The "Not so Young" Millennial Consumer

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Abstract

The Millennial generation, given its size, range of birth years, and recent current events, appears to be segmenting into smaller groups. Among them are the older cohort members who have defined their own approaches to the consumption of goods, and sharing of information. The extent to which these "older" Millennials are generally presumed to rely on the Internet and other technologies to navigate the world influenced this research. The study took place in the San Francisco Bay Area and examined older Millenials' first choice of retail outlet for the purchase of major product classifications when shopping either for themselves or for someone else as a gift. The research was specifically geared toward determining the extent to which older Millennials consider purchasing from online retail outlets, first-hand retail stores or second-hand stores. The study also sought perceptions older Millenials have of second-hand retailers and merchandise as well as their general expectations of retailers as they relate to community involvement. The sample of 486 respondents derived from college and university students who were born between the years of 1982 and 1992. The paper based survey sought information through both quantitative and qualitative means. Among the findings, the older Millennial sample would largely opt to shop from first-hand brick and mortar retail outlets. Additionally, they are not inclined to tell their friends where they shop unless asked, indicating that this older subgroup may not be as inclined to communicate about their preferences online as the younger group. The sample shows some concern toward the environment and cleanliness when purchase decisions are made and is largely concerned about the extent to which retailers are giving back to their communities.

Key words: millennial, consumer, retail channels, shopping, retailing

1. Introduction

Given the relevance of generational consumer decision-making practices that are predictive of purchase behavior (Gupta, Brantley, Jackson, 2010), the exploration of cohort demographics and psychographics can be useful to help explain shopping tendencies (Kinley, Bharath & Lockett,2010, Noble, Haytko & Phillips, 2009). Recently projected to be the largest American consumer generation in history, (Aquino, 2012, Belleau, Summers, Xu, &Pinel, 2007), and now having superceded the Baby Boomer Generation (Marketing Strategies, 2013) shopping tendencies of the Millennial segment of the population are under close scrutiny. With numbers at about 79 million in 2011 (Mantis, 2014), the overall Millennial influence on the marketplace is highly anticipated as retailers seek approaches to success with them (Cambal & Vaskovicova Zibrinva, 2011, Lachman & Brett, 2013).

Their personalities have been described as “self expressive, receptive to new ideas and open to change,” (Pew research Center, 2010), and they are also said to desire uniqueness of product (Rajamma, Pelton, Hsu & Knight, 2010). Millennials are known for their reliance on the Internet for general searches of product information (Kruger, 2013) and are said to highly value a friend’s tweet or product endorsement (Aquino, 2012). Millennials also respond to and are influenced by personalized messages or word of mouth (Smith, 2011) for attaining product information. Having grown up with computers and cell phones, and now largely engaged with social networking, Millennial use of technology, a distinctive characteristic of their identity (Pew Research, 2010), in their overall retail shopping experiences is critical for retailers to understand. The means through which this cohort shares – or chooses not to share – information about shopping for all types of products is crucial to all channels of retailing.

2. Young and Older Millennials

With a broad range of birth years –between 1976 and 1995, and with varied nomenclature such as *Generation Y* (Bracy, Bevill& Roach, 2010, Payment, 2008, DiGilio, Lynn-Nelson & Reis, 2004, Norum, 2003), *Generation Y/Millennial*, (Lachman& Brett, 2013), or *Millennial* (DiGilio, Lynn-Nelson & Reis, 2004, Howe & Strauss, 2003), age segmented consumer research has not been done, but is essential for this cohort. Given the broad age range of Millennials defined in the literature, it is presumed that there exist older members who have perceptions which are distinguishable from those of the younger members (Cui, Trent, Sullivan, &Matiru, 2003, Mantis, 2014). Although numerous studies have examined specific Millennial consumer behaviors, there remain generalizations in the literature which do not stratify the cohort based on age, even though retailers are aware that consumption for the 25 – 34 year old market grows with salary increases (Sullivan & Heitmeyer, 2008). Debevec, Schewe, Madden, and Diamond (2013) suggest a splintering between younger and older subgroups of Millennials based on their life experiences, their age during the 2008 Recession, and its relationship to the shaping of their values. They found that older Millennials (aged 27 – 31) tend to save money with values of thrift and utility, while younger Millennials (aged 17 – 23) have more of a feeling of entitlement.

