

## MILLENNIAL LEADERS' DISPLAY OF GENERATIONAL COHORT STEREOTYPES: A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH APPROACH

Louisa Grotkamp<sup>1</sup>, Janina Magdalena Schaumann<sup>1\*</sup>, and Philipp Riehm<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Macromedia University of Applied Sciences, Hamburg, Germany

### ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:  
Cohort stereotypes;  
Generation Y;  
Leadership;  
Leadership style;  
Millennials.

### ABSTRACT

This paper investigates how Millennial leaders perceive themselves in their leadership role and whether generational cohort stereotypes prevail with ascending hierarchy levels. Although Millennials and their character traits have been discussed at length in the literature there is a lack of research, which applies generational cohort stereotypes to Millennials in a leadership context. This limits our understanding of this generational cohort and how its members can benefit organizations as leaders. An exploratory qualitative research approach was followed, including interviews at 15 organizations from different industry segments in Germany. The data was analyzed through a qualitative content analysis. The study gives a differentiated picture of Millennials in leadership positions. While some generational stereotypes could be confirmed, other character traits seem to change with ascending hierarchical levels due to the leadership role's increased responsibility and the confinement within corporate structures. This can influence Generation Ys' behavior and potentially limit their value creating potential for organizations (e.g. driving innovation). This study contributes novel insights on Millennial leadership and organizational challenges to allow this generational cohorts' abilities as leaders to evolve. Organizations are advised to support the development of structures and processes that allow Millennials to unfold their potential. Directions for future research are outlined to further investigate this phenomenon.

\* Corresponding Author at Macromedia University of Applied Sciences, Gertrudenstraße 3, 20095 Hamburg, Germany E-mail address: [ja.schaumann@macromedia.de](mailto:ja.schaumann@macromedia.de)

## 1. Introduction

The term 'Millennials' refers to the generation of so-called Generation Y, born between 1980 and 1995 (Würzburger, 2016). They are one of the youngest generations currently in the workforce and will follow in the footsteps of the soon-to-retire Generation X and Baby Boomers, increasingly comprising a significant number of employees within organizations across the globe (Baker Rosa & Hastings, 2018; Weldy, 2020).

There is extensive academic research on the characteristics of generational cohorts, and it is argued that Generation Y differs greatly from older generations in terms of their value orientation, attitudes to work, and goals in life (Anderson et al., 2017; Bund et al., 2015; Hershatter & Epstein, 2010; Mayangdarastri & Khusna, 2020; Moon, 2014; Putriastuti & Stasi, 2019; Tapscott, 2008; Venter, 2017; Weldy, 2020).

The literature mentions a number of generational stereotypes related to Generation Y, such as a high degree of self-confidence, low need for security (Anderts, 2011), high demand for feedback (Weldy, 2020), and a strong relationship to technology (Özcelik, 2015). These characteristics entail both, difficulties for organizations in dealing with Millennials, but also great opportunities for future value creation when Millennials are given the opportunity to accelerate their performance (Stewart et al., 2017; Graen & Schiemann, 2013).

Millennials are described as the key generation to drive change towards a better future in a world confronted with diverse economic, political, and environmental challenges (Hershatter & Epstein, 2010;

Keszei, 2018). Consequently, organizations are eager to utilize the unique characteristics of Generation Y and increase the efficiency and effectiveness of Millennial employees to improve company performance and maintain organizational competitiveness in a quickly changing, highly dynamic world (Stewart et al., 2017; Weldy, 2020).

In recent years, the first members of this generational cohort have replaced earlier generations in their leadership positions. Nevertheless, how Millennials act and perceive themselves as leaders is not discussed in the literature (Chou, 2012; Keszei, 2018; Porter et al., 2019). Although there is extensive research on Millennials personal aspirations, expectations towards superiors, and how managers can lead this generational cohort (Mayangdarastri & Khusna, 2020; Özcelik, 2015; Pinzaru et al., 2016; Putriastuti & Stasi, 2019; Valenti, 2019), the literature is missing empirically validated contributions that uncover how Millennials behave as leaders themselves. This gap limits an understanding of how academics and practitioners can approach this generational cohort from a leadership perspective and how organizations can benefit from Millennial leaders.

The objective of this paper is to contribute to the academic literature by supplying empirically derived insights into whether generational stereotypes, that most of the existing literature relies on, are evident on higher hierarchical levels. Do these stereotypes prevail or will the theoretical perspective on this generational cohort have to be revised when Millennials take over roles on higher hierarchical levels?

## 2. Literature Review

In the literature, the concept of generation is approached from different perspectives, spanning life phases or birth cohorts (Baker Rosa & Hastings, 2018). In social sciences, the concept of generational cohorts is commonly used (Özcelik, 2015; Pinzaru et al., 2016; Sauser & Sims, 2012).

Researchers have questioned whether generational membership is a valid theoretical concept or only represents vague stereotypes with limited relevance to the academic discourse (e.g. Costanza & Finkelstein, 2015; Kelan, 2014; Rudolph et al., 2017). While going deeper into this debate is beyond the scope of this paper, this study follows the premises that there is evidence of differences between generations and that generational membership is crucial to an individual's identity due to the unique social and historic influences experienced by a generation (Baker Rosa & Hastings, 2018; Lyons et al. 2015; Porter et al., 2019).

