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Millennials and leadership: a systematic literature review

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In this article, we report on the findings of a systematic review of the literature on leadership and the Millennial generation (alternatively known as Generation Y). The purpose of this systematic review was to further our understanding of this cohort by exploring how Millennials are defined and understood within the leadership literature. We reviewed a ‘bounded set’ of journal articles ($n = 162$) published between 2000 and 2018. Data analysis focused on analysing identified modal trends as well as examining patterns of knowledge production. This article begins by situating our review in previous generational and leadership research. It then moves on to outline the method of review adopted, and our key findings. We reflect on the implications of these key findings for the recruitment, retention and professional development of Millennial leaders (both current and future). The paper concludes by identifying a series of issues requiring further research, discussion and debate.

Keywords: Millennials; Generation Y; leadership; systematic review

Introduction

There is a growing interest in understanding generational differences in diverse settings, particularly in the workplace (Howe & Strauss, 2007; Jorgensen, 2003; Thompson, 2017; Zemke et al., 2000; Edge, 2014; Murphy, 2011). While traditionally this interest has focused on Baby Boomers (those born between 1946 and 1964) and Generation X (those born between 1965 and 1978), increasing attention has been paid to Millennials (those born approximately between 1979 and 1999) in recent years. As of 2019, 56 million workers in the United States were Millennials making them the largest generational workforce (Fry, 2018). Millennials accounted for 3 million more workers than those from Generation X. Similar patterns have started to appear internationally (Nye, 2017).

Research on Millennials has become widely accepted in diverse occupational sectors, including healthcare (Koppel et al., 2017), business (Hershatter & Epstein, 2010), marketing (Young & Hinesly, 2012), and education (Galdames, 2019). Although the concept of Millennials in the workplace has become a ‘trendy’ topic in academic research and the popular media, there is a distinct lack of empirical evidence related to Millennials and the characteristics they bring to their work. For instance, Millennials in the workforce are often described using a series of negative adjectives. They are characterised as needy and high-maintenance (Hershatter & Epstein, 2010), as well as fragile and intolerant (Bodenhausen & Curtis, 2016). Furthermore, Millennials are often described as ‘job-hoppers’ who exhibit low organisational commitment and are continuously in search of a ‘better job’ (R. Edge et al., 2011). Yet such claims are frequently drawn from anecdotal data

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that lacks scientific merit or rigour (Deal et al., 2010; Murray et al., 2011). The current empirical body of research on Millennials is in short supply.

Furthermore, as Deal et al. (2010) observe, the empirical research that does exist ‘is often contradictory and sometimes confusing’ (191). Kowske et al. (2010) found that many of the characteristics attributed to Millennials in academic publications are based on single case observations and opinions which encourage negative perceptions and stereotypical assumptions. The authors remark ‘the popular press continues to bemoan the great generational divide at work, especially concerning Millennials. For example, the workplace has been described as a “psychological battlefield”, wherein buttoned-down, self-centred Millennials clash with their stodgy, rule-abiding Baby Boomer bosses’ (265). Yet the few research studies that have been conducted to date suggest that Millennial workers are more similar to older generations than popular opinion suggests (Lyons et al., 2015). This research indicates limited generational differences.

While there is no single definition of leadership (Gumus et al., 2018), traditional approaches recognise leadership as ‘a process of social influence’ (Kruse, 2013, p. 2) between leaders and followers. Previous academic discussions have frequently focused on Millennials as followers, and have mostly explored strategies to develop, recruit and retain young professionals (Martin & Warshawsky, 2017; Rodriguez & Rodriguez, 2015). Despite the oldest Millennials turning 40 years old in 2020, little is known about Millennials as leaders. The present review was undertaken with the aim of furthering our understanding of the Millennial cohort. It was particularly interested in the intersection between Millennials and leadership.

Given the lack of clarity surrounding Millennial leaders, we conducted a systematic review to identify the evolution of research trends. Hallinger (2013) remarks that ‘well-crafted reviews identify blind spots, blank spots and intellectual “dry wells” in the landscape of theory and methodologies for subsequent research’ (p. 127). We are in agreement and hope that our work may help to move the conversation about Millennials and leadership forward. The review reported on in this paper addressed the following exploratory research questions:

- (1) What is the nature of the journal literature focused on Millennials and leadership?
- (2) How are Millennial leaders defined and understood within the leadership literature?

We used a ‘topographic approach’ to analyse the Millennial and leadership literature. Topographic strategies ‘focus on observable features of studies such as volume, types of sources, conceptual models, research methods, and topics’ (Castillo & Hallinger, 2017, p. 209). By analysing a significant amount of studies, we aimed to acquire a precise picture of the research concerned with Millennials and leadership. This is the first project that systematically reviews studies exploring the intersection between Millennials and leadership. Although we fully acknowledge the importance of conducting a future review focused exclusively on articles published in prominent journals, the purpose of this particular study was to conduct a comprehensive review of the ways in which the constructs of Millennial and leadership intersect. It was anticipated that such a review would reveal the extent to which Millennials and leadership are studied, highlight potential changes in research patterns over time, and pinpoint the direction of future research.