Given the size and strength of the Millennial cohort, understanding their personal preferences as they relate to product viewing, purchase, and/or stores to support, and what information to share, based on age, is paramount. Currently, the older tend to Facebook and email and the younger are using more texting and Instagram (Mantis, 2014). Retailers and marketers must take into account the subgroups within the general Millennial category as we grow more aware of what their shopping tendencies are and their impact in the marketplace increases. The motivations that guide the Millennial consumer behavior that are critical to understand (Young &Hinley, 2012), are the day to day events and practices that shape their current behaviors. Understanding the nuances between the younger and older Millennials is vital to targeting their consumption preferences and practices. Vehicles and methods such as technology, community engagement as well as retail channel choice need to align well with each subgroup.

2.1 Purpose of Study

It is prudent to examine the behaviors as found in the general literature focused on the broadly defined Millennial cohort. While generally considered civic-minded with concern for the greater good and social responsibility (Cui, Trent, Sullivan &Matiru, 2003, Hyllegard, Ogle, Yan &Attman, 2010, Cone Inc. 2006), sustainability and socially conscious (Mantis, 2014), the subgroup nuances of this cohort are complex. Previous research found that older Millennials (born 1982 - 1992) were involved with maintaining and enhancing the lifecycle of products through upcycling and redesigning used products, over disposal (Vouchilas and Ulasewicz, 2013). The terms "new" and "used" or postuse were beginning to be interchangeable for this cohort. These findings led the researchers to question what this older cohort considers "new," and whether or not older Millennials are inclined to purchase through second hand retail channels with the assumption that items are still considered new to them as many subjects did so. Further, the researchers questioned whether or not second hand store shopping would be considered by older Millennials when buying a gift for a family member or friend. What is required is a better understanding of whether age factors into their preference for retail channel choice such as buying at first or second hand stores versus online, as well as their beliefs and expectations from retailers for social responsibility.

The purpose of this study was to use an exploratory approach to fill the research gap which currently exists as it relates to older Millennial consumer behavior and beliefs about products and retailers. It specifically explored the older segment of Millennials' consumer decision-making preferences and practices for purchasing particular product categories through brick and mortar or online retail channels. The study also examined the meaning behind older Millennial consumer choices and their perceptions of retailers and their involvement in environmental and community engagement issues. Focus was placed on the shopping preferences of older Millennials for seven particular categories of merchandise highlighting how existing perceptions and realities of what is considered new or used influence their purchasing choices, decisions, and the dissemination of this knowledge to friends.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Data Collection, Sample, and Analysis

This cross-sectional study took place at five colleges and universities in the San Francisco Bay Area. Student participants represented a variety of disciplines with a majority representing students majoring in apparel design, merchandising, and interior design. Students were given the opportunity to participate in the study immediately preceding or following classes on a volunteer basis. The sample in this study was comprised of 486 young adults (born between the ages of 1982 and 1992) who are independent with discretionary funds to spend on the purchase of personal and gift items.

The instrument, designed by the researchers, collected data as it related to respondents' first choice of retail channel when considering the purchase of a personal item or the purchase of a gift for someone else. The seven product categories were clothing, belts or bags, shoes, furniture, home decorative item, computer or cell phone, and books. While some of these product categories were derived from a prior study by the researchers (Vouchilas and Ulasewicz, 2013), the remaining items were included to explore a majority of products and items Older Millennials need and use. Retail channel options were first-hand store, first-hand online store, second-hand store, second-hand online store, and a final option for N/A or other, where subjects were asked to describe their responses in written form. Examples of each retail channel were provided in the survey directions.

Perceptions of products and specific retail channels were measured via a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Additional data including beliefs about retailers and consideration of the extent to which subjects considered second-hand store merchandise to be 'new' were collected. Demographic information included birth year and gender. Data were analyzed through multiple means which include descriptive data, correlations, and cross tabulation. Qualitative information provided in written form on the survey instrument, was transcribed and coded by emergent themes, using constant comparative analysis (Creswell, 2007).

4. Results

Subjects were asked to select their first choice for purchase channel by product type when considering purchasing the item for themselves (Research question - Is there a difference between young adult Millennial choices for where to shop based on product type?). The first choice for all items, with the exception of books, was a first-hand brick and mortar store. Books were consistently considered for purchase previously used either from second hand online stores (34.7%) or second-hand brick and mortar stores (33.1%). Notably, belts and bags, furniture, and décor items were first choice for purchase from a second-hand store by 26.2%, 28.9%, and 36.4% of the sample, respectively (See Table 1).

