32</b>	0.68
I see having a university degree as the key to success.	648	3.17	0.79
I see having a university degree as the key to a high paying job.	649	3.10	0.81
I am hard working.	649	3.06	0.72
I am pressured to decide early on a career.	646	<b>2.90</b>	0.85
I participate in extracurricular activities to get external rewards (e.g. medals, prizes, recognitions).	648	<b>2.76</b>	0.91
I focus more on academic achievement than personal development.	649	<b>2.45</b>	0.92
I have been put on a career track orientation since primary school.	648	<b>2.41</b>	0.98
I prefer studying hard sciences (e.g. math, science).	648	<b>2.23</b>	1.03

Another characteristic of millennials as described by Howe and Strauss (2003) is 'Pressured'. It is interesting to note that the millennials in the present study did not agree that they were 'pressured' as most of the items received low mean scores. As shown in the following Table 9, the millennials only agreed that they were reminded to take advantage of opportunities (mean = 3.27) and that they had many things to do at the same time (mean = 3.10)

**Table 9: Pressured**

	N	Mean	S.D
I am reminded to take advantage of opportunities.	649	<b>3.27</b>	0.68
I have many things to do at the same time.	649	3.10	0.72
I believe multi-tasking is a smart thing to do.	648	2.94	0.86
I have to multi-task to save time.	649	2.90	0.79
I am always required to excel.	647	2.87	0.91
I am always reminded to avoid risks.	646	2.67	0.91
Others should be flexible with me to avoid conflicting schedules.	649	2.64	0.88
I feel pressured to succeed.	645	2.56	0.98
While at school, I spent many hours completing my homework.	646	2.50	0.87
I find that I always have more work than the time available.	647	2.46	0.93
I had less free time when I was at school.	646	2.30	0.92
As a child, I had a tight schedule.	647	2.17	0.88
I used to have every hour of my day filled with structured activities.	646	2.16	0.90
I do not know how to manage free time.	644	2.12	0.94
I do not have time for spontaneous activities.	646	2.05	0.89

Finally, the millennials in the present study claimed that they were quite conventional as shown in Table 10. The selected millennials seem to agree with most of the items in the 'Conventional' construct. Most importantly, the millennials valued their parents' opinions (mean = 3.58), followed common rules (mean = 3.47), agreed with traditional values (mean = 3.41) and respected the authority (mean = 3.30). They also agreed that they were civic-minded (mean = 3.26). It was also observed that despite the high values on the items listed, the millennials in the present study did not believe that the government knew what is best for them (mean = 2.70) and that it could take care of them (mean = 2.66). Additionally, they claimed that their choices of clothing, music and cultural did not represent similarity with the trend. Hence, it could be deduced that despite their high regard to their parents and the government, the millennials were still independent.

**Table 10: Conventional**

	N	Mean	S.D
I value my parents'/guardians' opinions.	647	<b>3.58</b>	0.64
I follow common social rules (e.g. wearing proper clothes to functions, respecting the elders).	647	<b>3.47</b>	0.67
I agree with traditional values.	646	<b>3.41</b>	0.67
I respect the authority (e.g. university authority).	647	<b>3.30</b>	0.64
I am civic-minded.	646	<b>3.26</b>	0.70
I do not question the authority.	647	2.81	0.83
I believe the government knows what's best.	644	2.70	0.89
I believe the government will take care of me.	644	2.66	0.86
My choices of clothing, music, and cultural markings will be similar with the trend.	647	2.59	0.96
I fear being perceived different from my peers.	645	2.48	0.94

To this end, several interesting findings have been discovered about the selected millennials in the present study. Some of the findings include confirmation of the characteristics described in the literature. However, there are also findings that revealed the Malaysian undergraduate millennials who took part in the survey did not share some of the generally accepted characteristics of millennials as given in the literature. The findings of this study confirm that sociocultural and socioeconomic aspects provide influence to how people, including the millennials, think and behave in the society (Burns & Roszkowska, 2016; Burns et al., 2013; Von Bertalanffy, 1968).

The findings of the present study have shed some lights on the understanding of the characteristics of Malaysian undergraduate millennials. While further research could be conducted to identify social, cultural and economic factors that led to such characteristics, the present study has brought to light some important considerations needed when training the millennials in higher education. The following is a summary of the pedagogical considerations based on the



salient findings of the study.

- a) Feeling special and sheltered – there is a possibility to include the millennials' parents in their study program. Some creative approaches could include the involvement of their parents in on-going assessment. As the millennials believe that they are close and appreciate their parents' opinions, the idea to involve their parents in their assessment could be a good motivation.
- b) Confident and achievement-oriented – being confident, the millennials are goal-oriented and think highly of their potential. In terms of achievements, the millennials perceive good grades and getting good grades is important. Hence, educators could integrate real-life issues and promote meaningful participation of the millennials in their tasks and assignments as the millennials look forward to achieving greater heights in the academic and future undertakings.
- c) Team-oriented – friends are important to the millennials. Living in advance communication technology and high-speed internet accessibility, the millennials connect with their friends easily. Educators should encourage group work in accomplishing relevant tasks and most importantly, there is great potential in assigning tasks and group work that incorporate web technology.
- d) Pressured – unlike what is commonly described of millennials, the respondents in the present study had indicated that they were not as pressured as it could be expected. This fact is a good indication that the Malaysian undergraduate millennials are positive thinkers. On the same note, it is also a sign that they could be ready for greater challenges.
- e) Conventional – it is interesting to learn that the millennials were conventional in the sense that they agreed with traditional values. They also have high regard and respect for their parents, their university and authority. Concurring with the findings on 'feeling special' and 'sheltered', there is plenty of opportunities for the educators to include the students' parents in the study program. There should be assignments and tasks that include national issues and agenda.

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## 5. CONCLUSION

At the onset of the present study, there was a need to confirm the characteristics of the Malaysian undergraduate millennials. The selected millennials who participated in the survey had provided some new insights into the understanding of their characteristics as acclaimed in the literature. The salient findings from the present study have provided evidence that while some characteristics and their attributes were true of the selected millennials, there were also some that did not match the literature.

Nonetheless, the salient findings from the present study have provided relevant empirical data to guide policy development and pedagogical decisions on how best to teach the millennials in higher education institutions. Some suggestions on how best to train the undergraduate millennials have been provided.

The differences in the Malaysian undergraduate millennials' characteristics have brought to light the potential influence due to the sociocultural and socioeconomic factors. Further investigations on the possible causes to the Malaysian millennials' characteristics are deemed necessary. On that note, further studies especially the ones that investigate possible social, cultural and economic factors that influence the Malaysian millennials' characteristics could be conducted.

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