What is a Millennial?

Sometimes referred to as ‘Generation Y’, ‘Generation Me’ or ‘Generation Net’, Millennials are often (although not exclusively) described as the generational cohort born during the last two decades of the twentieth century and therefore began their adult life in the new millennium (Howe & Strauss, 2000; Edge, 2014). During the last decade, this cohort has captured the attention of researchers and administrators as they have entered the workforce and demanded changes in the ways that employees are managed. In comparison with previous cohorts, Millennials are the topic of a large number of publications seeking to identify their characteristics, attitudes and behaviours (MacKenzie & Scherer, 2019). A central component of the Millennial identity is their connectivity. They were the first generation born under the umbrella of the internet and, as such, have had almost unlimited access to information, digital resources and cutting edge technologies (Sessa et al., 2007). Having a formal digital persona has shaped Millennials’ mindsets, and fuelled a thirst for constant learning from diverse and less traditional sources (MacKenzie & Scherer, 2019).

As discussed above, Millennials in the workplace are typically characterised by a series of attributes which are often negative in nature. While recognised as tech-savvy, multitasking and collaborative, Millennials have been labelled as demanding, fragile and intolerant (Bodenhausen & Curtis, 2016). This has contributed to the idea that working with and leading this generation is a difficult chore. However, other studies have challenged these assumptions, particularly those related to a lack of commitment and work ethic. Research has identified little to no difference when comparing Millennials with previous cohorts (MacKenzie & Scherer, 2019; Real et al., 2010). Yet, research does indicate that Millennial employees demand a different leadership style than previous cohorts. Sessa et al. (2007) found a deep appreciation for honest and individual support among this cohort. They remark, ‘big-picture orientation does not appear in their top rankings; they want focus. Although they value trustworthiness (trusted, dependable, trusting, candid and honest), they do not place it as high as other groups’ (Sessa et al., 2007, p. 60). Similarly, Fore (2013) argues that Millennials follow leaders that can balance high performance while creating positive working environments.

Often characterised as ‘job hoppers’ (Edge et al., 2011), Millennials in the workplace are frequently defined by their need for constant support and validation, their attraction to value-oriented projects, and their desire for work-life balance (Bergman et al., 2011). Nonetheless, researchers have noted that these claims are often exaggerated and unsupported by empirical evidence (Deal et al., 2010; Murray et al., 2011). As mentioned above, the few studies that do exist argue for limited generational differences, and show Millennial workers to be much closer to older generations than popular opinion suggests (Kowske et al., 2010; Lyons et al., 2015; Real et al., 2010).

The imminent retirement of the Baby Boomer generation means that increasing numbers of Millennials will need to step up to leadership positions across many organisations in the near future. There is, therefore, an urgent need to identify and develop this new cohort of leaders. Research suggests that this process may be complicated, however, by issues related to the recruitment, organisational commitment and retention of Millennials (see, for example, Thompson and Gregory, 2012). Despite the importance of leadership succession and development, the concept of the Millennial generation as leaders is notably under-researched. Indeed, previous studies have tended to concentrate on Millennials’ role as employees and followers (Graybill, 2014; Nye, 2017). While a handful of studies have started to note the slow but increasing presence of the Millennial cohort in leadership roles (Al-Asfour & Lettau, 2014; Fore, 2013; Nye, 2017), we argue that more

empirical research is needed. Understanding Millennials as leaders will not only help tailor their professional development opportunities, but also inform the design of strategies and policies focused on increasing recruitment and retention (Fore, 2013).

Methods

Our methodological approach follows the orientations provided by the systematic review research (Gough, 2007). Aligned to the research questions outlined above our aims were twofold: (1) to chart the observable features of the literature, including publication volume, geographic distribution, types of articles, research methods, journal distribution, discipline, and topical foci, and (2) to understand how current research defines the Millennial generation. In light of the relevance of the age of birth for each cohort, we believed it was also important to analyse how different articles presented the generational age boundaries for the Millennial generation.

Scope of the review

As previous researchers have stated, there is no one way to conduct a systematic review but it is central to present how the search was conducted in a detailed and transparent way (Castillo & Hallinger, 2017). Our purpose was to capture how the extended academic community was approaching the concepts of Millennials and leadership. Accordingly, we did not limit our scope to a bundle of previously selected journals, but we opened the search to a set of over 682 academic databases, including ABI Inform, JSTOR, Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, PsycInfo and PubMed.

Criteria for selection

After deciding on our search terms¹ and clarifying our inclusion criteria, a comprehensive search was conducted for the time period 2000–2018 to identify relevant English language publications. The decisions to include papers from 2000 onwards was based on a realisation that this was the year in which the oldest Millennials entered adulthood and, potentially, formal organisational contexts. Our initial discussions focused on whether or not to include articles published in non-peer-reviewed journals. Given the lack of clarity surrounding Millennials and leadership, and the overall aims of the project – to understand how the current body of literature characterises the Millennial generation – the decision was taken to include non-peer-reviewed articles. As we explore below, investigating the proportion of peer-reviewed articles in the corpus led to some interesting insights.