Table 1

Frequencies for 1st Choice Retail Channel When Shopping for Oneself

Item (n)	*Channel*				
	1st Hand	2nd Hand	1st Hand Online	2nd Hand Online	Other
Clothing (451)	339	78	28	2	4
Belts/Bags (445)	271	117	42	8	7
Shoes (457)	378	25	51	3	0
Furniture (425)	254	123	22	18	8
Décor (428)	198	156	41	20	13
Comp/Cell 454)	361	7	67	16	3
Book (441)	77	146	59	153	6

Respondents were provided with space to provide qualitative data when the options for retail channel did not describe their preferred choice. Interestingly most of the comments provided referred to reasons why respondents did not make purchases or experienced multiple first choice experiences equally. The following table includes qualitative responses by recurring themes within each category of merchandise, ranked from most comments for furniture to least comments for Computer/cell phone. (See Table 2).

Table 2

Recurring Themes for Other Choices When Shopping for Self

Category (n)	Recurring Theme
Furniture (28)	Buy on Craig's List Free on the side of the road Inherit it, given to by friends and family Garage sales
Home Décor (22)	Buy from independent artists or boutiques Reuse and reinvest in found or given items No preference, first and second hand stores Curbside Make my own
Belts and Bags (11)	Garage sale, swap meet, yard sale, anywhere Donated or from family or friends Whatever belt is cheapest Ebay for belts
Books (10)	Second hand store off and online Borrowed or rented Curbside or no preference
Clothing (8)	Jeans new, others second or self made Hand me downs Crossroads of styles not at thrift stores Anywhere, 1st and 2nd, off and online
Computer /Cell Phone (6)	Used cell phone from parents Check online first for prices and then buy Craig's List

When shopping for a gift, the first choice for retail channel for all items was a first-hand brick and mortar store (Research question –Is there a difference between young adult Millennial choices for where to shop based on product type when shopping for a gift?). First-hand online stores were selected as the first choice for computer/cell phone gifts by 20.4% of the sample and 22.6% of the sample for books (See Table 3).

Table 3

Frequencies for 1st Choice Retail Channel When Shopping for a Gift

Item (n)	*Channel*				
	1st Hand	2nd Hand	1st Hand Online	2nd Hand Online	Other
Clothing (456)	397	20	37	1	1
Belts/Bags (452)	346	38	57	6	5
Shoes (450)	376	12	55	1	6
Furniture (435)	301	62	51	11	10
Décor (447)	297	66	67	10	7
Comp/Cell (451)	333	7	92	10	9
Book (434)	204	73	98	54	5

Overall, whether purchasing for self or as a gift, first choice for purchasing from second-hand retail channels was prevalent for books, and to a degree, belts/bags, furniture, and décor items (Research questions 3 and 4). Each of these product classifications stand out as items in which size and/or fit is not required with some limitations for belts.

Table 4 includes qualitative responses given by respondents for their other choices for gift purchase. Listed by recurring themes within each category of merchandise, with a new category titled general comments that were cross category, that was the second highest number of responses.

Table 4

Recurring Themes for Other Choices When Shopping for Gifts

Category (n)	Recurring Themes
Furniture (18)	Can't imagine buying furniture for others. Don't buy furniture for others. Would not give as a gift.
Other General Responses (11)	Do not buy gifts, make them Depends on the person shopping for Depends on what the item is Gifts from the curb Depends on what it is and who I am giving it to Hand me downs and trades. Check online for first hand, and then buy in store Give gift cards
Computer /Cell Phone (9)	Can't imagine buying electronics for anyone.
Shoes(6)	Too hard to give as a gift Would not buy shoes for someone else
Home Décor (5)	Will buy it anywhere, first or second Don't buy for others Will handcraft gift decor
Books (2)	Online first and second hand store Books may be hard to find, but OK if previously loved. Depends on the look of the book.
Belts and Bags(2)	Online first and second hand store. First hand store for bags. Would make belt or bag for gift.

Five-point Likert-type statements were used to determine specifics related to personal shopping from second-hand retail stores, any channel (Research questions 5 and 6). The alpha coefficient for items measuring perceptions regarding products and purchases was considerable at .12. Items used to measure perceptions of second-hand products/retailers relate to benefiting the environment, affordability, and cleanliness of products (See Table 5).