The defining time span for this generational cohort remains disputed. Academic contributions refer to Millennials as individuals born between 1982 and 2002 (Sauser & Sims, 2012), 1981 and 2009 (Özcelik, 2015), or between 1977 and 1988 (Reisenwitz & Iyer, 2009). Following Würzburger (2016) this study defines Generation Y as individuals born between 1980 and 1995. The character traits of Generation Y differ compared to previous generations, especially in a professional, working context and withhold both challenges and opportunities for organizations. Based on existing literature, these traits can be segmented into the following categories: communication, decision-making, relationships, and

motivation. Based on the body of literature reviewed for this study, the propositions discussed in the following chapters form the theoretical basis for the empirical study.

### 2.1. Millennials and communication

One of the most noticeable differences between Millennials and earlier generations is their strong relationship to technology. Millennials are often referred to as digital natives, implying their generation's incorporation of technology to be an intuitive part of their lives (Hershatter & Epstein, 2010). Their digital immersion represents a significant value of Millennials to organizations in driving the shift to digital channels (Alsop, 2008). Members of Generation Y spend a significant proportion of their time communicating via mobile phones and the Internet, using social platforms, instant messengers, etc. (Venter, 2017). Unlike Baby Boomers, who prefer face-to-face communication, Millennials prefer to call, use instant messaging, or send e-mails (Hershatter & Epstein, 2010; Stewart et al., 2017).

**Proposition 1:** Millennials prefer technology-based communication channels.

Due to their economic advantage, Millennials are argued to have more time and propensity to generate and distribute content (Hershatter & Epstein, 2010). According to a survey conducted in 2009 that investigated the amount of content created online, members of Generation Y showed a greater desire to publicly express their opinion than previous generations (Jones & Fox, 2009). The need to communicate one's opinion on a broad basis matches with the synonym of Generation Me that is commonly applied to the self-centered Generation Y, who have,

however, proven to be more motivated and affirmative than their predecessors (Twenge et al., 2010). In a professional context, direct and prompt feedback is a natural part of day-to-day work for Millennials (Weldy, 2020). They are eager to learn from their mistakes, expect to receive feedback and do not shy away from giving it to others (Moskaliuk, 2016). Moreover, Millennials are used to praise and direct feedback, which their parents used as reinforcements and corrective mechanisms (Kilber et al., 2014).

**Proposition 2:** Millennials are willing to voice their opinions, give and receive direct feedback.

## 2.2. Millennials and Decision-making

The characteristics and expectations of Millennials can influence the development of labor relations with colleagues, especially when it comes to Millennials' preferences to make decisions and information processing (Alsop, 2008; Gursoy et al., 2008; Hershatter & Epstein, 2010; Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010). Due to Generation Y's extensive use of digital, non-linear communication platforms, rapid and parallel processing of vast amounts of information, it is argued that Millennials tend to follow neural patterns, rather than operating in a sequential way, as their predecessors do. For instance, Tapscott (2008) showed through his observations that Generation Y's are looking for the higher stimulus of interactive communication and information processing, instead of receiving information in a strictly scheduled, one-way, broadcast-fashion. This is related to their preferred way of learning, based on an interactive and comparatively unstructured, learning-by-doing approach. Their preferred personal development process starts with discovery and only secondly moves on to

learning about techniques and applying a more rigid structural approach to learning and searching for information (Kim, 2018).

**Proposition 3:** Millennials prefer to operate following neural patterns, rather than operating in a sequential way.

The struggle with 'gray areas', decision-making, and problem-solving under less structured and vague conditions is argued to be especially challenging for Generation Y (Hershatter & Epstein, 2010). Most Millennials have not been exposed to taking high risks, compared to what their parents or grandparents experienced (Alsop, 2008). Moreover, Generation Ys' parents often took on the task of making important decisions for their children (Hershatter & Epstein, 2010). Hence, they often did not learn to evaluate situations by themselves (Alsop, 2008). Due to their aversion to risk-taking and uncertainty Millennials seek continuous feedback and direction in the workplace, while preferring to make decisions in a team rather than on their own (Graen & Schiemann, 2013; Alsop, 2008).

**Proposition 4:** Millennials are risk-averse in their decision-making.

Due to the exact specifications given to Generation Y by others at an early stage, hoping that they would thereby meet the requirements for a successful future, a generation emerged that functions exclusively according to those specifications (Hershatter & Epstein, 2010). They are used to having the route to success clearly mapped out for them. The literature argues that any ambiguous element or any project and test that Millennials must face without clear instructions, templates, and examples raises great concern (Gallicano et al., 2012).

Therefore, it is assumed that Millennials are unaccustomed to not receiving clear instructions that contain the criteria for success and specific deadlines set by others (Alsop, 2008).

**Proposition 5:** Millennials expect requirements to be clearly formulated.

### 2.3. Millennials and relationships

Parents of Generation Y took on an active role in the lives of their children and continuously push them towards personal and material success (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010). As a result of the strong parental socialization and institutional support, Millennials emphasize and expect personal success, and feel pressured to achieve it (Hershatter & Epstein, 2010; Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010). From a very young age, Millennials are expected to seize every opportunity given to them, receiving grades, trophies and credentials, and pursuing leadership positions for which they have been prepared for by the most prestigious universities (Hershatter & Epstein, 2010). It is, therefore, unsurprising that members of this very progressive group of Millennials are represented among the young professionals hired by thriving business organizations (Moritz, 2018; Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010). Although this elite is not entirely representative of their generation, they have a significant influence on organizations and their expectations in terms of recruitment, demands, commitment and motivation. Therefore, this Generation Y character trait is important to consider for this study.