Our search yielded 174 papers. Screening of the documents indicated some duplicates, papers that were not written in English and some that were not relevant. This screening process led to a final corpus of 162 articles. Full texts of eligible publications were retrieved in preparation for data extraction and analysis.

Data extraction and analysis

We read each article with the goal of extracting information relevant to each of our research questions. The following data were collected (Table 1).

Research question 1 necessitated that we employ descriptive statistics to generate a series of graphs aimed at identifying modal trends in patterns of knowledge production. To explore research question 2 we followed a similar strategy to identify how the cohort boundary or birth year of Millennials was detailed in the literature. A basic thematic

Table 1. Data extraction.

Research question	Data collected
What is the nature of the journal literature focused on Millennials and leadership?	Publication volume; geographic distribution of articles; types of articles; methods of data collection; journal distribution; academic discipline; topic of article.
How are Millennial leaders defined and understood within the leadership literature?	Millennial age range; characteristics attributed the Millennial generation.

analysis was performed to establish the most common characteristics attributed to the Millennial cohort in our corpus. All data were recorded in a shared Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, and regular moderation meetings took place to ensure rigour and quality.

Results: research question 1

In this first section, we respond to research question 1: *What is the nature of the journal literature focused on Millennials and leadership?* Here we explore the publication volume, the geographic distribution, the different types of article and the methods employed in the corpus we analysed.

Publication volume

Our literature search generated 162 articles published between 2000 and 2018. The search yielded no results published before 2005 and during the year of 2007.

Even though the search scope included articles starting from the year 2000, there were no available publications before the year 2005. Publications with a focus on Millennials and leadership have spiked in the last three years, with 114 of the papers reviewed being published between 2016 and 2018 (see [Figure 1](#)). With 70% of the corpus being published in this time period, it is possible to suggest that there has been increasing interest in the topic of Millennials and leadership in recent years. We argue that this highlights the timely nature of this review.

Only 57% of the 162 publications included in this review were peer-reviewed. It is notable that during the 2005–2018 time period there has also been a growth in the number of peer-reviewed articles focused on Millennials and leadership (see [Figure 2](#)). The prevalence of non-peer-reviewed publications, however, suggests that the research quality of this corpus of literature is variable. This finding supports Lyons and Kuron's (2014) call for enhanced levels of rigour in research focused on generational differences at work.

Geographic distribution

Our analysis of the geographic distribution of articles concerned with Millennials and leadership revealed a distinct lack of geographical spread (see [Figure 3](#)). Accounting for 85% of the reviewed publications, the United States have authorially dominated this corpus of literature to date. The few studies not conducted in the US originated from predominantly Western societies (the United Kingdom and Canada, for example). Our analysis, then, aligns with Williams and Turnbull's (2015) observation that much of the research

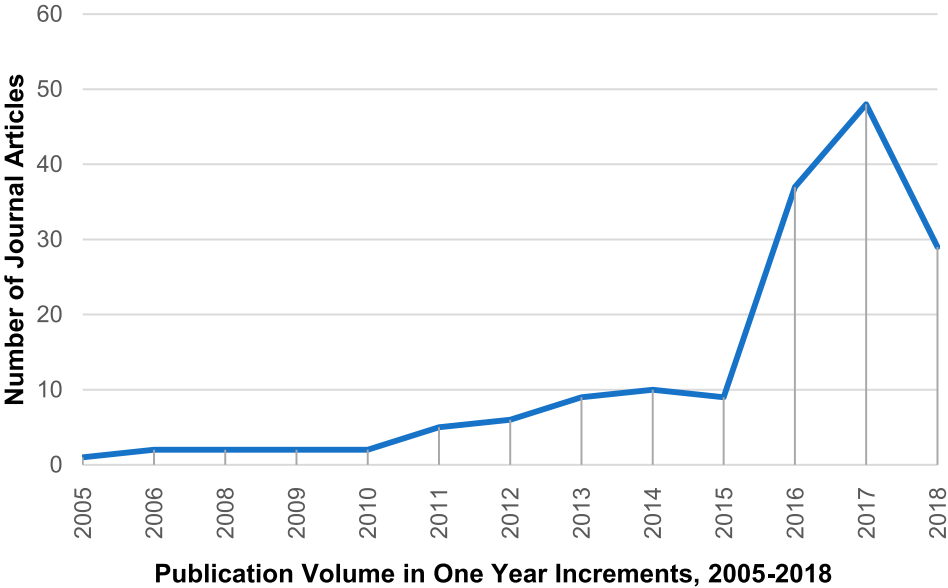


Figure 1. Publication volume of articles published on the theme of Millennials and leadership, 2005–2018 ($n = 162$).