Table 5
Mean Scores and CorrelationCoefficient for Second-Hand Store Product Perceptions

Survey Item for Second-Hand Products	*N*	*M*	*SD*	*r*
Purchases benefit the environment	482	3.14	.957	
Merchandise is more affordable	481	3.50	1.09	
First-hand merchandise is cleaner than second-hand	481	3.51	1.08	
Second-hand products may be dirty	482	2.30	1.16	
Purchase first-hand because items have not been used	482	3.46	1.16	
First-hand merchandise is cleaner than second-hand	481			
Second-hand products may be dirty	482			.378**

** - Significant at .01.

Perceptions of the environmental benefit and product affordability of second-hand items were mixed although affordability of second-hand products appears to be a concern. Perceptions of cleanliness yielded a significant correlation for the two survey items yet the overall perception that second-hand products may not be clean was not found.

Items used to measure young adult Millennial expectations from retailers related to community involvement and support for community and specific concepts as they relate to second-hand stores specifically (Research question 7). Community involvement and concern for the community are prevalent for this sample. Overall perceptions of second-hand retailers indicate more positive opinions of them although roughly half of the sample considers them to have a negative stigma. This does not, however, preclude them from shopping second-hand (See Table 6).

Table 6
Frequency of Expectations and Perceptions of Retailers

Survey Item	*N*	*% agree*	*% disagree*
Second-hand retailers have a negative stigma	479	48.2	51.8
Second-hand store merchandise is not organized	479	30.9	69.1
Second-hand store used items are not up to date	479	21.7	78.3
Second-hand store items are not brand new	479	37.6	62.4
Retailers should give back to communities	478	91.6	8.4
Retailers should donate a % of profit to a cause	478	65.9	34.1
Retailers should develop community partnerships	478	59.2	40.8
Retailers should donate to schools	478	65.7	34.3

Overall beliefs about retailers indicated they should engage with communities with percentages of profits and school donations among the most prevalent requirements. Second-hand store reviews were somewhat mixed in terms of whether or not subjects felt they have a negative stigma associated with them, however, the overall merchandising and product were not felt to be the causes of the stigma. Perceptions of second-hand store stigma and perceptions of whether or not second-hand purchases were still considered new by subjects are found in the following cross-tabulation (See Table 7). Interestingly, despite buying second-hand product and considering it 'new', 29% of the sample perceives second-hand retail store outlets as having a negative stigma while 30% did not perceive a stigma. The belief that second-hand retailers have negative stigmas does not appear to largely impact purchasing from these outlets.

Table 7

Cross-Tabulation for Perceptions of Second-Hand Store Product Still Considered New and Perceptions of Second-hand Store Stigma

Survey Items		When buying second-hand, I still consider item new	
		Yes	*No*
Second-hand retailers	*Yes*	140	60
have a negative stigma	*No*	145	69

Retailer expectations for this sample show strong concern for communities and community engagement. Cross-tabulation indicates 59% of the sample agree that retailers should give back as well as develop community partnerships (See Table 8).

Table 8

Cross-Tabulation for Beliefs that Retailers Should Give Back to Communities and Develop Community Partnerships

Survey Item		Retailers should develop community partnerships	
		Yes	*No*
Retailers should give back	*Yes*	283	155
to communities	*No*	0	40

A cross-tabulation was run to check for beliefs related to pricing of goods and retail outlet associated with personal needs (See Table 9). Price was found to be a significant component to purchases in general and the affordability of second-hand products.

Table 9

Cross-Tabulation for Affordability of Second-Hand Products and Importance of Price to Purchase Fix table

Survey Item		Price is one of the most important factors to purchases				
		1	***2***	***3***	***4***	***5***
Second-hand merchandise	***1***	0	2	3	9	6
is more affordable to me	***2***	3	6	20	28	12
	3	6	5	37	56	37
	4	7	7	25	58	54
	5	1	4	7	38	50

Likert Scale – Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5)

When asked to qualitatively state how they tell friends where they shopped, over 40% of the respondents stated they told only if asked, complemented, or that they did not share information (see Table 10). When information was shared it related to something they were positive about including a good price or shopping experience.

