

BRANDING, COMMUNICATION, AND MILLENNIALS: A LOOK AT THE
COMMUNICATION HABITS OF THE LARGEST GENERATION IN HISTORY

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Christopher James Mattix

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By

Christopher James Mattix

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ABSTRACT

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Millennials are the largest generation in history and are frequently the targets of major marketing campaigns. However, no current research exists that focuses on Millennials' brand related communication habits. Focus groups with 50 college students were used to study the brand related communication habits of Millennials. Focus group data indicate that face-to-face communication is preferred by Millennials when communicating about brands and products; however, participants noted an increased use of digital communication (text messages, instant messages, social networks) when communicating a negative brand experience. Price, family tradition, and product type were found to have the biggest influence over what types of messages were communicated and with whom they were communicated.

Keywords: Millennials, communication, marketing, branding, social learning

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INTRODUCTION

It is an interesting time to be a consumer. The present age has become a digital marketplace where any number of companies can send and receive information to and from the consumers they target. Much of today's marketing is geared toward a young audience in hopes of ingratiating them into a company's good graces (Seckler, 2006); this strategy and the response it hopes to illicit is known as branding and brand loyalty, respectively. The young audience currently targeted by marketers is known as Millennials (individuals born between 1977 and 1997; also known as Generation Y (Meister & Willyerd, 2010)), and they are the largest generation in history (Yarrow & O'Donnell, 2009). Millennials are also the most sought-after demographic for marketers because they are statistically more present online; where much of today's marketing efforts are focused (Pew, 2010).

In recent years much research has been done to figure out the best strategy for obtaining a loyal customer base, but the majority of this research is grounded in the realm of market research (Stokburger-Sauer, 2010). Research in the area of branding and communication may be beneficial to scholars in the fields of communication, business, marketing, and advertising. There still remains a potential for academic research that answers the questions of how and why Millennials learn and communicate about brands.

This study aims to understand how Millennials learn about brands and communicate brand preference to their peers. Current research on Millennials has paid relatively little attention to how brand preference is communicated to others. How Millennials communicate their brand preferences is an untapped vein of research with a high potential for discovery which will be beneficial to the fields of communication and

marketing because it will provide a more holistic understanding of a group which is both the largest generation in history as well as the largest target demographic (Greenberg & Weber, 2008). Millennials are a generation that begs for more research, especially in the field of communication, and understanding how this generation sends, receives, and interprets messages will open the doors to deeper-level research. Studying communication in conjunction with Millennials and brand preference will be beneficial to the fields of communication and marketing and may prove to reach further into other fields of study by highlighting the consumer tendencies of Millennials.

Millennials are an important group to study because much of today's advertising is directed at them (Greenberg & Weber, 2008; Rosenfield, 1997). According to a study by Powell (2007), Millennials tell an average of 17.8 people about their favorite new television shows and websites, which compares to 6.3 people told by Baby Boomers. This discovery makes Millennials a very desirable target demographic because marketers will get more exposure for their products. Millennials are typically early adopters of new technology and spend more time using technology, which makes them unique from other generations (Mumford, 2006). Millennials are more concerned with issues such the environment, sustainability, and social enterprise (Gloeckler, 2008), which suggests that they are more socially conscious than older generations. Millennials also work more collaboratively and gather information more quickly than older generations (Gorman, Nelson, & Glassman, 2004). Less is known about how Millennials learn, experience, and communicate about brands, and the role that technology plays in those processes.

In the past marketers used tactics such as rebellion and celebrity endorsements to entice younger consumers, but recently marketers have had to re-evaluate how they

advertise to consumers because of the unique nature of Millennials (Seckler, 2006). The Millennial generation wants to be able to personalize their lives (What Millennials Want, 2009), and marketers have noticed this trend, evident in the increasing number of companies who allow consumers to customize a product to fit their personality (Yarrow & O'Donnell, 2009).

This recent change in marketing strategies further highlights the need to study Millennials. Because there is a gap in the current research surrounding Millennials, marketers are implementing strategies without a complete understanding of their target demographic. The methods used by Millennials to communicate with one another are unique (Seckler, 2006). Communication plays a vital role in how consumers learn about brands. Whether a consumer learns about a brand from an advertisement, friends, online communities, or family members, communication is still the most crucial part of the equation, yet the ways in which Millennials both learn and communicate about brands is not well understood.

Millennials are unique because they grew up with massive advances in communication technology (Greenberg & Weber, 2008), and they are a generation that expects more from technology than previous generations (Seckler, 2006). The advances in communication technology over the last two decades alone have changed the way people think about communication (Lindstrom, 2010). This presents researchers with a unique opportunity to study the effects of shifts in communication technology in conjunction with the generation that is most comfortable using that technology.

Because Millennials are such a unique group, and because they exist as the main target demographic for many industries (Greenberg & Weber, 2008), it is important to

broaden and deepen the scope of knowledge in this area. Millennials are the largest generation in history (Greenberg, & Weber, 2008), and yet the current body of academic research leaves much to be desired. This study seeks to deepen our knowledge of Millennials by exploring how they learn about brands and how they communicate their brand preferences.

Rationale

Previous research on branding and Millennials has primarily focused on marketing to these consumers, and has neglected to include consumer communication processes. This study will examine how Millennials learn about brands, how they communicate their brand preferences, the methods of communication most commonly used by Millennials, and why they chose those methods. It seeks to understand how Millennials interpret information from marketers and communicate that information to others.

Research in this area can be useful to scholars in the communication field by providing an understanding of how Millennials communicate in the context of consumption. This research will also benefit the field of communication by offering a look into what motivates communication about brands among Millennials. On a practical level, research centered on Millennials, branding, and communication can be used by marketers to develop campaigns that are better suited for maintaining a high level of brand loyalty. Researchers need to understand the rituals and norms within the group before any claims can be made; this study aims to address that gap in the current research.

Conclusion

Millennials are a group where research has predominantly focused on marketing (Greenberg & Weber, 2008; Yarrow & O'Donnell, 2009; Seckler, 2006), use of new media

technology (Tapscott, 1998; Zemke et al, 2000; Rapoza, 2008), and organizational culture (Gloeckler, 2008). The current body of research highlights how Millennials differ from older generations, but differences in how they communicate, particularly how they communicate about brands, are understudied.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Little research exists on Millennials' communication about brands. The majority of current research looks at Millennials from the perspectives of marketing, new media technology, and organizational culture. The following section will provide an overview of the current body of research surrounding Millennials and branding.

Conventional Wisdom about Millennials

Millennials are the largest generation in history (Greenberg & Weber, 2008), having surpassed the Baby Boomers in sheer numbers, and still growing due to varying definitions of the term Millennials. Knowing this, it is important that researchers begin to focus more heavily on the millennial generation. As mentioned in the introduction, Millennials are a unique generation; they are early adopters of technology (Rapoza, 2008), are more socially conscious (Greenberg, & Weber, 2008), work better in groups (Zemke et al, 2000), and have better written communication skills than previous generations (Gorman, Nelson, & Glassman, 2004).