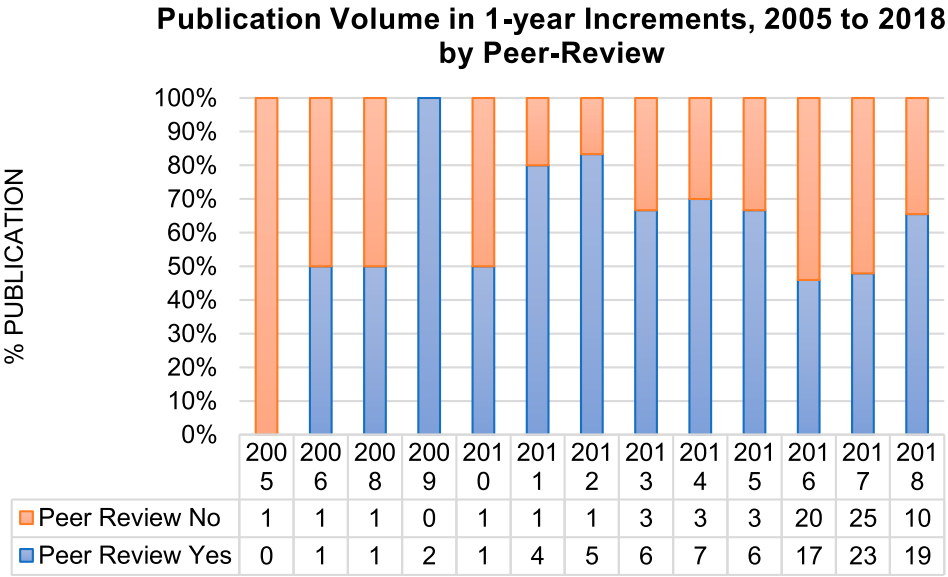


Figure 2. Publication volume of articles published on the theme of Millennials and leadership by peer-review, 2005–2018 ($n = 162$).

focused on Generation Y tends to be produced from a Western perspective. While we acknowledge that the geographic distribution of articles may be different if we had incorporated articles written in languages other than English, the absence of non-Western

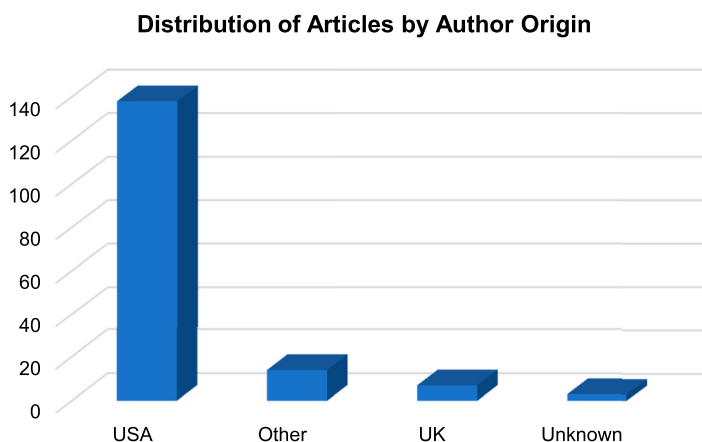


Figure 3. Distribution of articles published on the theme of Millennials and leadership by author origin, 2005–2018 ($n = 162$).

perspectives from this body of literature represents a significant ‘blind spot’ (Heck and Hallinger, 2005, p. 238) in our knowledge and understanding of the Millennial generation.

Types of articles

Each of the articles we reviewed was classified according to five distinct types: (1) empirical, (2) conceptual, (3) case study, (4) review and (5) opinion. Those categorised as ‘empirical’ were articles exploring the theme of Millennials and leadership that were based on findings derived from quantitative, qualitative or mixed research methods. Applying the definition put forth by Castillo and Hallinger (2017, p. 213), ‘conceptual’ papers were those that ‘propose a conceptual model, apply a conceptual model to analyse an issue, or analyse a policy, problem or issue based on a combination of experience and/or selective reference to the literature’. ‘Case studies’ were those that investigated the practices of particular organisations or initiative related to the leadership of or enacted by Millennials. Papers classified as ‘review’ were those drawing on an existing body of literature on Millennials and leadership. ‘Opinion’ pieces were those papers based on the perceptions and views of individuals on the theme of Millennials and leadership, and therefore contained no empirical data.

As can be seen in Figure 4, our analysis of study type revealed that 54% of our corpus comprised of papers classified as ‘opinion’ (see, for example, Currie, 2012). Our categorisation of the studies based on type revealed that empirical studies accounted for only 22%. Although empirical papers represented the second largest group, our analysis revealed a relative lack of empirical studies focused on Millennials and leadership. This trend suggests the need for significantly more empirical articles in this field if we are to develop our understanding of this group.