**Proposition 6:** Millennials are focused on increasing efficiency to stand out in a highly competitive society.

The network of relationships is their generation's presumed key to improve their personal competitive profile and efficiency to reach their goals. Following this, Millennials strive to build close relationships with their superiors, who, according to popular literature, are regarded as parents in the workplace (Alsop, 2008). Generation Ys have been led and cared for by authority figures, such as their parents and teachers, and emphasis has been placed on imparting a high level of self-esteem and entitlement to Millennials (Hershatter & Epstein, 2010). As such, Generation Y's are drawn to authority figures and seek their support for their own personal and professional development (Twenge et al., 2010). Moreover, this generational cohort expects a continuous exchange of information, regular performance evaluations, a supportive environment, and organizational transparency (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010). Additionally, Millennials expect to have easy access to top management and they have no problem skipping hierarchies if it serves their goals (Hershatter & Epstein, 2010). They look up to leaders who level out the playing field and do not reinforce hierarchies (Weldy, 2020).

**Proposition 7:** Millennials consider close ties to authority figures and flat hierarchies to be crucial for their professional development and satisfaction.

The value of these relationships only increases over time and their establishment is, therefore, time-consuming (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Millennials, who are known to seek quick external rewards through, for instance, job changes, may find building a quality relationship with their manager not worthwhile (Anderson et al., 2017; D'Amato

& Herzfeldt, 2008; McGinnis Johnson & Ng, 2016). Therefore, and considering that Millennial employees are described as rather self-involved and even selfish, they are argued to believe that they can achieve goals more easily if they work on them independently, which often results in their tendency to disregard the potential of team efforts (Anderson et al., 2017), unless it eases their decision-making process (Alsop, 2008). Similarly, Harris-Boundy and Flatt (2010) concluded from their study on Millennials working in teams, that this generational cohort demonstrate higher levels of individualism than collectivism when striving for success.

**Proposition 8:** Millennials prefer to reach goals independently.

#### 2.4. Millennials and motivation

While older generations value job security, rank and prestige, the Millennial generation also strives for accomplishing purposeful work and self-realization (Moon, 2014). Millennials value companies that positively impact society and reflect their own core values, often related to innovative work or sustainability (Hershatte & Epstein, 2010). For instance, according to an empirical study by Cone Inc. (2006), more than 50% of Millennials refuse to work for companies that lack social and environmental responsibility. Millennials are highly motivated to improve issues they care about and are willing to invest their time when day-to-day tasks are connected to bigger issues impacting their lives (Weldy, 2020). From a company internal perspective, they value a working culture that fosters equitable treatment at the workplace, as they are argued to have a strong sense of fairness (Valenti, 2019).

**Proposition 9:** Millennials place great value on purposeful work that reflects their values.

The Millennial generation has grown up with strong, highly innovative brands and have been accustomed, from an early age, to companies continuously releasing new products and regular updates (Klein & Sharma, 2018). To remain competitive in today's market, companies must be visionary in their approach, relentlessly forward-thinking and, above all, they need to be innovative (Moon, 2014). Millennials are very attracted to innovative products (Klein & Sharma, 2018) and are argued to see innovation work as purposeful and fun (Chou, 212). This generational cohort does not only focus on driving innovation processes efficiently but is also most capable to create and innovate (Lancaster and Stillman, 2010; Hou, 2017). Millennials are explorers with an entrepreneurial mindset, continuously pushing frontiers with a relentless transformational drive (Tapscott, 2008). To Generation Ys innovation is part of everyday life (Hershatte & Epstein, 2010).

**Proposition 10:** Millennials are innovation driven.

Millennials place high demands on employers, increasingly wishing to only fulfill tasks of their choice and only under the conditions that they prefer, which may be a result of institutions being very considerate of their needs from an early age (Hershatte & Epstein, 2010). For instance, flexible working hours are highly important for Generation Y's, while they expect their work to be evaluated according to the fulfilment of set goals and not based on their daily working hours (Putriastuti & Stasi, 2019). Bund et al. (2015) remark that as long as Millennials' demands are met, they will be

loyal, but if the employer fails to meet their requirements, they have no problem leaving a company. While some scholars found that organizations attempt to fully assimilate Millennials into the workforce (Kilbert et al., 2014), others showed the enormous potential that Millennials can unfold when allowing them to operate freely (Stewart et al., 2017).

**Proposition 11:** Millennials expect a lot of freedom to operate in their way of choosing.

Millennial employees are argued to display lower levels of loyalty than previous generations (Mayangdarastri & Khusna, 2020). Therefore, institutional loyalty has become very important for companies in retaining and dealing with this generational cohort. From an organization's perspective, Generation Y loyalty finds expression in eager, passionate, and intelligent work (Hershatter & Epstein, 2010). Whereas, from Millennial employees' perspective, loyalty involves companies ensuring that there are sufficient opportunities for self-realization in their daily work. Millennials are said to be highly energetic, skillful, and always looking for new challenges (Valenti, 2019). Hence, they become bored easily with routine tasks (Kilber et al., 2014). Therefore, Millennials value and are more likely to stay loyal to an employer if they are continuously offered professional development, advanced training, as well as coaching and mentoring (Baker Rosa & Hastings, 2018; Mayangdarastri & Khusna, 2020).

**Proposition 12:** Millennials value self-realization and expect advanced training offered by employers.

In contrast to Generation Y's desire for self-realization and to do purposeful work, it is argued that they are increasingly motivated by extrinsic factors (e.g. monetary

rewards) (Chen & Choi, 2008; Twenge et al., 2010). This discrepancy and Millennials' struggle between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation is a key issue in the literature on Generation Y. From early childhood on, Millennials learned that professional development and surpassing monetary gains are a key goal in life. Moreover, they personally experience these goals to be realistic due to the high level of education that many of them have enjoyed and based on the efficient working relationships that they established in the course of their professional development (Hansen & Leuty, 2012; Twenge & Kasser, 2013).