A good portion of the current body of research on Millennials comes from a marketing standpoint. The research focuses on how Millennials differ from older generations while at work (Gorman, Nelson, & Glassman, 2004). This research highlights how Millennials demand a work environment that differs greatly from the traditional workplace environment familiar to older generations, mainly the Baby Boomers. This research, while important, is thin in the area of communication. Instead researchers focus on how Millennials require a different organizational environment which gives them more freedom or how Millennials personalize their workspaces, but Millennials are a more complex group than the current research suggests.

The current body of research surrounding Millennials is a mixed bag of positives and negatives. As mentioned earlier, Millennials are a generation raised with technology (Seckler, 2006). As a result, Millennials are the most technologically savvy generation in history (Yarrow & O'Donnell, 2009). The tech-savvy nature of Millennials is near impossible to refute but, while this generation may possess a knack for utilizing new technology, Millennials also have many faults.

Millennials are described in the book *Generation Me* as “narcissistic consumers” and “entitled” (Twenge, 2007). Twenge argues that Millennials are a generation that doesn't just ask for personalized goods and services, they demand them. This differs from the flattering picture of Millennials painted by Yarrow & O'Donnell (2009) in their book *Gen BuY*; which portrays Millennials as a revolutionary generation who have changed the face of retail. It should be noted that the studies conducted by Twenge (2007) and Yarrow & O'Donnell (2009) differ in their focus. Twenge (2007) is primarily concerned with portraying one aspect of Millennials (narcissism) and the reasons behind it, while Yarrow & O'Donnell's (2009) book is focused on the consumer habits of Millennials. These differing interpretations of the millennial generation are both parts of the same whole. The difference in focus between researchers leads to differing definitions of Millennials. Twenge (2007) focuses on the psychological aspects of Millennial, while Yarrow & O'Donnell (2009) focus on the consumer habits of Millennials and how they have adapted to advances in technology. The definition of Millennials I am using in this study is individuals born between 1977 and 1997 (Meister & Willyerd, 2010). This definition of Millennials was chosen for two reasons. First, to allow non-traditional students the opportunity to participate in the study, and second, because it puts the generation closer to

the advent of the Internet, a technological advance that has had a very large impact on this generation (Seckler, 2006).

Looking further into the body of research on Millennials we see that they are lauded for their ability to work in groups (Gorman, Nelson, & Glassman, 2004; Greenberg, & Weber, 2008). Gorman, Nelson, & Glassman (2004) state that Millennials work more collaboratively in groups and are more willing to share information with peers than previous generations. Twenge & Campbell (2009), however, have a different opinion. In the book *The Narcissism Epidemic* Twenge & Campbell (2009) choose to look at the self-obsessed nature of Millennials. The authors argue that Millennials are too self-involved and are too concerned with their own self-esteem; which the authors argue is a result of the messages sent to Millennials at an early age by their parents. Twenge & Campbell (2009) discuss the effects of parenting on Millennials, arguing that a constant barrage of “you can be anything you want to be” type messages are largely responsible for the narcissistic nature of today’s teen and adult Millennials. There are conflicting accounts of Millennials’ nature and behavior, which calls for more empirical research.

One area where researchers are in total agreement is consumption; which is defined here as the use of goods by a consumer until its disposal (Merriam-Webster, 2011). Millennials are a group who consume goods at a very high rate (Greenberg, & Weber, 2008) and, not surprisingly, are the main targets for many major marketing campaigns. Millennials are widely viewed as a group who are quick to consume new products, and researchers have found a way to measure their involvement with the brands they purchase. The Foote Cone Belding Grid, which was used as a means of preliminary data collection in this study, measures the level of brand involvement of an individual based on emotional

and logical brain functions (right side and left side brain activity). The grid has four quadrants, each representing a different psychological position; Marshallian, Freudian, Pavlovian, and Veblenian. The top two quadrants show high brand involvement, one on the logical side and one on the emotional side, and the bottom two quadrants show low brand involvement within the context of logic and emotion. Researchers may agree that Millennials have a high rate of consumption, but they do not all agree on the reason behind this consumption. According to Seckler (2006), Millennials have high rates of consumption because goods are so readily available. They are a group who is statistically present online more than any other group, and thus exposed to the largest number of goods. Twenge (2007) posits a different reason for Millennials' high level of consumption: entitlement.

According to Twenge in *Generation Me* (2007), Millennials have a sense of entitlement. This argument goes back to Twenge & Campbell's (2009) previous discussion of the effects of parenting on today's Millennials. Twenge argues that Millennials feel entitled because they have been given so much over the course of their lives. It is because they have rarely had to go without that they feel they are owed something. This sense of entitlement, according to Twenge (2007), is extended into every aspect of Millennials' lives. From job searches to possessions, Millennials want it all. Twenge's (2007) opinion may be extreme but it is useful in that it highlights an aspect of the generation that is glossed over by researchers like Greenberg & Weber (2008) and Yarrow & O'Donnell (2009).

Another area of agreement is individualism. Researchers consistently state that Millennials are a group who value their individuality. Seckler (2006) points out that

Millennials are more likely to consume goods that reflect their personality in some way, and Yarrow & O'Donnell's (2008) book *Gen BuY* echoes Seckler's (2006) comments. Millennials want their personality to shine through everything they do, and individualism as a core value is something that sets the millennial generation apart from previous generations; it is also something that researchers agree is a unique attribute.

If we look at everything that has been said about Millennials, both good and bad, it becomes clear that this is a generation that is both uniquely different from, and directly influenced by generations. There is a conventional wisdom surrounding Millennials. We see these conventional beliefs in how marketers approach Millennials, which can be seen in the recent trend of QR codes which require consumers to scan a code with their smartphone in order to get free web content, but there is little research on whether these trends apply in the context of consumption. This study seeks to investigate and test these assumptions.

Brand Preference

Much research has been done on the subject of brand preference, which is defined by Mathur, Moschis, & Euehun (2003) as a measure of brand loyalty in which a consumer will choose a particular brand in the presence of competing brands, but will accept substitutes if that brand is not available. It is a subject of interest for people in the fields of advertising, marketing, and communication. The following section will highlight the major findings of previous research about brand preference.

According to Mathur, Moschis, & Euehun (2003), most consumers will change their brand preferences several times in their lifetime. This suggests that no matter what marketers do to entice consumers they will always lose customers. This is an

uncontrollable truth that marketers and advertisers have to accept. Three variables are used to explain preference changes: consumer characteristics, marketing mix factors, and situational influences (Mathur, Moschis, & Euehun, 2003). These variables encompass the many different scenarios that might cause a consumer to abandon one brand in favor of another.

Brand preferences change across people, environments, and motivating conditions (Sha, Allenby, & Fennell, 2002; Mathur, Moschis, & Euehun, 2003) and it is important for marketers to understand which product attributes are associated with those changes. This means that consumers evaluate brands based on the nature of the situation in which the brand will be used. Some brands are used in unchanging environments, while others are used in many different situations and contexts. Think about it as the difference between doing the laundry and going for a run every day; when you do the laundry your environment is static, therefore the brands you use will probably perform the same way every time, but if the brand is in a constantly changing environment it may perform differently. While it is impossible for companies to control how and where consumers use their products, they are, nevertheless, affected by these factors (Sha, Allenby, & Fennell, 2002).

