

## Who are Millennials?

### And what they want from libraries, bookstores, and librarians

#### Abstract

An intriguing approach to gaining insight into the unique characteristics and learning styles of a group of students is to understand generational differences. 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.

How do Millennials remember their school library once they have graduated from high school? Do they remember the experience fondly, or is it a big turn off? Are school librarian's efforts to encourage reading and research appreciated, or is it a wasted effort?

Where do young adults turn for information to solve a problem? To answer these questions, 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.

#### Research Questions

This study sought to understand how 18-to 24 year old members of the Millennial generation use and experience libraries and bookstores. It set out to answer the following questions: (1) Where do young adults turn for information? (2) What is the frequency of use of the bookstore and public, college, and high school library? (3) What do they do at

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the bookstore or library? (4) What are the least and most important aspects to their bookstore and library experiences?

### **Who are Millennials?**

Millennials are a generation of children born between the years 1982 and approximately 2002 (Howe and Strauss, 2000, 41). The Millennial generation is expected to greatly influence American society because of its sheer size (Howe and Strauss, 2000, 62).

A generation is a cohort-group of about 20 years or so that “defines itself against a backdrop of contemporary trends and events” and is shaped by history, culture, and the environment that surrounds them (Howe and Strauss, 2000, 46). Each generation has a sense of self, 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). As a generation ages its peer personality evolves and becomes more identifiable and its influence on society grows.

Strauss and Howe, perhaps the most prolific authors to write about generational differences blend social science and history to understand the nature of a generation’s collective personality, 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” (Strauss and Howe, 2006, 26). Generally, they are politically conservative yet more socially tolerant than previous generations. They are cooperative team players, followers looking for consensus who 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. Members of the Millennial generation are used to being treated as unique and special because they 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, 1).

Members of every generation interact with their world in ways unique to their generation that often results in a disconnection between services and programs that are offered and those that are desired. Abrams and Luther (2004) provide three-insights into Millennials’ use of information, learning, and beliefs that differs from Xers born between 1961 and 1981 or Baby Boomers. 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” (37). Third, this generation is principled, civic minded, and direct and “demands respect and finds no need to beg for good service” (37).

### **How Millennials use libraries**

Curtis and her colleagues (2000) at the University of Georgia gained insight into Millennials’ use of information by conducting focus groups among undergraduates. Their findings indicate that most Millennial-aged college students begin research on the

Internet, not by using library databases; search remotely rather than in person; 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 between the years 1982 and 2002 about their reading habits, fewer Millennials are reading literary works such as fiction, poetry, and drama than previous generations. Dana Gioia, chairman of the NEA, summarizes the findings of in one sentence: Literary reading in America is declining rapidly, but especially among the young (Bradshaw, 2004, vii). However, recent evidence suggests that reading of fiction and nonfiction written specifically for the youth population 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).

Given this generation's preference for 24/7 access to information and the Internet and contradictory evidence about their reading habits, librarians must wonder if Millennials might turn away from libraries altogether. 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. When college students and soldiers were asked, "When was the last time you went to the public library or a bookstore?" They

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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” (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 student surveyed 10 Millennials at various venues such as restaurants, bars, church, parties, work, car washes, university athletic events, and stores and directed to interview. The 119-item survey consists of qualitative, quantitative, and open-ended questions. Graduate students received online training about research design and survey techniques. Although the sample represents a convenience sample, the online course delivery ensures diversity and variety perhaps not attainable in convenience surveys conducted primarily in one geographic location. Table 1 shows the distribution by age and gender.

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

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<b>Age</b>	<b>No.</b>	<b>%</b>
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
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	117	47.8
Female	128	52.2

| \* Percentages total less than 100 due to rounding

For this paper, three questions are analyzed. First, where do Millennials turn for information?" Second, what do Millennials value in their bookstore and library experiences? The third question consists of three parts: First, "Did you go to the school library when you were in high school?" "How often did you go to the school library?" and "When you think about your school library experiences, what word or words come to mind?"

## Results

### *Where Millennials turn for information*

Altogether, the 245 respondents made 677 selections, but almost all respondents identified at least two sources for information. Table 2 identifies the number of responses, the percentages, and rank. Although the Internet is the single most popular response, respondents indicated a preference for turning to friends, family, faculty, professors and teachers, colleagues and teammates to find information. This is not surprising since one characteristic of Millennials is their sociability and penchant for social networking.

Table 2: Where Millennials turn for information  $n=677$

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

### *What Millennials value*

Millennials were asked to rate on a scale of 1 to 5 the importance of 11 factors to their bookstore or library experience. The most important aspects of the bookstore and library

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experience were determined by summing 4s and 5s. Likewise, the least important aspects of the bookstore and library were determined by summing 1s and 2s.

Table 3: What respondents value least and most about their bookstore and library experiences  $n=245$

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	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

What matters most to Millennials is quality of materials (books, magazines, and newspapers); and followed by a tie for second place—helpful staff and convenient hours. The least important aspect to this experience is coffee. Bargain items for sale and the library or bookstore as a place to be with others were the second and third least favorable responses. Conversely, 50% of the respondents selected 4 or 5 to the library or bookstore as a place to be alone. These respondents value 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.

*Do Millennials use the high school library?*

Eighty-nine percent of the respondents surveyed used their high school library. About a third of the students who never used their high school library gave homeschooling as the reason.

#### *How frequently do Millennials use the school library?*

Altogether, 42.5% of respondents used the high school library less than once a month and 57.5% of respondents used the high school library once a month or more.

#### *What do Millennials remember about high school libraries and librarians?*

Responses to an open-ended question asking students to describe their high school library experience were coded as positive, negative, or neutral. Examples of neutral comments were “research” and “homework.” Many respondents remember the high school library as a quiet place for research, study, homework, reading, and book checkout.

Examples of positive comments are “helpfulness of librarians” and “relaxing environment.” Some Millennials remember the high school library as a fun place to socialize. In one instance, the word “awesome” described the experience. One Millennial claimed that it was “her reason for success.” Altogether, 10 responses were highly positive.

Many respondents replied negatively to this question. There were 75 negative responses such as “boring,” “library had a limited collection,” and librarians are “unhelpful,” “rigid,” “mean,” and “grouchy.” Several young adults found the high school library to be dirty, dark, and disorganized.

#### **Where do we go from here?**

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Over one hundred and fifty years ago, Alexis de Tocqueville wrote that amongst democratic nations “each new generation is a new people” (Democracy in America 547). As Strauss and Howe (2000) 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” (10).

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 has time to develop services tailored particularly to the generation’s “peer personality.” Therefore, by the time students reach college, these librarians have had time to prepare. Because school librarians receive less forewarning, opportunities to teach to a generation’s strengths may be lost. In order to ensure a meaningful education for all students, it behooves librarians to understand the rising generation.

In the meantime, two hundred forty-five Millennials in North Carolina have spoken: they want helpful librarians, good collections, and convenient hours. No matter the generation we serve, basing customer service on helpful librarians, good collections, and convenient hours makes good sense.

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