**Proposition 13:** Millennials are motivated by extrinsic factors.

The above outlined propositions and the summary in Table 1 represent a comprehensive overview of common stereotypes of this generational cohort in the literature.

**Table 1.** Summary of Millennials' stereotypical character traits

<b>P1</b>	Millennials prefer technology-based communication channels.
<b>P2</b>	Millennials are willing to voice their opinions, give and receive direct feedback.
<b>P3</b>	Millennials prefer to operate following neural patterns, rather than operating in a sequential way.
<b>P4</b>	Millennials are risk-averse in their decision-making.
<b>P5</b>	Millennials expect requirements to be clearly formulated.
<b>P6</b>	Millennials are focused on increasing efficiency to stand out in a highly competitive society.
<b>P7</b>	Millennials consider close ties to authority figures and flat hierarchies to be crucial for their professional development and satisfaction.
<b>P8</b>	Millennials prefer to reach goals independently.

<b>P9</b>	Millennials place great value on purposeful work that reflects their values.
<b>P10</b>	Millennials are innovation driven.
<b>P11</b>	Millennials expect a lot of freedom to operate in their way of choosing.
<b>P12</b>	Millennials value self-realization and expect advanced training offered by employers.
<b>P13</b>	Millennials are motivated by extrinsic factors.

### 3. Method, Data, and Analysis

A qualitative research approach was chosen for this study, which is especially useful if the purpose is not to explain by means of numbers, but explore through dialogue and observation (Flick, 2016; Maruster & Gijzenberg, 2013). Of course, Millennials and their character traits have been discussed at length in the literature. Nevertheless, the research objective of this study, Millennials' self-perception, and behavior when they become leaders themselves, has not been sufficiently investigated. As such, this study investigates a well-researched phenomenon that, however, may need to be rediscovered in a new context. The preexisting of an extensive body of knowledge and the transformation of this knowledge into a new context calls for a mix of an inductive and deductive research design.

Consequently, existing literature played a key role prior to the field study, as the aggregation of literature supplied the necessary background to confirm the research objective/gap, supported the relevance of the derived propositions and coding categories, and assured a better comprehension of the collected data.

This deductive process of qualitative research was argued for by Eisenhardt (1989) who outlined the benefits of an a priori specification of constructs (deductive) to

shape the research design while allowing the discovery of the unexpected (inductive). As such, introducing even a high degree of deduction to data generation in qualitative research is not counterintuitive to discovery per se, although it may arguably reduce the extent to which exploration is possible (Ali & Birley, 1999). Nevertheless, as a first exploratory contribution, a balanced approach including inductive and deductive elements was chosen.

#### 3.1. Data acquisition

Qualitative social research is characterized by a relatively small sample and a dialogue-approach, as its aim is explorative rather than explanatory (Baur & Blasius, 2019). In this study, interviews with Millennials in leadership positions at 15 organizations in Germany were conducted and analyzed based on the theoretically derived propositions 1-13. Germany represented a relevant research context for this study. Although economic stagnation during the past decade impacted Millennials in many European countries, the negative effects on spending power and career opportunities were comparatively minimal on Millennials in Germany (Klein & Sharma, 2018).

For this study, Millennial leaders were defined as experts on the phenomenon of interest: the display of generational stereotypes among Millennial leaders. Gläser and Laudel (2010) define an expert as a source of special, factual, and experience-based knowledge about the social issues being researched. In this respect, in-depth expert interviews were chosen as a useful way to acquire data on special knowledge domains and subjective interpretations (Baur & Blasius, 2019).

In the process of developing an appropriate sample for interview-based qualitative research, the approach discussed by Robinson (2013) was used, which includes four aspects: defining the sample universe, deciding on a sample size, selecting a sampling strategy and sourcing cases.

The sample universe or boundary of the sample plays a significant theoretical role when analyzing and interpreting the data by determining what the sample is a sample of and, therefore, specifying who or what the study is about (Robinson, 2013). To define and to draw boundaries around the sample universe inclusion and exclusion criteria for the interviewees' attributes were specified. Individuals had to belong to the appropriate age-group as members of Generation Y, they had to be in a leadership position and have at least six months of leadership experience.

Regarding the sample size, as the aim of this study was to exploratory rather than to supply generalizable explanations, the comparatively small sample size is argued to be sufficient to gather first empirical insights

(Robinson, 2013). To achieve a broad perspective of Millennial leaders, the sample included leaders from various business sectors. These sectors were chosen based on their relevance for the German GDP in 2015. Regarding the sample strategy, purposive sampling was used. This approach is a non-random way of guaranteeing that specific categories of cases within a sample universe are represented in the final sample of the study (Robinson, 2013). The selection was based on existing theory and the idea that certain people may have a unique and relevant perspective on the research phenomenon, and that their presence should, therefore, be guaranteed in the sample (ibid.).

In the process of sourcing relevant cases, the participants for this study's interviews were recruited by first contacting relevant companies without any prior knowledge. This resulted in a sample of 15 experts. All interviews were conducted face-to-face between April and August 2015 (see Table 2).