Another factor that influences brand preference is social groups. Stafford (1966) claims that social groups dictate brand preference and that group members tend to reflect the brand preferences of the group leader. Stafford (1966) goes on to say that group members' brand related behavior would vary depending on their relationship with the group leader. Similar findings came from a study done by Ford, & Ellis (1980), but they found that, contrary to Stafford's findings, brands low in visibility, complexity, and risk

were not susceptible to group influence. These types of brands include items such as food and toiletries.

In a study by Zablah, Brown, & Donthu (2010) researchers found that brand preference was the number one determinant of brand importance and that brand consciousness came in at a close second. Translated, this means that, in a competitive marketplace, consumers believe that the brands they prefer are the most important brands of that specific type of product. This means that consumers, essentially, have all the power. The burden, then, lies on advertisers and marketers because it is their job to breed preference. We know that advertisers and marketers need to entice consumers, but how exactly are they doing so?

In the world of marketing there are different types of advertising. When marketers advertise a brand (known as Brand Advertising) they are attempting to influence the consumers' perception of the brand (Chakravarti, & Janiszewski, 2004). The main goal for marketers is for their brand to differentiate itself from other brands. When there is an increase in differentiation there is also a decrease in the substitutability of one brand for another (Chakravarti, & Janiszewski, 2004). The more unique a brand is, the more likely consumers will stay loyal to the brand.

Brand loyalty can be viewed as the extreme version of brand preference. Jacoby (1971) describes brand loyalty as the overt act of selective repeat purchasing based on evaluative psychological decision processes. It is important to understand that the terms "brand loyalty" and "brand preference" are not interchangeable. A consumer who is loyal to a brand will buy that brand no matter what and will even go out of their way to get that brand (Jacoby, 1971). A consumer who prefers a brand will buy something else if their

preferred brand is unavailable, and many consumers prefer more than one brand for similar products (Jacoby, 1975).

While the present body of research about brand preference makes mention of communication, it is mostly in reference to advertising; little has been written about how consumers communicate their brand preferences to others. Ford & Ellis (1980) bring up the concept of peer-to-peer communication about brands, but their discussion of the topic revolves around the visibility of brands within groups and how that affects brand preference in group members and not on how group members communicate about the brands they prefer.

This is a study about how Millennials communicate their brand preferences to others. There is a sizable gap in the research surrounding both Millennials and communication of brand preference. I have already made mention of the tendency for marketers to use digital communication to market to Millennials and, in a digital age where brands are being advertised through a variety of media, it is necessary to look at how technology is used by Millennials.

Millennials, Marketing, and Technologies

Millennials have adapted to a world where technology is valued and those who can't keep up get left behind (Greenberg & Weber, 2008). Perhaps the biggest technological achievement of the last 20 years is the internet (Du Boff, 2000), and Millennials have laid claim to this virtual world. Zemke et al, (2000) note how Millennials have taken new technology and made it their own:

There aren't just three Rs anymore—as in, reading, writing and 'rithmetic—there's a fourth: the Internet. And it's as natural as breathing for Generation Next [...] Most

Boomers can, and are, learning as fast as they can. But it's a little like learning a language. When you're a child, language acquisition is as easy as blinking. When you're an adult, it seems far less natural. It takes a lot more effort, so much effort that most adults choose simply not to add another language to their repertoire. (pp. 128-129)

Beyond simply understanding and using new communication technology, Tapscott (1998) illustrates one possible explanation for Millennials online tendencies: “[Millennials] converse comfortably and freely on an intellectual plane with adults, and have found that their expressed thoughts are valued much more highly online, where their age cannot be determined,” which suggests that Millennials are more willing to communicate online because they are judged based not on their age, but on what they have to say. Millennials have a large presence online. A survey conducted by the Pew Research Center (2010) showed that 75% of Millennials have a profile on a social networking site while only 50% of Generation X maintained an online profile and only 30% of Baby Boomers used social networking sites.

Marketers have been having trouble connecting with the Millennial generation (Seckler, 2006). Millennials are a generation that demands individualism in almost everything they consume (Seckler, 2006), which presents a dilemma for marketing teams who want to appeal to a mass audience at the lowest cost. In recent years marketers have had to rethink their strategies for hooking new customers. In the past, marketers used strategies such as celebrity endorsements and rebellion to entice younger consumers (Strauss & Howe, 2006), but today many marketers are finding that the old ways of advertising aren't working (Yarrow & O'Donnell, 2009).

In Yarrow & O'Donnell's (2009) book, *Gen buY* they highlight the strong connection Millennials have to brands:

Gen Y's unique relationship with brands, their powerful influence on marketers, their peers and their friends, their love of technology, and their speedy, visual world are reshaping retailing. Their confidence in self-expression, lickety-split decision-making, and desire to have it all *now* have had a notable impact on the way they shop. (pp. 41)

Millennials are a generation that wants what they want, when they want it. The speedier the service the better; but Millennials also want products to feel personal (Yarrow & O'Donnell, 2009). Where previous generations were content to buy a product as-is, Millennials are more discerning and marketers are noticing that in order to sell more they need to give more. The shift from mass produced products that are only available in one style to allowing consumers to decide how a product will look is unique to Millennials (Seckler, 2006). Older generations did not call for the customizability of products the way Millennials do. Where generations like the Baby Boomers were content customizing products like cars and homes, Millennials are calling for all products to offer a level of customizability; from traditionally customizable products like a car all the way down the line to food items such as M&Ms (Seckler, 2006). This unique attribute suggests that Millennials are complex consumers and adds to the list of reasons why Millennials should be studied more in-depth.

Customizability of products is becoming more and more prevalent in today's consumer driven world (Yarrow & O'Donnell, 2009), and marketers have begun to offer more products that can be tailored to the users specifications. Millennials are more than

willing to offer their feedback for products (Gorman, Nelson, & Glassman, 2004), but researchers still need to understand how Millennials communicate and what motivates their communication. Millennials are more willing to communicate their opinions than older generations (Gorman, Nelson, & Glassman, 2004), and online communities centered on brands and products have been popping up all over the web, where Millennials are the dominant population (Anderson & Rainie, 2010).

Millennials rely heavily on technology to communicate with others (Greenberg & Weber, 2009), but what they are communicating is still a mystery. I posit that in order for companies to effectively market their products to Millennials they need to understand how Millennials communicate with others. This study should not be limited to online communication alone, because knowing how Millennials communicate in face-to-face interactions could be beneficial as well because it may highlight communication patterns not typically associated with the Millennial generation.

Millennials have already established themselves as a generation that collaborates well with others and as a group that is ready and willing to share information (Gorman, Nelson, & Glassman, 2004; Tapscott, 1998). The increased willingness of Millennials to share information with others should compel researchers to look at the messages being sent and how they reflect the norms and ideals of the millennial generation. This study aims to uncover how Millennials communicate about brands and what that communication says about Millennials' communication habits on a broader level. For this study the theory of Social Learning (SLT) will be used as a guide, and the following section will hit on the key aspects of SLT and, more specifically, one aspect of the theory called Observational Learning.