Research methods

As outlined above, papers classified as ‘empirical’ comprised the second largest group of publications after ‘opinion’ pieces. We organised each of the 35 ‘empirical’ papers according to the methods of research they employed (see Figure 5). Of the 35 articles reviewed, 26 were quantitative in nature. Surveys were conducted in 19 of the

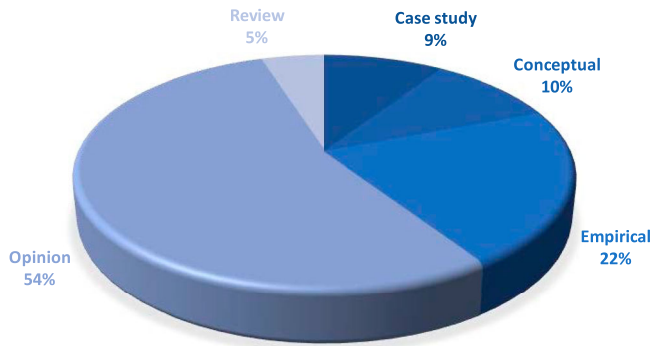


Figure 4. Breakdown of articles published on the theme of Millennials and leadership by study type, 2005–2018 ($n = 162$).

quantitative studies (see, for example, Lewis and Wescott, 2017; Bodenhausen & Curtis, 2016). Qualitative studies (8) were relatively rare, and only one mixed methods study was found. The majority of the qualitative pieces we reviewed were interview-based studies (see, for example, Meng et al. 2017; Koppel et al., 2017). Overall, our analysis revealed (a) a relative lack of empirical papers focused on Millennials and leadership, and (b) a clear preference for quantitative methods of research in those empirical studies that do exist. Like Lyons and Kuron (2014, 151) we suggest that a ‘greater qualitative understanding’ of Millennials and leadership, as well as the study of generations in the workplace more generally is needed. This is an argument that we return to in the discussion section of this paper.

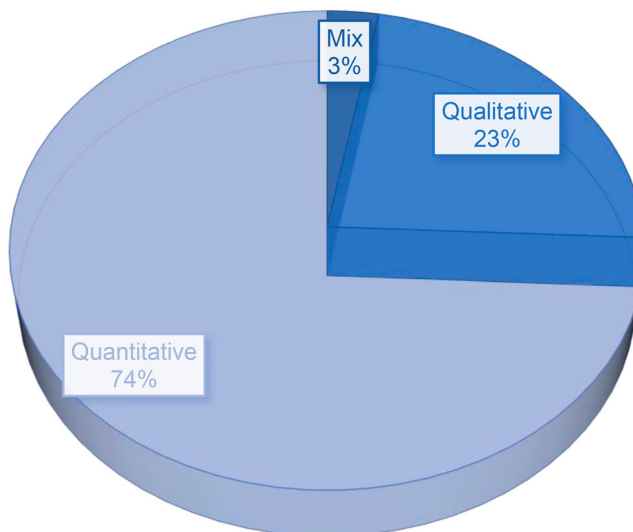


Figure 5. Distribution by research method of empirical articles published on the theme of Millennials and leadership, 2005–2018 ($n = 35$).

Discipline and topical foci

While a number of disciplinary areas and fields of study were represented in our corpus, the majority of publications originated from the fields of business, healthcare and management (30.2%, 12.3% and 11.7%, respectively). Other disciplines, particularly those of a less corporate nature, were not so strongly represented (see Figure 6). For instance, only two publications could be found from the field of education ($n = 2$), the disciplinary area in which we are both based. We found the lack of publications focused on leadership and the Millennial generation surprising in the light of school workforce data that shows the cohort of teachers with leadership responsibility in England is getting younger (DfE, 2018). This is a finding that mirrors international trends (Edge, 2015).

After determining the frequency of articles from each disciplinary area, we classified each paper according to the central topic discussed (see Figure 7).

We found that a significant number of papers focused on managing generational differences in the workplace ($n = 44$). This is perhaps not surprising given the substantial body of work focused on generational difference and leadership (Rudolph et al., 2018). Indeed, scholars working in this area have established that each generation understands and implements leadership differently which, in turn, demands that organisations adapt (Lyons et al., 2012). The second most common topic of discussion concerned leading Millennials ($n = 42$).

These papers tended to characterise Millennials as in need of direction and leadership as opposed to leaders in their own right. Indeed, only 12 papers in our corpus focused on the topic of Millennials as leaders of organisations and institutions. Other notable topics of discussion included the retention ($n = 19$), recruitment ($n = 19$) and professional development ($n = 18$) of the Millennial generation. This concern can perhaps be linked to the characterisation of Millennials as ‘job hoppers’ which was discussed earlier. We also identified a small pocket of work concerned with the Millennial generation and gender ($n = 3$). The authors were left wondering whether this may be the start of a body of academic literature concerned with what could be termed ‘genderation’ or the intersection between gender identity and generational attributes.