**Table 2.** Overview of conducted interviews with Millennials in leadership positions

	<b>Age / gender (M/F)</b>	<b>Industry</b>	<b>Leadership role in months / subordinates</b>	<b>Interview length in minutes</b>
<b>Expert 1</b>	26/M	Construction	12/1	60
<b>Expert 2</b>	30/F	Chemicals	24/4	60
<b>Expert 3</b>	31/F	Pharmaceuticals	48/5	60
<b>Expert 4</b>	29/M	Metal	7/79	75
<b>Expert 5</b>	28/M	Mechanical engineering	1/100	60
<b>Expert 6</b>	24/M	Vehicle construction	24/4	30
<b>Expert 7</b>	29/M	Energy	30/3	60
<b>Expert 8</b>	24/M	Trade	10/100	60
<b>Expert 9</b>	29/F	Logistics	9/7	45
<b>Expert 10</b>	33/M	Information & communications	8/6	60
<b>Expert 11</b>	30/M	Finance & insurance	90/60	45
<b>Expert 12</b>	28/F	Real estate & housing	36/4	60
<b>Expert 13</b>	30/M	Corporate services	12/11	60
<b>Expert 14</b>	28/F	Defense & social security	12/9	40
<b>Expert 15</b>	29/F	Health & social services	7/21	60

Prior to the interviews an interview guide based on the research objective, previously reviewed literature and the derived propositions was developed to curate the interviews (see Table 3).

In the first step, questions alongside the propositions mentioned earlier were collected. The questions were carefully formulated to not lead answers. In a second step, the questions were clustered into the four master categories: communication, decision making, relationship and motivation. For inductive reasons, further questions were asked in case that new aspects emerged spontaneously during the conversations (semi-structured interviews).

**Table 3.** Interview guide

<p><b>Communication</b> Which communication channels do you use daily? Do you alternate the channel based on the topic? What kind of feedback culture do you cultivate in your team? How important is an open communication within and between hierarchical levels?</p>
<p><b>Decision-making</b> How do you make decisions (process)? Alone or involving others? Do you follow a set pattern or decide ad hoc? What do you base your decisions on (extensiveness of information)?</p>
<p><b>Relationships</b> How important is personal success to you? How important are relationships to reach it within and between hierarchical levels? How do you prefer to reach your goals (alone or in a team)?</p>
<p><b>Motivation</b> What is your motivation to work in this organization and leadership role (intrinsic / extrinsic)? How important is it for you (a) to be able to innovate and (b) that the firm is considerate of your needs (freedom to operate, personal development etc.)?</p>

At the beginning of each interview, participants were informed that their personal perceptions and attitudes towards work and leadership would be investigated, but no reference to possible differences with other colleagues would be made. This ensured that participants would respond as openly and unbiased as possible and encouraged spontaneous answers.

Whenever the time available to the respondents allowed, the conversation lasted until a saturation point regarding the topics of discussion had been reached, which also served to validate the collected data. All interviews were transcribed in their original language (German) for the analysis process.

### 3.2. Data analysis

To analyze the derived data a qualitative content analysis was conducted. The goal of content analysis is the systematic processing records of communication, which is converted into text elements in the course of the analysis, through a reduction process of paraphrasing, generalizing, and summarizing (Flick, 2016; Mayring, 2015).

Using a category system, a content analysis primarily aims at the reduction and interpretation of text (Flick, 2016). The transcripts of the expert interviews were examined by one team member according to the theoretically derived propositions 1-13, which also represented the categories for analysis. In the process of coding, text passages were assigned to a certain category when they supported the confirmation or rejection of a proposition (deductive). Moreover, the analysis process allowed for new insights to emerge and text being coded and organized according to unexpectedly revealing categories (inductive), especially

when the data did not seem to support the propositions.

In this process, the categories were continuously re-examined in multiple steps of data triangulation, moving back and forth between theory and empirics. This iterative process assured the study's sufficient theoretical foundation and supported the validity of the obtained data in regards to its accordance with the research objective, while maintaining the strength of qualitative research that lies within discovering the previously unknown (Maruster & Gijzenberg, 2013; Mayring, 2015).

#### 4. Result and Discussion

The analysis resulted in a differentiated picture of Generation Y leaders. It was shown that despite ascending hierarchy levels, Millennial leaders show certain generation-typical character traits as discussed in the literature and summarized within proposition 1-13. However, this study has also derived new insights, deviating from the literature and formulated within the following propositions A-E.

The most profound discrepancy between the empirics and theory was found within proposition 1. Opposed to the common representation in the literature (e.g. Venter, 2017; Hershatter & Epstein, 2010; Stewart et al., 2017), Millennial leaders in this study resided in traditional ways of communicating (especially face-to-face), due to their perceived importance of maintaining a personal connection to subordinates in fulfilling their leadership role (P1). This resulted in a modified proposition.

**Proposition A:** Millennials in leadership positions value personal and face-to-face communication.

The data indicates that Millennials in leadership positions prefer to consult with others before deciding (e.g. employees, superiors, or a private contact) (P4). In line with the literature (Hershatter & Epstein, 2010; Graen & Schiemann, 2013; Alsop, 2008), they take a cautious approach on a secure base, rather than taking risks by making spontaneous or trial-and-error decisions. According to the participants, this is based on the responsibility that comes with their role as leaders, with a focus on strategic decision-making, a long-term perspective, and little room for errors.

Nevertheless, the data gives room for interpretation, whether Millennial leaders' hesitation stems from their dependence on strictly formulated rules, guidelines, and instructions (P5) or if it is based on the increased responsibility, which also makes it more important to gather differentiated input from multiple sources. However, in contradiction to the literature, the data indicates that Millennial leaders are more likely to follow a structured, sequential path in the decision-making and information gathering process (P3). Hence, a new proposition emerged from the analysis.

**Proposition B:** With increasing responsibility Millennial leaders prefer to make decisions in a structured way and based on comprehensive information.

