

Canadian Millennials: The same in many ways but different in others...you may be surprised

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Twenty years ago I introduced my fellow Canadians to the idea that demography was not always destiny and that values matter most. In my book *Sex in the Snow*, I demonstrated this by showing that within each generation of Elders, Baby Boomers and Gen Xers, there were social values segments which we called tribes. Some tribes had more traditional values such as deference to authority, religiosity and patriarchy. Other tribes with the same generation questioned authority, embraced feminism and had a more secular world view. In addition some tribes were more likely to defer gratification and saved on principal while others were conspicuous consumers of status symbols and experiences.

The next generation to join the party are called Millennials. These young Canadians were born from 1980 to 1995 and are now aged 21 to 36. They are a quarter of the Canadian population, soon to be even larger than Baby Boomers, the oldest of whom are now moving into their 70s and others departing the scene for good.

Much of what passes for analysis of this generation of Canadian adults amounts to little more than anecdote and stereotype. Aside from data on youth unemployment, student debt and the embrace of everything digital, the Canadian conversation is remarkably devoid of solid evidence about how Millennials live, what they think, what they value, what they want, or what they hope to achieve. Are they motivated strivers facing a tough job market, or entitled brats who are too picky to accept an unfulfilling job? Are they talented digital innovators or just screen addicts? Have they been nurtured by their Boomer parents' loving encouragement, or are they entitled narcissists poisoned by a lifetime of unearned praise? Newspapers, newsfeeds and dinner tables teem with opinions.

To better understand their values, life goals, career aspirations and orientation to political engagement, the Environics Institute surveyed a representative sample of 3,072 Millennials in 2016. The analysis of the survey responses revealed six distinct social values tribes: Engaged Idealists, Critical Counterculturalists, Bros and Brittanys, Diverse Strivers, New Traditionalists and Lone Wolves. The most notable insight to be drawn from our analysis is that the range of values among the tribes in this generation is wider than among previous generations. Millennials' values range from the most conservative to the most liberal we have seen in previous generations; they also range from the most open to change to the most closed; from the most to the least religious, from the most to the least patriarchal; the most global to the most parochial, and the most confident of a better future to the least confident that things will eventually work out for the better for them.

Of course, demographics might have suggested some of these findings: Millennials are the most ethnically diverse multicultural generation in our history. They are more likely to be first or second generation immigrants and to come from a wider range of countries (not just from Europe) than was the case for Boomers and Gen Xers. A quarter is visible minority compared to less than ten percent when Boomers were young. They are more urban than ever before. They are the best educated generation in our history, with the lesser educated facing much dimmer prospects in a knowledge economy than was the case for previous generations where high school and a good work ethic was good enough to get a good job and live a middle class lifestyle. They are far more likely than previous generations to have experienced divorced parents before they turned 15. Many are only children or have only one sibling. In many cases friends are their real family. Some would say they have neither [friends](#) nor [family](#).

Because we have been tracking the social values of Canadians since the early 1980s we are able to not only compare Millennials to Gen Xers, Boomers and Elders today, but also go back to see how today's Millennials compare to Gen Xers and Boomers when they were young in the 1960s, 70s and 80s. In this way, we can see what values remain constant through the decades and what diversity, technology, globalization, and social and economic change may have done to make this generation unique, just as leading edge Boomers were unique in their youth.

Like Boomers and Gen Xers when they were young, today's Millennials are strong on the values of Pursuit of Intensity, Penchant for Risk, Pursuit of Novelty, Acceptance of Violence, Sexual Permissiveness, Pursuit of Originality and Personal Creativity. Plus ça change; plus c'est la même chose. In this way, today's Millennials seemed to be coded like previous generations of youth throughout the past century. They are filled with energy and vitality as they emerge from youth to early adulthood.

There are other values where Millennials stand out from their elders but less so than Gen Xers and Boomers stood out from their elders when they were young. Millennials are strong on Rejection of Authority but less so than Gen Xers and Boomers stood out on this value when they were young. This undoubtedly reflects at least partly the more traditional values of first and second generation immigrants and perhaps also a renewed respect for order in world seemingly in chaos whether as a result of global warming, strife, disease or politics in the United States.

On another set of values, Millennials are weaker than their elders but less so than Gen Xers and Boomers were when they were young: Financial Concern (regarding the future), Utilitarian Consumerism, Discriminating Consumerism, and Saving on Principal. In other words Millennials are less likely to reject these "prudent" values than were Gen Xers and Boomers when they were young. Boomers and to a lesser extent Gen Xers grew up in an era of economic prosperity; Millennials have recently witnessed a financial meltdown, the great recession and are entering (or trying to enter) a more precarious economy.

But the most interesting are the values in which today's Millennials are different from previous generations when they were young. Three stand out: Adaptability to Complexity, Flexible Families (the myriad alternatives to Mom, Dad and 2.5 kids), and Anomie and Aimlessness, a sentiment most characteristic among the tribe we call Lone Wolves. This latter tribe comprises sixteen percent of the generation and stands out by being more alienated from the mainstream than the alienated of previous generations felt out of sync with the mainstream society and economy in their era.

As expected Millennials also stand out as being more Enthusiastic for Technology than Gen Xers and Boomers were when they were young (thanks to Steve Jobs, Mark Zuckerberg et al.) but they are more likely to be stronger on the counter value: Technology Anxiety which measures the broader concerns about the social and ethical implications of advancing technology in comparison with the personal benefits.

Finally and again a double edged sword: today's Millennials are stronger on the value Multiculturalism (with familiarity breeding kinship rather than contempt), and interestingly Millennials are slightly more likely than Gen Xers and Boomers were in their youth on the values Global Consciousness and Xenophobia. They are aware of what is going on around the planet and they don't like what they see very much. This before Donald Trump became the president of the United States.

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