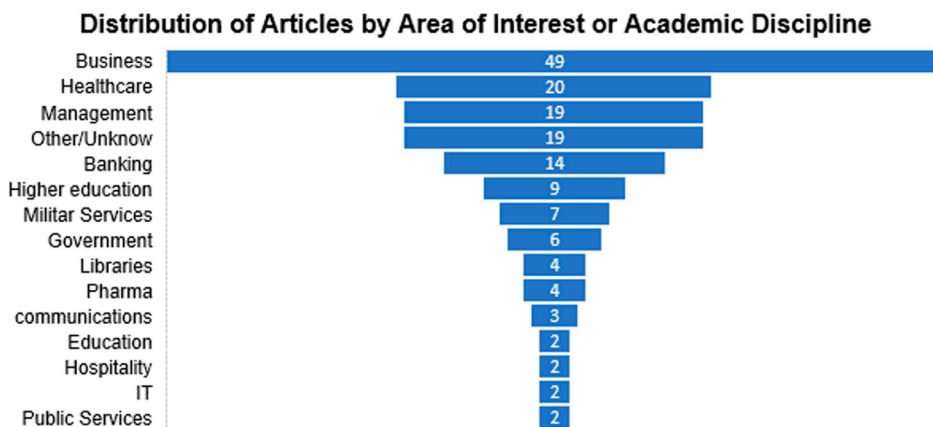


Figure 6. Distribution of articles published on the theme of Millennials and leadership by area of interest or academic discipline, 2005–2018 ($n = 162$).

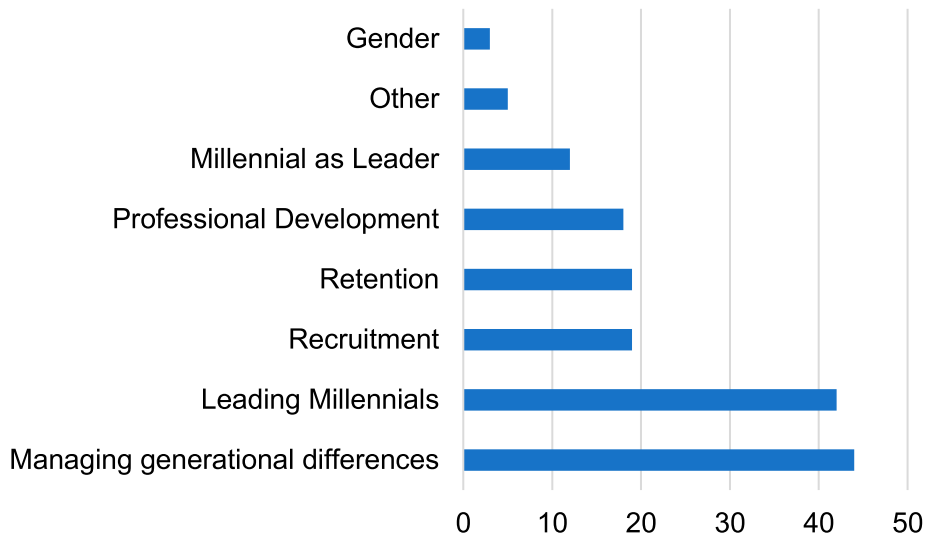


Figure 7. Distribution of articles published on the theme of Millennials and leadership according to topical foci, 2005–2018 ($n = 162$).

Results: research question 2

In this section of the paper, we respond to research question 2: *How are Millennial leaders defined and understood within the leadership literature?* Here we explore the age range and characteristics attributed to the Millennial cohort in the corpus we examined. Following on from the previous section, we will also consider the extent to which Millennials are characterised as leaders, aspirant leaders or followers in the literature we analysed.

Just under half of the articles we reviewed (43%) categorised the Millennial cohort by birth year. Eleven of these articles defined the Millennial cohort as people born between 1980 and 2000 (see Figure 8). This was the most common specific year range in our corpus. As can be seen in Figure 8, however, the authors whose papers we reviewed tended to designate a variety of different age ranges to this generation. There are 28 combinations across 69 articles. 18 of the proposed age ranges are referenced only once by a single publication. The earliest birth year attributed to the Millennial cohort was 1977 and the latest birth year was 2005; a 28-year range. Our analysis, then, revealed that: (1) the majority of the articles did not categorise the Millennial generation by birth year, and (2) when considering those authors that did refer to Millennials as people born in a specific year range, there appears to be no agreed categorisation. We believe these to be noteworthy findings requiring further investigation.

Previous studies dealing with the inconsistency of generational age range have found similar patterns (Costanza et al., 2012). Exploring the literature concerned with generations and leadership, particularly matures, Boomers, Xers and Millennials, Rudolph et al. (2018) identified a similar scenario across multiple publications which compromised analytical precision. They remark ‘not only does this lead to a lack of continuity across the leadership and generations literature, but, as aforementioned, these arbitrary generational groupings are implicitly conflated with chronological age’ (55).