Theoretical Framework

Social learning theory (STL) was developed by Robert Sears who attempted to meld psychoanalytic and stimulus learning to explain human behavior (Grusec, 1992). Albert Bandura, who abandoned the psychoanalytic aspect of Sears' earlier work and instead focused on cognitive and information processing behavior, later took up the theory. Where Sears is credited with birthing SLT, Bandura is responsible for the current incarnation of SLT.

The early work of Sears was mainly focused on how children internalize the values, behavior, and attitudes of the culture in which they are raised (Grusec, 1992). This focus on the impact of culture on children sparked an interest with many behavioral psychologists, one of which was Albert Bandura. Bandura's take on SLT widened the focus of Sears' research and included adults. Bandura decided to change the path of SLT and focused his efforts on the cognitive processes of information gathering and how it affects human behavior because he believed social learning was not limited to children and adolescents, and could be studied in a variety of social situations (Ormond, 1999).

SLT looks for changes in behavior. In order to measure the effects of social learning, researchers look to the observers to see if a behavioral change has been made, which coincides with a social event (Ormond, 1999). Learning can also occur without a change in behavior because not all social events are positive. In these instances observers learn that a change in behavior might be detrimental to them (Ormond, 1999) and they continue to behave in a way that avoids the negative social event they witnessed. Bandura studied the effects of environment on behavior and how it can reinforce or punish behavior; meaning, we learn what is acceptable behavior based on our surroundings and

the feedback we get from other people who interact with us in our environment (Bandura, 1977). We model behavior that is seen as desirable or praise-worthy and, generally, we avoid behavior that is viewed as undesirable. Our environment plays a large role in informing us about the value of different behaviors, and we choose whether or not to model the behaviors we observe.

One aspect of Bandura's SLT research is called Observational Learning, which focuses on the process by which individuals engage in social events and how they internalize and repeat what they saw (Grusec, 1992). There are four parts to observational learning; attention, retention, symbolic representation, and motivation for performance. In the attention phase individuals choose to either ignore or pay attention to a social event; attention is related to the power and attractiveness of an event. The second phase, retention is where individuals retain the information set forth in an event and the information is stored in the individual's memory. The third phase, symbolic representation, is where individuals take the information they have retained and form it into a series of symbols mirroring the initial event. The fourth and final phase is performance. In this phase there must be sufficient motivation for an individual to perform the symbols they have retained (Bandura, 1977).

The four phases of observational learning offer a model for cognitive behavior that guides this study. Bandura's model lends itself to evaluating how Millennials evaluate brand information and, subsequently, how they choose to communicate the information they have received. Pilot study data suggests that Millennials have a system for evaluating brands similar to that of Bandura's observational learning phases. Initial data indicated that Millennials choose whether or not to pay attention to a brand based on the visibility of the

brand, which relates to the power and attractiveness stated in Bandura's research, internalize what they have seen/heard about the brand, symbolically represent that information, and then communicate the information to peers (Bandura, 1977).

Bandura's original theory of observational learning was operationalized to explain the social learning about brands as experienced by Millennials. Some updates to the terminology used in Bandura's original were made in order for the theory to explain the phenomenon of observational brand learning by Millennials. The third phase of Bandura's observational learning model is called symbolic representation, which is where an individual creates a mental representation of a social event. For this study symbolic representation is operationalized as the forming of opinions about brands. The fourth phase of Bandura's observational learning model has also been operationalized to fit this study. In the original theory individuals perform the social event they observed during the fourth phase. In this study the act of performance is fulfilled by the act of purchasing or wearing a brand.

SLT applies to this study because it is a means of understanding how people learn about new things and what they do once they have obtained that knowledge, which is the overall goal of this study. In performing this research it is my hope that I will be able to understand better the ways in which Millennials send and receive information about brands and products. Previous research suggests that Millennials are a very social group (Yarrow & O'Donnell, 2009; Greenberg & Weber, 2008; Seckler, 2006) and STL is used to understand to social aspects of behavior.

Observational learning has been used in the field of psychology for as long as the theory has existed. Previous research from Bellebaum, Kobza, Thiele, & Daum (2010)

shows how observational learning can be used to predict potential brain functions in children, and research from Law & Hall (2009) used observational learning to understand how adult sport novices learn new skills. The changes I have made to the model should be viewed as an updated version of Bandura's original model. STL is by no means a new concept, but few changes have been made to original theory. It is my belief that STL can still function as the authors intended, but its terms and meanings may need to be updated to reflect the present day and its common social events. This belief is reinforced when looking at recent research in the realm of animal psychology, which uses observational learning to understand the mental processes of dogs in learning tasks (Kupán, Miklósi, Gergely, & Topál, 2011).

What I have done is adapt observational learning to fit within the parameters of this study. The changes to the third and fourth phases are necessary if the theory is to be used at all. I argue that Bandura's STL can be applied to a number of scenarios, as evidenced by the diversity of studies that have used it (see Yi & Davis (2003), who studied computer software training as observational learning; Chen, Wang, & Xie (2011), who investigated the difference between word of mouth and observational learning within the context of online social interactions; and Mitra, Yen, & Bushwick (2010), who used it to study leadership in the workplace). This theory has been used in a number of different fields, including sociology (Mitra, Yen, & Bushwick, 2010), business (Yi & Davis, 2003), and marketing (Chen, Wang, & Xie, 2011).

SLT also lends itself to the methodology used in this study by highlighting areas of inquiry such as attractiveness of brands, brand discovery, and motivations for purchasing a brand. SLT leads me to believe that Millennials learn about brands because of social

interactions both online and offline. A pilot study containing four focus groups was conducted prior to this study, which focused on Millennials' brand loyalty and how they communicate it to their peers. The pilot study used a similar protocol that focused on how Millennials learn about brands and how they communicate what they have learned. The initial focus groups' responses point to SLT and observational learning as a theoretical framework for this study. Participants noted that their communication must be motivated. The motivations listed by participants ranged from the age of the recipient, gender, recipients having similar interests, and the cost of the product. These motivations reflect back to observational learning and its phases.

SLT has also affected the methods used in this study. The focus group protocol has been influenced by STL; certain questions have been constructed in accordance with the observational learning model. The question "How do you learn about brands?" is directly related to SLT and observational learning. This question seeks to find out the frequency of Millennials learning about brands through social events. SLT was used as sensitizing concepts during data analysis. The discussion section of this study also uses SLT (in conjunction with participant responses) as a guide.

SLT seeks to uncover the cognitive processes by which individuals internalize and act on information. The concept of internalization and performance was seen in pilot study data and highlights the similarities between brand learning and communication, and the cognitive process of information gathering and performance. Millennials must choose to participate in the process of brand learning and must also choose to repeat the information they have gathered, which is similar to the criteria for observational learning posited by Bandura. The similarities in both processes, as well as initial pilot study data, point to

observational learning as best theoretical framework for this study.

This study uses SLT in two ways: understanding how Millennials learn about brands and understanding how Millennials learn to communicate about brands.