Table 10

Recurring Themes Related to When, How and Why Shopping Information is Shared with Friends

Category (n)	Responses
Voluntarily Telling Friends where they shop (182)	Tell only if asked Tell only if complimented, or if they like it Only if they say they like something, I tell them where I got it I don't tell them, it doesn't really matter
What they tell others (99)	If it was a good shopping experience, if it was a nice clean place with good merchandise I make recommendations for quality and price that meets their budget Does not matter if first or second hand, makes no difference If it was a good deal If I am excited about something I tell them where I got and promo info Only share deals I came across Name of store and price if cheap Tell them where the deals are at first or second hand
How they tell friends where they shop (47)	Face to Face Word of Mouth Checking in on Facebook, email, blog, online Take photos and share online We go shopping together

5. Conclusion and Implications

The unexpected finding that the older Millennial subgroup, given the choice, largely preferred purchasing from brick and mortar retailers is crucial to understanding implications for all retails channels, and further supports the need to for age stratification when studying shopping preferences within the Millennial cohort. This finding does not preclude but rather supports a multi channel approach with an evaluation of multiple product and store searches (Gupta et al, 2010) that may begin online for price, size and assortment comparisons and end in the store for final touch, feel and decision to purchase (Lewis, 2014). The experiential aspect of shopping in a store (Sullivan & Heitmeyer, 2008) may also subjugate the online socialization that comes through sharing photos through social media platforms such as Instagram (Mantis, 2014). As the findings support, this group is not inclined to voluntarily inform friends where they made purchases unless asked. Their methods for sharing the information further supports the older Millennial is not inclined to text as an accepted and anticipated approach to communicating (Mantis, 2014).For retailers, this finding is important to consider as the current technology revolution is highly assumptive in its approach to reaching this generation. With age come gradual changes in perceptions that retailers should align with.

Millennials have a need for uniqueness and individualized looks, and patronize particular retail channels or outlets that provide such products (Rajamma, et.al, 2010).While members of the older Millennial group are still open to one of kind second-hand purchases, the sample was less likely to choose this method as their first choice. This finding was somewhat unexpected as the San Francisco Bay Area is currently seeing ubiquity in second-hand stores which are often sought as locations for purchasing unique items that are often times considered 'new' to the individual as found in this study (See Table 11).

The finding that subjects were more willing to purchase bags, belts and books from second-hand retailers supports the reality that these items can be easier to purchase without concern about fit, but also that this subgroup is more thrifty (Debevec et al., 2013) than the younger Millennials. In particular second-hand retailers can benefit from understanding that they can target this age group for home-related goods.

Table 11

Recurring Themes for Why Second-Hand Items are Considered New

New Item (33%)	It is new to me and no one else will wear it as I do. It is new in my life. It is new to me. It is new to my wardrobe and me.
Uniqueness (24%)	No one else will have it. Unique and hard to find. More character, fashion all looks the same.
Economical (15%)	Second hand quality is higher relative to price point. Budget items.
Reuse (15%)	Good for reuse. Don't demand new resources, leaves bad eco footprint.
Retro/Vintage (11%)	Looking for something vintage. Vintage items are older but still considered new.

The cleanliness of items appears to be important to this subgroup. Findings reveal that although the sample largely felt that first-hand merchandise is cleaner than second-hand merchandise, they moderately disagreed with the notion that second-hand products may be dirty. In this same vein, the sample did not perceive second-hand store items as not up to date or not brand new, indicating their support for this particular retail niche.

As this research drew from the authors previous work which found the lifecycle of clothing and furniture items extended through repurposing, the expectation was that acquisition of items from second-hand stores would be considerable, both from a sustainability as well as affordability perspective. This was not the case for this sample, though subjects were more willing to purchase second-hand furniture and decorative items over other product categories. The overall finding for this sample regarding pricing is that it is an important aspect of their purchases though they did not generally perceive second-hand goods as being more affordable. Second-hand retailers who are targeting this market can easily apply pricing strategies that address this finding.

Findings in this study supported previous findings regarding older Millennial civic mindedness, concern for the greater good and social responsibility (Hyllegard, et, al 2010, Boyd, 2010). These concepts were revealed in the strong expectation that retailers give back a portion of their profits to benefit communities and that they somehow engage with the community through partnerships. This notion crosses all retail channels and was strongly perceived by a majority of the sample. Analysis in the Robin Report (Mantis, 2014) revealed that 29% of their Millennial sample was striving to make the world a better place. Retailers in all channels are able to use this information to not only align themselves with this age cohort through involvement with local to regional communities, but also to confidently develop this paradigm as an accepted and expected approach to retailing in the twenty-first century.

5.1 Limitations and Recommendations for Further Research

Although the preferences for purchasing goods were provided by subjects, their actual practices are believed to be representative of these choices, but can perhaps vary from them. The subjects in the sample are considered to be representative of Older Millennials in general, however, as they attended school and/or reside in a metropolitan area, the findings are limited. This study is useful to further research on segmentation within the Millennial age cohort, which attempts to further examine and explain the underpinnings of their reasons, choices and methods for making purchases.

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