Contradicting the reviewed literature (e.g. Anderson et al., 2017; Harris-Boundy and Flatt, 2010), most Millennial leaders in this study were agreed that goals can be reached more efficiently through collaboration within teams, as multiple opinions, experience, and knowledge were perceived to lead to more successful results and improve efficiency, especially when it

concerns innovations (P8). However, the data also reveals an exception from this preference. In case that teamwork was not delivering the wanted results, Millennial leaders have no problem to take matters into their own hands and attempt to reach goals independently to attain a competitive advantage over others.

**Proposition C:** Millennial leaders prefer to reach goals in collaboration with others unless teamwork shows to be inefficient.

As the literature suggests (Hershatler & Epstein, 2010; Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010), efficiency was an important topic for the interviewed Millennial leaders (P6), which they described as essential for their own and their teams' competitive profile. This became especially apparent in relation to efficiency-oriented communication, which they proclaimed to be key to their leadership style. The data shows that being approachable by subordinates, encouraging an open exchange and 'living' a flat hierarchy culture is a top leadership priority for Millennial leaders, even when it may not be an explicit part of their organization's culture (P7). Participants also stated that they see themselves as mentors and coaches to guide their subordinates and set an example. In this process, the interviewed experts were willing to give honest and direct feedback to their employees. Moreover, they reported to regularly give open feedback not only to subordinates, but also to superiors (P2). Consequently, and in line with the literature (Alsop, 2008; Moskaliuk, 2016; Twenge et al., 2010; Weldy, 2020), it was shown that Millennial leaders value flat hierarchies as structures in which open exchange is nurtured and close links between hierarchical levels assured (P2/P7).

Extrinsic factors were mentioned by the experts in this study to have a motivational impact, such as the increased power and authority through their leadership position, monetary rewards, praise, and appreciation (P13). Yet, key to Millennial leaders' motivation were intrinsic aspects, such as their drive for self-realization within their leadership role, their wish for professional development, and their desire to contribute to something of value and with a larger impact (P12). As such, the dominance of extrinsic factors on motivation could not be confirmed (e.g. Hansen & Leuty, 2012; Twenge & Kasser, 2013) leading to an altered proposition.

**Proposition D:** Millennial leaders show a tendency to be more intrinsically than extrinsically motivated.

Study participants placed high importance on the issue of an organization's innovation potential for identifying with the company, as to them and confirming the literature (Chou, 2012; Lancaster and Stillman, 2010; Hou, 2017; Tapscott, 2008), contributing to innovation represented purposeful work (P10/P9). Respondents outlined organizational structures as key facilitators or hindrance to innovative processes and as such, acknowledged their own role as leaders within changing these processes.

Overall, participants expressed a sense of confinement within the company structures, which would often not allow them to operate in their desired way (e.g. use of digital communication tools, innovative drive). Although Millennial leaders value aspects of these structures (e.g. direct, face-to-face communication, gathering advice from different sources) when they support

them in fulfilling their role, they also try to change these structures, within the context of their position, to fulfil their own perception of what defines a good leader (e.g. open feedback culture and flat hierarchies).

Contradicting the literature (Hershatter & Epstein, 2010; Bund et al., 2015), the data suggests that Millennial leaders are willing to put their personal preferences of operating aside and adapt to organizational structures (P11). Yet, they offer this freedom of carrying out tasks according to individual preferences to their subordinates. This shows that Millennial leaders are willing to make a trade-off between their own, their subordinates' preferences, and the structural circumstances that they are confronted with, while pushing the boundaries of what is possible.

**Proposition E:** Millennial leaders are willing to adapt their way of operating but use their position to drive strategic, operative, and structural change to accommodate their preferences.

## 5. Conclusion and Suggestion

This study is one of the first to empirically investigate Generation Y in a leadership context. A key issue that this study's insights puts focus on is the integration of Millennial leaders within corporate structures and processes, which can collide with the values and preferences of Generation Y, as they were designed by members of earlier generations (Generation X, Baby Boomers) who had different preferences and values (Pînzaru et al., 2016).

The literature agrees that organizations need to win and keep Millennial leaders to guide their business into the future, create value, and competitive

advantage (Keszei, 2018). However, this study indicates that Millennial leaders can feel confined in fulfilling their role as desired (e.g. driving innovation). Ironically, this concerns Millennial characteristics that are most valuable to organizations (Stewart et al., 2017). Consequently, on a broader perspective this study indicates that there is a disadvantage in forcing Millennials' assimilation into an organization and its more traditional structures and processes, as it can decrease this Generations' value creating potential.

For organizations to benefit from this highly motivated and capable generation, organizations are well-advised to account for this Millennials' needs, allow them to prosper, innovate, contribute to and change organizational developments, as scholars have previously argued (e.g. Stewart et al., 2017). Instead of attempting their complete assimilation into predefined structures and standards, the results of this study support that organizations can greatly benefit from giving them the freedom to design these according to their needs.

This organizational struggle of finding the right balance between expecting Millennials to adapt and adapting the organization to accommodating their needs and preferences has long been discussed in the literature (Hershatter & Epstein, 2010; Kilbert et al., 2014; Stewart et al., 2017; Weldy, 2020).

Now that Millennials have climbed up the hierarchy ladder, they have gained more power and control over what influences their work (working culture, structures, routines etc.) and, as is outlined in this study, they are pushing change through their behavior as leaders.

This study also shows how stereotypical characteristics may change due to an individual's environment and different responsibilities that come with a leadership role. This enriches the literature with arguments for more qualitative research on generational members within their environment and the interdependencies that may be evident there.

This is an explorative, qualitative study and the small data set is a clear limitation. More research is needed to scrutinize its conclusions.

This study suggests that relevant future research should investigate how Millennials integrate into an organization's context, whether and how it changes their perceptions and behavior over time. Researchers may also engage more deeply with the change processes that are initiated by Millennial leaders and the resistance they may experience, the struggle that it creates, and how it is resolved.