Observational learning is used as a guide for understanding how Millennials learn about new brands and products by highlighting the process of discovery, exploration, and decision-making. Observational learning also helps uncover how learning influences purchasing decisions. SLT helps us understand how Millennials learn to communicate about brands, because they need to learn what brand related communication is accepted, and what is rejected, within their social environment, as well as learning which audiences are the appropriate recipients of brand related communication.

Research Questions

Based on the review of literature, the following research questions are proposed to explore Millennials and their communication of brand preference:

RQ1: How do Millennials learn about brands?

RQ2: What motivates Millennials to communicate their brand preferences?

RQ3: How do Millennials communicate their brand preferences?

METHODS

For this study I used focus groups (see protocol in Appendix A) as my primary source of data collection, and a short preliminary survey (Appendix B) administered at the start of each focus group as a secondary source of data. Focus groups allow participants to interact during the interview process; this interaction provides data that is unique to the method (Hartman, 2004). Focus groups also allow participants to respond to questions in a way that builds on what has been said by other members of the groups. This approach offers a unique context that cannot be replicated (Hartman, 2004). Focus groups fit the purpose of this study because they allow participants to communicate with one another and collaborate on questions. Also, participants may have trouble remembering some of the ways in which they discovered a brand or other information they will be asked to provide; by using focus groups I was able to avoid instances of participants being unable to remember details about purchasing habits. Focus groups allow respondents to offer their thoughts on not only their own memories but on the memories of other group members as well.

Recruitment

Participants for this study were recruited from the Communication 110: Fundamentals of Public Speaking research pool, as well as Communication 212: Interpersonal Communication. All students enrolled in the Communication 110 course are required to participate in two research studies each semester. This study offered extra incentive to participate because, due to the length of the focus group, it counts toward both of the required research participation assignments. Students recruited from Communication

212 were able to participate in this study for extra credit, awarded to them by their instructor.

Initial recruitment occurred via email. The recruitment email provided basic information about the purpose of the study as well as what will be asked of participants. The email also noted that students would receive credit for both research participation assignments, or extra credit from their instructor (for students in COMM 212). Once students began to respond I filled focus groups sessions according to participants' availabilities. I scheduled focus group sessions based on the understanding of the typical evening schedule of a college student that I developed while conducting the pilot study.

Participants

Based on the operationalization of the Millennial generation used in this study (those born between 1977 and 1997), students born between 1977 and 1993 were permitted to participate in the study. Students who are under the age of 18 were not permitted due to their inability to consent to participation in the study. Because I am interested in studying how Millennials communicate their brand loyalty, Millennials are the only group who qualified as participants for this research study. Focus groups with 50 total participants were used for this study; 35 participants were males and 15 were females. All participants were between the ages of 18 and 34, and were currently enrolled at NDSU. Participants were recruited from Communication 110: Fundamentals of Public speaking, as well as Communication 212: Interpersonal Communication. Of the 50 participants, 44 came from Communication 110 and 6 came from Communication 212.

Procedures

Participants were asked to read and sign an informed consent form (Appendix C)

before taking part in any aspect of the research. The informed consent form briefly outlined the purpose of the study and provided participants with information about potential risks, video recording of the focus group, and their ability to opt out of the study at any time.

There were two main research procedures present in this study. The first procedure was a preliminary survey where participants were asked questions about their favorite brands, what methods of communication they use to broadcast information about brands, and to whom they broadcast that information. The survey also asked questions about brand involvement based on my explanation of the Foote Cone Belding Grid (Appendix A). The Foote Cone Belding Grid measures the level of brand involvement of an individual based on emotional and logical brain functions (right side and left side brain activity). The grid has four quadrants, each representing a different psychological position; Marshallian, Freudian, Pavlovian, and Veblenian. The top two quadrants show high brand involvement, one on the logical side and one on the emotional side, and the bottom two quadrants show low brand involvement within the context of logic and emotion. The preliminary survey was used as a tool to help guide the conversation in each focus group session. This brief survey enabled me to avoid spending unnecessary time asking very basic questions, and allowed participants some time at the beginning to think about the topic before they were asked to answer questions in the focus group. My co-facilitator, Alicia Phillips, analyzed the preliminary surveys while I began the discussion component and handed me a summary to use during questioning.

The second procedure was the discussion portion of the focus group. Five focus group sessions were conducted, with each focus group containing between 6 and 12

participants (Fern, 1982; Hartman, 2004), and lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. Twelve participants were recruited for each focus group to ensure that the groups would have enough participants in the event of some participant(s) being unable to attend. Focus groups were conducted using a semi-structured interview style. I used this style because it allowed me to ask follow-up questions based on the responses I got from the group participants. The ability to ask questions based on the conversational momentum and direction of the group is a unique attribute of the semi-structured style and is beneficial to data collection because it allows participants to elaborate on topics and it allows the researcher the opportunity to follow points of discussion brought up by participants (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998).

The questions asked in each focus group differed slightly because some of them were based on the results of the preliminary survey, but the overall topics remained the same. Questions about brands that participants feel strongly about (whether positively or negatively), how they learned about those brands, to whom they communicate those feelings, and which mediums they use to communicate those feelings were asked in each focus group (Appendix B).

The questions asked were related to each other by moving from the very broad, “Tell me how you learn about new brands,” and, “Who would you tell about a brand you like?” to more specific questions about the brands mentioned during the focus group. These questions helped me answer the research questions by asking participants to reflect and describe how they learn about new brands, how they communicate about brands they like/dislike, who they tell, why they tell those people, and the mode of communication they use to relay brand information. Each focus group session was video recorded and

transcribed. Participants were given a pseudonym during transcription and at the conclusion of the study the video recordings will be destroyed.

Data Analysis

All focus group transcripts were analyzed using an inductive approach. First, all transcripts were read through in order for me to become more familiar with the data. Each transcript was then coded using an open coding method, which allowed themes to emerge from the data. Open coding occurs when “data are broken down into discrete parts, closely examined, and compared for similarities and differences” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 102). During open coding data is read and re-read to ensure that themes are accounted for and put into representative categories. This process allows the researcher to look for things like conversation topics, vocabulary, recurring activities, meanings, and feelings (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). Concepts that appeared in multiple transcripts prompted a re-reading of the transcripts for the purpose of deeper understanding of the concept and its context within the transcript.

After being labeled in the transcripts, concepts were grouped into categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Sub-categories were used when applicable. Sub-categories are used to expand on contextual information such as where, when, and why (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Once open coding was complete, axial coding commenced. Axial coding is “the act of relating categories to sub-categories along the lines of their properties and dimensions” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Combining categories creates themes; categories and sub-categories that are related to one another or are repeated can be merged into one theme.

The last phase of analysis was selective coding using sensitizing concepts (Strauss

& Corbin, 1998). Using sensitizing themes allowed any categories or sub-categories not identified during the open or axial coding phases to emerge. This study used social learning theory and observational learning as sensitizing concepts. I used social learning theory to point out data that highlighted the steps in Bandura's observational learning model. There was some overlap when using this type system of analysis (open, axial, and selective coding). All transcripts were analyzed until no new themes emerge from the data, when theoretical saturation was reached.

