

Cultural Daily

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(Dis)Connected: Abstraction and the Millennial Experience

Dan Matthews · Wednesday, August 29th, 2018

You see the word “millennial” so often online it’s almost irksome. What, if anything, is so important about millennials? Besides the years in which we were born, what makes a millennial a millennial? What is millennial culture, and what do millennials value?

I would argue that millennials are very important, but not because we’re more empathetic, or determined to change the world, or concentrated on valuing diverse perspectives, cultures, and individuals.

No, we are important because of something we can’t control. We are the most abstract generation the world has ever seen. What does that mean, and is it a good thing? That’s what I intend to figure out in this article. I’m not even sure of the answer yet myself.

The Millennial Experience

If there’s one word that seems to encapsulate millennial culture, it’s “experiences.” In my last post on [social media and culture](#), I discussed the negative aspect of this hunger for experiences, which goes by the loathsome term “FOMO,” or “fear of missing out.” If you thought “YOLO” (you only live once) was bad, FOMO is worse. FOMO is the exact opposite of “living in the moment” — it’s a term that stands for jealousy, fear, and knee-jerk, mindless activity. Although YOLO might encourage a kind of mindless activity, at least the word “fear” isn’t part of the acronym.

As I discussed before, FOMO creates goal conflicts. Millennials are having trouble with goal conflicts because of constant connectedness via social media. It’s easy to see why: when you’re always seeing updates on the new experiences your friends are having, it’s tough not to want to share those experiences, despite the fact that your primary goals in life conflict with them.

Because social media in America is innately capitalist, companies are trying to figure out how to capture the millennial love of experiences. This, in turn, forces those companies to change. [Millennials are changing the hospitality industry](#) because 78 percent of millennials prefer to spend their money on experiences instead of things. Because [millennials are prioritizing experiences](#), Macy’s is trying to bring them in with “miniconcerts, yoga classes, and cafes.” The clothing retailer is even trying to predict what people will want to wear to the Coachella music fest, in hopes that millennials will buy their Coachella clothes at Macy’s. It’s a desperate attempt to keep more Macy’s stores from shutting down. Everyone knows millennials will buy those clothes at thrift stores.

It's worth asking why millennials love experiences so much. Of the 78 percent who said they prefer experiences over things, 69 percent said it's because experiences "make them feel more connected to their communities, other people, and the world."

We want to feel physically and emotionally connected to people because that connection is lacking in our everyday lives. We crave experiences because technology places us in an abstract sphere where we interact with a bunch of ones and zeroes arranged in such a way as to represent human beings. The drive for experiences is a hunger for something previous generations took for granted: physical, sensory interaction.

Ironically, this desire for experiences is an abstraction. To make experiences something to strive for turns experience into an idea, as opposed to experience being the inevitable result of engaging in activities as a sentient being.

Millennials are the first "digital natives," and even though we want experiences more than anything else, we're also willing to substitute the virtual for the physical if it means we can "get the job done." We've been getting the job done digitally for most of our lives.

[George Washington University](#) notes that 77 percent of millennials would be willing to use virtual reality for work-related conversations. This, then, would change the PR industry, as PR professionals figure out ways to create virtual experiences that speak to millennials.

The craving for experiences in a world increasingly driven by abstract digital interactions will change every aspect of society. But there's also something dangerous about this.

A Dangerous Kind of Intelligence



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Abstraction enables human intelligence, or, human intelligence enables abstraction. Language, numbers, religion, art, philosophy — it all springs from the ability to take concrete physical things, abstract them from their surroundings, and assign symbols to them.

[Psychologist James Flynn](#) studies intelligence, and during his studies, he discovered something surprising. The average IQ has gone up by at least 30 points over the last century. That's because we are increasingly geared toward abstract thinking. We're shaping our minds to prioritize abstract thinking because it's the type of thinking you need in order to constantly understand and manipulate symbols in complex ways and make analogies.

But Flynn sees a downside. "I'm not being gloomy but actually the major intellectual thing that disturbs me is that young people like you are reading less history and less serious novels than you used to," Flynn says.

He argues that millennials are caught in an abstract bubble of the present. Without an understanding of the past and what created the moment we're in now, Flynn feels we can be easily manipulated. According to Flynn, "All you need are 'ahistorical' people who then live in the bubble of the present, and by fashioning that bubble the government and the media can do anything they want with them."

That's dangerous — an abstract form of intelligence, disconnected from the past, such that the

purveyors of information merely have to manipulate the abstractions to manipulate the intelligence.

Experience: you only live once, right? There are others who have lived before and have had similar experiences. What did they do to make things better in a real way? That's the question we must answer right now.

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