These novel research endeavors could not only enrich our understanding of Millennial leadership, but also contribute to the literature on inter-generational work, change management, and innovation processes.

## Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the study participants for their time and insight.

## References

- Ali, H., & Birley, S. (1999). Integrating deductive and inductive approaches in a study of new ventures and customer perceived risk. *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, 2(2), 103-110.
- Alsop, R. (2008). *Trophy kids grow up: How the Millennial generation is shaking up the workplace* (1<sup>st</sup> ed.). San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons.
- Anderson, H.J., Baur, J.E., Griffith, J.A., & Buckley, M.R. (2017). What works for you may not work for (Gen)Me: Limitations of present leadership theories in the new generation. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 28(1), 245-260. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2016.08.001>
- Andert, D. (2011). Alternating leadership as a proactive organizational intervention: Addressing the need of the Baby Boomers, Generation Xers and Millennials. *Journal of Leadership, Accountability, and Ethics*, 8(4), 67-83.
- Baur, N., & Blasius, J. (2019). *Handbuch Methoden der empirischen Sozialforschung* (2nd ed.). [Methods for empirical social science research]. Wiesbaden, Germany: Springer VS.
- Bund, K., Heuser, U. J., & Kunze, A. (2015). *Generation Y: Wollen die auch arbeiten?* [Generation Y: Do they want to work?] Retrieved from <https://www.zeit.de/2013/11/Generation-Y-Arbeitswelt>
- Chen, P., & Choi, Y. (2008). Generational differences in work values: A study of hospitality management. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 20(6), 595-615. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09596110810892182>

- Chou, S. Y. (2012). Millennials in the workplace: A conceptual analysis of millennials' leadership and followership styles. *International Journal of Human Resource Studies*, 2(2), 71-83.
- Cone Inc. (2006). *2006 Millennial cause study*. Retrieved from <https://www.conecomm.com/research-blog/2006-millennial-cause-study>
- Costanza, D. P., & Finkelstein, L. M. (2015). Generationally based differences in the workplace: Is there a *there* there? *Industrial and Organizational Psychology: Perspectives on Science and Practice*, 8(4), 308-323.  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2015.15>
- D'Amato, A., & Herzfeldt, R. (2008). Learning orientation, organizational commitment and talent retention across generations: A study of European managers. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 23(8), 929-953.  
<https://doi.org/10.1108/02683940810904402>
- Eisenhardt, K. M. (1989). Building theories from case study research. *Academy of Management Review*, 14(4), 532-550.
- Flick, U. (2016). *Qualitative Sozialforschung: Eine Einführung* (7th ed.). [Qualitative social science research: An introduction]. Reinbek, Germany: Rowohlt Taschenbuch.
- Gallicano, T. D., Curtin, P., & Matthews, K. (2012). I love what I do, but ... A relationship management survey of Millennial generation public relations agency employees, *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 24(3), 222-242.
- Gläser, J., & Laudel, G. (2010). *Experteninterviews und qualitative Inhaltsanalyse: Als Instrumente rekonstruierender Untersuchungen* (4th ed.). [Expert interviews and qualitative content analysis: As an instrument of reconstructing analysis]. Wiesbaden, Germany: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften
- Graen, G. B., & Schiemann, W.A. (2013). Leadership-motivated excellence theory: An extension of LMX. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 28(5), 452-469.  
<https://doi.org/10.1108/JMP-11-2012-0351>
- Graen, G. B., & Uhl-Bien, M. (1995). Relationship-based approach to leadership: Development of leader-member exchange (LMX) theory of leadership over 25 years: Applying a multi-level multi-domain perspective. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 6(2), 219-247.  
[https://doi.org/10.1016/1048-9843\(95\)90036-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/1048-9843(95)90036-5)
- Gursoy, D., Maier, T. A., & Chi, C.G. (2008). Generational differences: An examination of work values and generational gaps in the hospitality workforce. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 27(3), 448-458.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2007.11.002>
- Hansen, J., & Leuty, M.E. (2012). Work values across generations. *Journal of Career Assessment*, 20(1), 34-52.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1069072711417163>
- Harris-Boundy, J., & Flatt, S. J. (2010). Cooperative performance of Millennials in teams. *Review of Business Research*, 10(4), 30-46.
- Hershatler, A., & Epstein, M. (2010). Millennials and the world of work: An organization and management perspective. *Journal of Business and Psychology*, 25(2), 211-223.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10869-010-9160-y>
- Hou, X. (2017). Multilevel influence of destructive leadership on millennial generation employees' innovation behavior. *Social Behavior and Personality: an international journal*, 45(7), 1113-1126.  
<https://doi.org/10.2224/sbp.6117>