Pilot Study

A pilot study, consisting of four focus groups with a total of 24 participants, was conducted in October 2010. The participants in the pilot study were all NDSU students enrolled in Communication 110, and ranged in age from 18-21. The data from this pilot study suggest that Millennials use a variety of methods to communicate their brand loyalty, and that there are a number of different factors that dictate how, where, and to whom Millennials communicate brand loyalty. The pilot study provided a few key findings: first, that Millennials learn about brands through the visibility of a brand in their everyday lives; second, that Millennials identify with the brands they purchase but price affects their willingness to communicate their purchases third, that Millennials adapt their communication about brands according to whom they are communicating with, and fourth, that Millennials prefer to use online communication when they are dissatisfied with a purchase and face-to-face communication when they are satisfied with a purchase.

The pilot study influenced the research design for this study by providing areas of interest where more specific questions should be asked; specifically in the area of questions about price. The initial data also suggests that more research needs to be

conducted in order to gain a deeper understanding of how Millennials communicate about brands, both online and offline. The next chapter focuses on the findings from the current study, but also highlights points of convergence with data from the pilot study.

RESULTS

After the focus groups reached theoretical saturation they were transcribed and coded using an inductive method described in the previous chapter. The coding process revealed 6 key themes: observation, price, family tradition, broadcasting, audience awareness, and product type. The themes of observation and family tradition relate to purchasing decisions, while broadcasting, audience awareness, and product type relate to communication; price is related to both purchasing decisions and communication. Pilot study findings will be discussed at the end of the themes with which they overlap.

Theme 1: Observation

“It’s hard not to learn about new brands. Everywhere you look you see somebody wearing something new or using some new gadget. There’s just so much new stuff all the time.”

(Jim: 30-33)

The first theme to emerge during coding was observation. When conducting the focus groups I asked participants how they learned about new brands and/or products. A large majority of the participants stated that the main way they learned about new brands/products was by observing their peers. Jared illustrated this theme: “When I’m hanging out in the Union or something like that, I see a lot of kids wearing new clothes or whatever, and if I like what I see I will either ask them about it or go home and look it up online” (44-47). This comment shows how the observation of peers can lead to the exploration of a brand or product. “If one of my friends comes up to me wearing some new shoes or is using an iPad or something, I will ask him about it” (Tyler: 55-56). Tyler’s comment shows how friends can introduce each other to new brands/products simply by

using them. “Well, I’m a girl. So I kind of always notice new clothing. Especially if it’s something I would wear” (Shelby: 42-43). Shelby’s comment highlights how she notices clothing worn by other when it is something she can see herself purchasing.

Jared, Tyler, and Shelby weren’t the only participants to share this mentality. When talking to participants it became clear that they pay more attention to their peers than they do to television or print advertisements. However, there were 15 participants who stated they primarily learned about new brands/products from television, print, and online ads. Maggie and Anna explained how they observe brands and products through popular culture. Observation can be broken into two distinct sub-themes, the observation of peers and the observation of popular culture. “I never really pay attention to what other people are doing, so I guess TV and Internet are how I learn about stuff like this (brands)” (Maggie: 65-67). Maggie’s statement shows that she prefers to observe new brands and products through advertisements in popular culture. “I read fashion magazines and there are tons of ads in there. It’s hard not to notice the ads when the first 20 pages are trying to sell you something” (Anna: 45-47). Anna’s statement, much like Maggie’s, highlights the fact that she generally only pays attention to new brands and products when they are included in the media she consumes.

The majority explained why they prefer to find out about products through the observation of peers. One participant, Mark, offered his personal reason for observing. “I guess I just like to see a product in person, you know? I can tell how it fits or how it works. TV ads don’t really tell you that stuff” (Mark: 60-62). The sentiment expressed by Mark was not a singular event. 29 participants expressed a lack of trust in advertisements, and stated they felt like marketers were lying them to. “TV ads only tell you about the good

things. They don't tell you that their product might break a week later" (Sherman: 70-71).

In four out of the five focus groups, participants expressed distrust in advertisements, and from this a sub-theme emerged; reviews, which participants described as a way to observe the general consensus on a brand or product. A majority of participants talked about their use of product reviews. "If there is a product that I'm interested in buying I will look online to see what other people are saying about it" (Billy: 70-71). Billy's quote points out a trend reinforced by 30 other participants, that their first inclination when they become interested in a new brand or product is to see what other people have said about it. Billy's feelings are reinforced by a statement from Jim, "I want to know what other users are saying about a product [...] I trust them more than what the company says about their own product" (72-74). Jim's comment also points back to the lack of trust participants have in advertisers.

When the theme of reviews was mentioned I asked participants what they look for in a review. Some participants didn't list any specific criteria for reviews, but some said they looked for the negative aspects of a product. "I want to know what is wrong with something. If there are more costs than benefits I will maybe shop around for something else" (Billy: 80-81). "Sometimes companies will write really good reviews of their products, but those are easy to spot. If the product was as good as they (the company) say it is then everyone would already have it" (Jim: 88-90). Jim's words were reinforced by copious head nods which suggest that many of the participants have had similar experiences reading product reviews.

Participants favored observation and reviews when looking for new brands/products. They felt more secure purchasing a product if they had seen it in person

or if they trusted the reviews they read about the brand/product. This process of observation and research shows Millennials as a group take an active role in their purchasing, and are not consumption-happy consumers of the latest and greatest products/brands; contrary to some of the views expressed in previous research (Twenge, 2007; Greenberg & Weber, 2008).

Data collected in a pilot study was similar to the findings on this theme. Pilot study participants noted that they generally learn about new brands/products by observing their peers, and also noted that they use online reviews as a way to explore a brand or product before making a purchase. “You just remember the brands you see the most, and if you like it you might check it out” (Hector: 20-21). The quote from Hector illustrates a theme similar to the theme found in this study. “Sometimes it’s easier to like see it on somebody else first and then you’re like ‘hey I like that’ and you might look into buying something” (Jason: 38-40). Jason’s comment highlights the effect of observing brands and products through peers. While pilot study participants’ responses did not have the level of detail present in responses from this study, the data is still useful and further proves the validity of this theme.

Theme 2: Price

“I guess price has a lot to do with it. I mean, I don’t talk about a thirty cent pack of Ramen I bought, but I would tell you if I bought a new car.”

(Zander: 130-132)

The theme of price emerged in all 5 focus groups, and was described similarly in each group. Price can be broken into two sub-themes; price affecting purchasing decisions and price affecting communication of that purchase. Zander explained why price is so

important. “I would say price is important because I’m a college student and I don’t have a lot of money. I look at how much something costs first because I have to watch how much I spend” (Zander: 110-112). This quote illustrates the importance of budgeting for Millennials and how it affects purchasing decisions. “It’s important to me to know if something is worth the money. I guess this goes back to reviews, but I want to know if the thing I’m purchasing is going to be worth the money...especially if it is over a hundred dollars” (Jim: 130-133). Jim’s comment reinforces the sentiments shown in Zander’s comment, and again shows the importance of cost effective spending for Millennials. Billy shared his feelings: “If I spend a bunch of money on a new computer I’m probably going to tell people about it...just because it was expensive” (125-126), which highlights how expensive purchases function as motivation for brand/product related communication.