As discussed earlier, the majority (68.5%) of the literature we reviewed positioned Millennials as followers or employees in the workforce. For instance, Hall’s (2016) work focuses on ‘the rise of Millennials in the workforce’, and the ways in which ‘managers

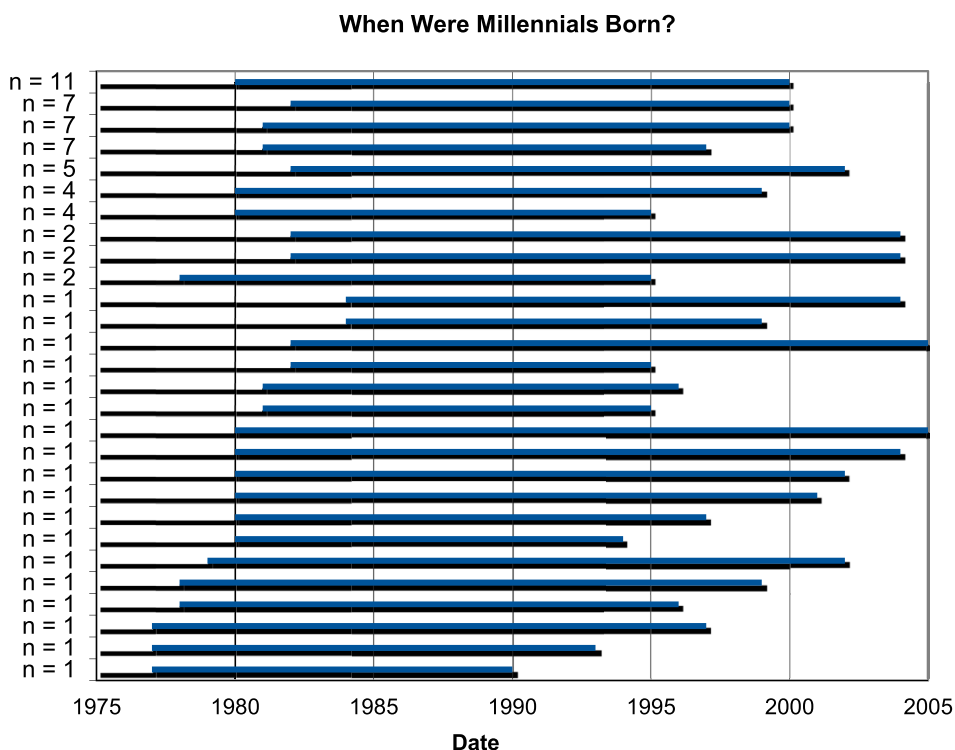


Figure 8. Distribution by categorisation of birth year of articles published on the theme of Millennials and leadership, 2005–2018 ($n = 69$).

must consider how to effectively communicate with these employees' (35). Here, as in many of the papers we reviewed, Millennials are characterised as employees who have recently joined the workforce. Yet, as noted earlier in this paper, Millennials are getting older and, in some occupational sectors, leaders are getting younger (see, for example, DfE, 2018). Only 19 of the papers we reviewed focused on the Millennial cohort as current, active leaders. Interestingly, 24 of the papers we analysed positioned Millennials as aspiring or potential leaders, thereby suggesting that the shift from employee to employer is a future possibility for Millennials as opposed to a current reality. Interestingly, a small number of studies ($n = 8$) did not explicitly characterise Millennials as leaders, aspiring leaders or followers. Their leadership status and responsibilities remained ambiguous (Figure 9).

Characteristics

We adopted a basic thematic approach to identify the characteristics and traits commonly attributed to the Millennial cohort in our corpus. A total of 51 papers characterised the Millennial generation as technologically proficient (e.g. Graybill, 2014; Leyva, 2017). This was the most common characteristic or trait used to describe the Millennial generation in the body of literature we analysed. Other characteristics included:

- A preference for collaborative working ($n = 31$; e.g. Stefanco, 2017; Barbuto and Gottfredson, 2016);

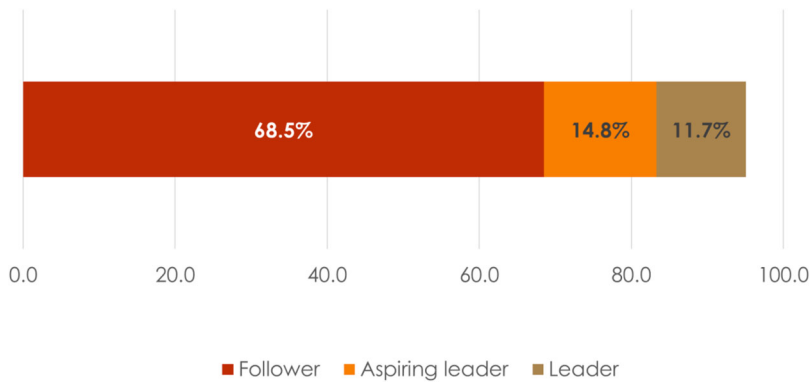


Figure 9. Distribution by position (i.e. follower, aspiring leader or leader) of articles published on the theme of Millennials and Leadership, 2005–2018 ($n = 154$). Note: Eight cases were excluded as they did not explicitly refer to Millennials as (active/potential) leaders or followers.

- Actively striving to achieve a work-life balance ($n = 22$; e.g. Woods, 2016; Hackel, 2017);
- A values-oriented approach to work ($n = 21$; e.g. Sweet and Swayze, 2017; Murphy, 2011);
- A need for feedback from and open dialogue with superiors ($n = 16$; e.g. Vanmeter et al. 2013);
- The search for purposeful work in a diverse workplace ($n = 12$; e.g. Urick, 2017; Gladis and Gladis, 2015).