- Jones, S., & Fox, S. (2009). *Generations Online in 2009*. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2009/01/28/generations-online-in-2009/>
- Kelan, E. K. (2014). Organizing generations - What can sociology offer to the understanding of generations at work. *Sociology Compass*, 8(1), 20-30. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12117>
- Keszei, D., Murphy, K., & Loeur, N. (2018). An Evaluation of American Millennials Leading Global Teams: A Multidimensional Framework for Planning and Optimizing Success. *Journal of Management Policy and Practice*, 19(1), 10-16. <https://doi.org/10.33423/jmpp.v19i1.1264>
- Kilber, J., Barclay, A., & Ohmer, D. (2014). Seven steps for managing Generation Y. *Journal of Management Policy and Practice*, 15(4), 80-91.
- Kim, S. (2018). Managing millennials' personal use of technology at work. *Business Horizons*, 61(2), 261-270. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2017.11.007>
- Klein, A., & Sharma, V. M. (2018). German Millennials' decision-making styles and their intention to participate in online group buying. *Journal of Internet Commerce*, 17(4), 383-417. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15332861.2018.1463804>
- Lyons, S., Urick, M., Kuron, L., & Schweitzer, L. (2015). Generational differences in the workplace: There is complexity beyond the stereotypes. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, 8(3), 346-356. <https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2015.48>
- Maruster, L., & Gijsenberg, M. (2013). *Qualitative Research Methods*. New York: Sage Publications.
- Mayangdarastri, S. & Khusna, K. (2020). Retaining millennials engagement and wellbeing through career path and development. *Journal of Leadership in Organizations*, 2(1), 42-48.
- Mayring, P. (2015). *Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse: Grundlagen und Techniken* (12th ed.). [Qualitative content analysis: foundations and techniques]. Weinheim, Germany: Beltz.
- McGinnis Johnson, J., & Ng, E.S. (2016). Money talks or millennials walk: The effect of compensation on nonprofit millennial workers sector-switching intentions. *Review of Public Personnel Administration*, 36(3), 283-305. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0734371X15587980>
- Moon, T. M. (2014). Mentoring the next generation for innovation in today's organization. *Journal of Strategic Leadership*, 5(1), 23-35.
- Moritz C. (2018). Ist jeder seines Glückes Schmied? Über den Mythos der modernen Leistungsgesellschaft. [Does man forge his own destiny? The myths of our modern meritocracy]. *Leviathan*, 46(1), 109-134. <https://doi.org/10.5771/0340-0425-2018-1-109>
- Moskaliuk, J. (2016). *Generation Y als Herausforderung für Führungskräfte: Psychologisches Praxiswissen für wertorientierte Führung*. [Generation Y as a challenge for leaders: a psychological knowledge for the practice of value-oriented leadership]. Wiesbaden, Germany: Springer
- Myers, K.K., & Sadaghiani, K. (2010). Millennials in the workplace: A Communication perspective on millennials' organizational relationships and performance. *Journal of Business and Psychology*, 25(2), 225-238. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10869-010-9172-7>

- Özcelik, G. (2015). Engagement and retention of the millennial generation in the workplace through internal branding. *International Journal of Business and Management*, 10(3), 99-107. <https://doi.org/10.5539/ijbm.v10n3p99>
- Pînzaru, F., Vătămănescu, E.-M., Mitan, A., Săvulescu, R., Vițelar, A., Noaghea, C., & Bălan, M. (2016). Millennials at work: Investigating the specificity of Generation Y versus other generations. *Management Dynamics in the Knowledge Economy*, 4(2), 173-192.
- Porter, T. H., Gerhardt, M. W., Fields, D. & Bugenhagen, M. (2019). An exploratory study of gender and motivation to lead in millennials. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 159(2), 138-152. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224545.2019.1570902>
- Putriastuti, B. C. K., & Stasi, A. (2019). How to lead the millennials: A review of 5 major leadership theory groups. *Journal of Leadership in Organizations*, 1(2), 12-13.
- Reisenwitz, T. H., & Iyer, R. (2009). Differences in Generation X and Generation Y: Implications for the organization and marketers. *Marketing Management Journal*, 19(2), 91-103.
- Robinson, O.C. (2013). Sampling in interview-based qualitative research: A theoretical and practical guide. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 11(1), 25-41. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2013.801543>
- Baker Rosa, N. M., & Hastings, S. O. (2018). Managing Millennials: looking beyond generational stereotypes. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 31(4), 920-930. [https://doi-org.ludwig.lub.lu.se/10.1108/JOCM-10-2015-0193](https://doi.org.ludwig.lub.lu.se/10.1108/JOCM-10-2015-0193)
- Rudolph, C. W., Rauvola, R. S. & Zacher, H. (2018). Leadership and generations at work: A critical review. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 29(1), 44-57. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2017.09.004>
- Sausser, W.I., & Sims, R.R. (2012). *Managing human resources for the Millennial generation*. Charlotte, North Carolina: IAP.
- Stewart, J. S., Oliver, E. G., Cravens, K. S. & Oishi, S. (2017). Managing millennials: Embracing generational differences. *Business Horizons*, 60(1), 45-54.
- Tapscott, D. (2008). *Grown up digital: How the net generation is changing your world*. New York: McGraw Hill Professional.
- Twenge, J. M., Campbell, S. M., Hoffman, B. J., & Lance, C. E. (2010). Generational differences in work values: Leisure and extrinsic values increasing, social and intrinsic values decreasing. *Journal of Management*, 36(5), 1117-1142. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206309352246>
- Twenge, J.M., & Kasser, T. (2013). Generational changes in materialism and work Centrality, 1976-2007: Associations with temporal changes in societal insecurity and materialistic role modeling. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 39(7), 883-897. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167213484586>
- Valenti, A. (2019). Leadership Preferences of the Millennial Generation. *Journal of Business Diversity*, 19(1), 75-84. <https://doi.org/10.33423/jbd.v19i1.1357>
- Venter, E. (2017). Bridging the communication gap between Generation Y and the Baby Boomer generation. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, 22(4), 497-507. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2016.1267022>

Weldy, L. (2020). How millennials are redefining leadership: Millennials want to become strong, people-focused leaders. *Leadership Excellence*. 37(2), 36-38.

Würzburger, T. (2016). *Key Skills für die Generation Y: Die wichtigsten Tipps für eine erfüllte Karriere*. [Key skills for Generation Y: essential tips for a great career]. Wiesbaden: Springer.