Participants expressed price as functioning in two ways, and the above quotes illustrate this; pre-purchase and post-purchase. Participants brought up price as a factor when they were asked why they choose to use certain brands over others and when asked what types of brands/products they mentioned to others. Price as a factor before purchasing a brand or product was something that the majority of participants nodded in agreement to when asked if they agreed, but was only described in detail a few times. “Price. If I’m going to buy a product and there is a cheaper option that works just as well as a name brand then I will buy it” (Sherman: 88-90). Sherman’s comment about finding a cheaper alternative to a name brand product was mentioned by participants in all 5 focus groups. Participants noted that because they are college students, many of them don’t have enough money for name brand item, and instead they look for products that fulfill the same needs at a lower cost. Michelle expressed a similar mindset: “I just can’t afford a lot of name

brand stuff so I either look for bargains or buy the store brand stuff (generic)" (95-97).

Price as a motivator for communication post-purchase garnered more complex responses. "Well, you know I never want to brag about buying stuff but if I bought something really expensive like a Mac (computer) or something like that, I would probably tell more people about it" (Jessie: 200-202). Jessie's comment about price and communication shows a link between expensive purchases and increased communication about brands and products. Wilhelm shared a similar opinion, "I think I would talk about something I bought if it was, like, super expensive, but other than that I don't really talk about it (purchases)" (212-214). The main idea expressed by participants is that they were more likely to talk about expensive purchases because they were excited. Another participant, Josh, stated: "When you get a new car or a snowmobile or something, you are excited about it. You just want to tell people" (20-221).

Participants stated that price is very important to them when considering a purchase because they generally don't have a lot of money to spend. Some participants brought up the fact that they are willing to buy generic brand foods to save money, money they could spend on other goods and services. "I will buy generic food because there really isn't that much of a difference, at least not to me" (Michelle: 100-101). Michelle views food as an area where costs can be cut because she does not view it as an important product. Tyler shared a similar mindset: "A loaf of bread is a loaf of bread, but a car is not just a car" (109-110).

Some participants noted that the product was the thing that dictated price. If they thought a product was inherently too expensive they would avoid it. "I hear a lot of people talk about how much they love their Macs (computer), but for me it just isn't worth the

money. I can buy a PC that is just as good for half the price” (Jared: 130-134). Jared sees expensive technology, like Apple computers, as a waste of money and instead opts for PC computers, which are a cheaper alternative. While only 12 participants shared this sentiment, it is still an interesting view on the function of price.

Price was also a theme that emerged in the pilot study. Participants in the pilot study did not talk extensively about price, but it was mentioned in 3 of the four pilot study focus groups. “Price can have an effect too. Like if something was really expensive you might tell more people about it (Rick: 139-140). The quote from Rick highlights the motivation to communicate based on the price of an item. Pilot study participants noted that price is a motivator for brand/product related communication and that expensive product are talked about more frequently than inexpensive products. “If I buy something like a new TV, something that costs a lot of money, I want people to know about it, but if I bought something that only costs like 5 bucks then who cares?” (Dominic: 110-112). Dominic’s quote illustrates the function of price on communication, and coincides with the findings in this study.

Theme 3: Family Tradition

“I remember when I was looking to buy a new car. My mom said if I got a Ford she would disown me.”

(Jake: 120-121)

The theme of family tradition was discussed in all 5 focus groups. Participants discussed their purchasing habits and how they are directly related to the products bought by their parents when they were growing up. Jake illustrates this theme. “I just use the stuff that my mom and dad bought when I was a kid. I’m used to it, so I don’t even think about

it, really” (Jake: 130-132). Jake points out that he is accustomed to certain products because they were purchased by his parent when he was growing up, and thus does not think about switching to a different brand. Jenny also shared this sentiment: “I remember coming to college and seeing a bunch of other kids using all of these brands that I had never heard of...just for stuff like laundry detergent,” Jenny said, “but still...I guess I was never exposed to it because I just used what my parents bought” (142-145). Jenny’s experience with new brands in college is due to her inexperience with them, which is a result of her parents purchasing habits.

When the theme of tradition was discussed in the focus groups, participants focused the conversation on how they either continue to buy the brands/products they were raised on, or, how they have started making purchases that differ from their family tradition. At this point family tradition can be broken into two sub-themes; continuation and differentiation. Zander illustrates differentiation: “Now that I’m older I don’t just buy whatever my parents use. I have my own brands that I like” (140-141). Zander continued to say “it might have something to do with how much money I have to spend, but I think it also has to do with me wanting to make decisions for myself” (142-143). Zander’s comment suggests that differentiation may be a result of growing up and wanting to be a unique person who can make decisions for himself.

The theme of price emerged in reference to tradition. Participants who noted that they don’t buy the same products as their parents also noted that it generally had to do with the amount of money they have to spend on goods. This concept was illustrated by Kendall: “I can’t afford to buy a lot of name brand stuff, so I just get whatever works for a good price” (155-156). It should also be noted that when participants talked about products

and tradition together, the products were usually necessities such as toothpaste, laundry detergents, and toilet paper. Five participants discussed automobile brands, such as Jake in the quotation at the beginning of this section. When asked why their parents chose one brand of automobile over others none of the participants could effectively answer the question, however, they all stated they shared the same opinion on automobile brands as their parents. This suggests that brand loyalty may be the result of prolonged exposure to one viewpoint.

The discussion of tradition was brief in all 5 groups, but the same data came out of each group. Participants either accepted or rejected their family's purchasing tradition. While only two options were discussed, it would be fallacious to assume that only two options exist; one could presumably continue and differentiate based on the product being purchased. Price, again, was a deciding factor for some participants.

The pilot study data also listed family tradition as an emergent theme. Participants noted that they use certain products because their parents had purchased them while they were growing up. One participant, Douglas, stated: "I grew up driving Ford trucks. That's what my dad always had and now that's what I like" (40-41). Douglas' comment about the connection between his current purchasing habits and the purchasing habits of his parents is similar to many comments made by participants in this study. Jacklyn also illustrated this theme: "I've been using Tide forever. My parents always bought it when we were kids. It gets the job done, so I just keep buying it" (47-48). Pilot study participants only discussed how they continue to buy products based on the purchasing habits of their parents, and did not discuss discontinuation.

Theme 4: Broadcasting

“I tell my friends because that’s who I see the most.”

(Tyler: 200-201)

Broadcasting, the communication of brand preference or opinion is one of the more complex themes that emerged during the coding process. Participants were asked questions regarding whom they tell about positive and negative experiences with brands/products. Responses pointed to two sub-themes of broadcasting: face-to-face interactions and digital messaging. A large majority of the participants stated they prefer to use face-to-face communication when talking about brands/products. “It’s just easier, and people will understand exactly what you are talking about” (Drew: 220-221). Drew’s comment shows his belief in the ease of face-to-face communication, and his comment garnered a lot of head nods. When asked if they agreed with his statement all of the participants in that group said “yes.”