As highlighted earlier in this paper, not all of the traits commonly attributed to the Millennial cohort are positive in nature. Indeed, our analysis found that 10 of the analysed articles explicitly referenced a tendency among Millennials to ‘job-hop’ or stay in a position or organisation for only a short period before moving on (see, for example, Ferri-Reed, 2013; Schlichting, 2012). This was often taken as evidence of either (a) disloyalty and a lack of commitment to employers, or (b) ambition and a desire to move up the career ladder quickly.

Discussion

Our review revealed a predominantly quantitative body of research originating mainly from the United States. We found that the majority of what has been written about the Millennial cohort and leadership is located in the fields of business, healthcare and management. In 2012, Thompson and Gregory remarked that significant empirical research was needed in relation to the Millennial generation in the workplace. The findings of our review suggest that this is still the case. Only 22% of the papers in our corpus were empirical in nature thus leading us to believe that the current evidence base related to Millennials and leadership is limited in quantity. Furthermore, the prevalence of ‘opinion’ pieces which contained no empirical data published in non-peer-reviewed journals in our corpus raises significant questions related to the quality of existing publications related to the Millennial cohort and leadership.

Interestingly, our findings related to the Millennial cohort echo the literature of the 1990s describing the challenges of managing GenXers (Kupperschmidt, 1998; Stone-

Johnson, 2016). For instance, in an opinion piece about the differences between cohorts and the uniqueness of generation X employees, Losyk (1997) wrote:

The loyalty and commitment to the workplace that previous generations had are gone. Generation X'ers watched their grandparents slave away only to received a gold watch and pension upon retirement [...] Their parents' dedication to the company has been repaid with downsizing and layoffs. Young people feel there is no such thing as job security [...] they can't believe that their boomer bosses spend 60 or more hours a week at a job that they constantly complain about. They strongly believe there is life after work (p. 41).

However, these type of opinions that are based on personal experience or limited cases studies clash with the findings of more rigorous research. Two-decades ago, Karp et al. (1999) discussed the negative stereotypes about young employees, and found similar and, in some cases, even more positive work-oriented characteristics in GenXers than Boomers:

Often characterised as being lazy, arrogant, unreliable, and cynical, Generation X is considered to be anything but team-oriented. A pilot study of 398 people from six organisations across the country using the Team Orientation and Behavior Inventory discovered Generation X to be significantly more team-oriented than baby boomers (p. 30).

Our findings strongly suggest the cyclical nature of generation research; the youngest cohorts are frequently seen as initially difficult but this perception eventually changes over time when a new generation enters the workplace. Mirroring this evolution, the perspectives of leaders, aspiring leaders and followers also gradually shift over time. Our systematic review illustrates this point as slowly but steadily more publications are considering Millennials not only as the potential leaders of tomorrow but as the current leaders of today.

Limitations of the study

Based on the relatively under-researched nature of the topic, the decision was made to include non-peer-reviewed literature. However, the variable quality of the literature reviewed is an important limitation of this review. Limiting the scope of a future review concerned with the Millennial cohort and leadership to a bounded set of peer-reviewed journals should be considered in subsequent work. Furthermore, our review focused on papers written and published in English. Although it was necessary to restrict our search in this way, we believe that a search that included publications written in languages other than English may yield significant results relating to the Millennial generation and leadership. Likewise, the inclusion of grey literature and student theses may also prove fruitful.

Future research

We believe that future researchers would benefit from addressing the limitations presented in many of the studies reviewed here. We have noted the lack of empirical research concerned with leadership and the Millennial generation. More rigorous research with a clear and rigorous methodology is needed to move the field beyond opinion pieces and descriptions of particular case studies. We also found that there appears to be no agreed categorisation related to the specific year range in which the Millennial cohort were born. As presented earlier, studies not only significantly differ on their birth range but many studies work without a clear concept of birth range thus building arguments that could easily represent other cohorts. We suggest that further work should focus on agreeing an explicit and standard definition related to the year of birth of Millennials. Based on the most frequent

age range found in this review, we strongly suggest considering the definition of Millennials as those born between 1980 and 2000.

The current findings suggest that there are three directions in which future research concerned with the Millennial cohort and leadership might usefully proceed. Firstly, further qualitative research in this field could uncover the stories behind the statistics related to the Millennial cohort and leadership. Secondly, research in more diverse geographical contexts, disciplines and industries is needed to allow for a deeper understanding of the particular characteristics underpinning Millennials as a generation. Lastly, we suggest that greater attention is paid to the concept of Millennials as leaders by not only exploring their uniqueness as a leadership cohort, but also identifying their similarities with GenXer and Boomer leaders.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Note

1. The keywords 'leadership' and 'Millennial(s)' guided our search. Given the exploratory nature of the project, we aimed to conduct an open and inclusive search.

Supplemental data

Supplemental data for this article can be accessed at <https://doi.org/10.1080/14783363.2020.1812380>.

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