The idea that face-to-face communication has a lower chance of misunderstanding was a consistent theme in all 5 focus groups. “I know that when I am talking to someone face-to-face they will not be confused by what I’m talking about” (Tyler: 250-251). Tyler’s comment about the lack of miscommunication in face-to-face interactions is another instance where group members nodded in agreement. When asked to explain why he felt this way Tyler said, “Well, when you send a text message or chat with someone on facebook they might not understand what you are talking about or they might take it the wrong way. You can’t really use stuff like sarcasm in a text” (259-262). Tyler points to instances where he views miscommunication as a likely outcome. Jenny shared a similar reasoning, “I don’t want to have to explain myself over a text message so I just use texts to

say stuff like ‘where are you’ or ‘what are we doing tonight’ because I know you can’t read it wrong” (260-262). Jenny’s comment also suggests that there have been instances where digital communication has been misunderstood, which has affirmed her preference for face-to-face communication.

Participants noted that face-to-face communication is their preferred method for communicating about brands/products, but they also noted that this was mainly true when they had a positive brand experience. When asked how they communicate after having a negative brand/product experience, a small majority (28) of participants stated they were likely to use digital messaging. “When you are mad about something you just want to tell a bunch of people...texting makes that easy” (Jenny: 300-301). This statement from Jenny points to frustration as a motivator for communication after having a negative brand experience. Zander summed up this concept by stating:

I read somewhere that we talk more about bad experiences than we do about good experiences. I don’t know about the rest of you but I think that is true for me. When I have a bad experience I want people to know about it...partly because I want sympathy and also because I don’t want other people to go through the same bad experience as me (320-325).

When asked how they felt about Zander’s comment the vast majority of participants said they agreed with him. One participant, Maggie, said “Yeah, I guess I just want to get it off my chest, and I agree about the warning your friends thing. You don’t want your friends to get ripped off” (350-352). The quotes from Zander and Maggie highlight a trend from all 5 groups: protection of peers. All participants agreed that they communicate their negative brand/product experiences to their peers because they want to

protect them from making the same mistake they made.

While participants stated they were willing to tell a large number of people about a negative brand/product experience, they also stated they generally didn't talk about positive brand/product experiences. "I guess I just assume that no one is going to care" (Jim: 320). Jim's comment was reinforced by Michelle, who said "Yeah, totally. I think people might think I'm bragging or something, so I don't really say anything unless someone asks me about it (brands/products)" (322-324). A majority of participants were quick to point out that they generally didn't talk about brands/products unless asked by someone else. "If one of my friends saw that I was wearing a new shirt or something and asked me about it, I would say something, but otherwise I probably wouldn't say anything" (Jim: 355-358). Jim's comment points to prompting as a major motivation for communication about a brands/products, which is a theme present in all 5 groups.

As stated earlier, broadcasting is a complex theme that functions differently depending on the brand/product experience of the user. Participants highlighted their affinity for face-to-face communication, but 26 of the participants also stated they were likely to use digital messaging to communicate about a negative brand experience. All participants agreed their communication was partially motivated by a desire to warn their peers after they had a negative brand/product experience.

Data collected in the pilot study showed three themes in common with the findings of this study; the preference of face-to-face communication when talking about brands/products, using digital communication more when discussing negative brand/product experiences, and warning others of negative brand experiences. Pilot study participants noted that they prefer to use face-to-face communication because they did not

view brand related communication as a priority, and instead valued it as the topic of small talk. Richard illustrates this finding: “Face to face. It’s not a very interesting text message. I usually just mention stuff about brands in passing. It’s like small talk” (130-131).

Participants from the pilot noted that they use digital communication more when discussing a negative brand experience and that they broadcast negative brand experiences mainly to warn others. Reagan illustrates this pilot study finding: “to protect them from making the same bad decision you made. Like, looking out for the common good” (220-221). The findings from the pilot study are similar to the findings here; however, the pilot study participants did not talk in as much detail as the participants in this study.

Theme 5: Audience Awareness

“I’m not going to tell my mom about some new video game I bought.”

(Max: 130)

Participants consistently made comments about their communication and how it is dependent upon the listener. Audience awareness, according to participants, dictates what brands/products are discussed and what method of communication is used to discuss them. Max stated “like I said before, I’m not telling my mom about video games because I know she won’t care, but I might talk to her about some new food item or something like that” (200-202). This comment highlights the way Millennials cater their brand related communication to specific audiences. According to the participants, not every brand can be discussed with every person they know; they adapt the brands they discuss to the audience of their message.

Participants pointed out that they are more likely to communicate about a brand/product if the recipient of that communication is someone whom they view as

interested in that brand or that type of product. This suggests that Millennials cater their brand/product communication to only those individuals who are seen as having similar interests as them. “If I don’t think you would like some product that I like then I’m not going to tell you about it” (Jake: 230-231). Jake’s comment illustrates the need for brand related communication to have some utility to the audience.

Participants also noted that age and gender factor into their brand communication. “I don’t talk to my girlfriend about my truck because she doesn’t care” (Jim: 312-313). This quote from Jim reinforces the theme by illustrating how certain brands/products are regarded as having a specific audience. Jenny reinforced this theme by stating, “my guy friends aren’t interested in what shampoo or conditioner I like...it doesn’t apply to them” (315-316). These quotes highlight Millennials’ inclination to only communicate about certain brands/products with certain people. Age is the other area where participants talked about censoring their brand/product communication to with their audience. Brycen commented on this theme: “My parents never ask me about the clothes I’m wearing or what type of phone I have, but they ask about stuff like food” (333-334). Brycen’s comment illustrates the difference age can have on brand related communication.

Audience awareness dictates what brands/products are talked about by Millennials. Age and gender were the two categories consistently talked about in all 5 groups, but one participant also noted that location might play a role in deciding what types of brands/products are talked about.

“I think maybe region or location might have something to do with it (brand communication),” said Teresa (430-431). She went on to say, “I mean I’m from a big city and I know a lot of people who talk about this kind of stuff (brands/products) a lot, but up

here you never really hear people say stuff about it” (432-434). These comments suggest that location may play a role in how frequently brands/products are discussed. Teresa also stated: “Maybe it’s just because people are more concerned with brands or whatever in the city. You know? There are more people so there’s more marketing influence.” This comment suggests that Millennials living in more urban locations might be more consciously aware of brands/products and, hence, talk about them more openly. Unfortunately Teresa was the only participant who discussed location in detail. Two other participants talked about location, but they did so in a manner that suggests they were hypothesizing, rather than speaking from experience.

Theme 6: Product Type

“It depends on the product really. I won’t just start telling people about a product randomly.” (Zander: 400-401)

Product type was the last theme to emerge. Participants continuously stated that their communication about a brand or product was dependent on the type of brand/product.

“There are just some things (products) that I wouldn’t talk about. Like, no one cares about what cereal I eat” (Shelby: 390). Shelby’s comment suggests that some brands/products are less important in conversation and Zander shared a similar opinion, “It depends. If I bought something like a new TV or a new pair of headphones I would probably tell people about it, but not everything is worth bringing up” (415-416).

Participants noted that many of the day-to-day products they use are rarely the topic of a conversation. “You just don’t talk about that stuff because people don’t care...or at least I know I wouldn’t care if someone was telling me about their toothpaste or something like that” (Wilhelm: 340-342). Participants agreed that some products are better suited for

conversation than others. These products include things such as technology (televisions, computers, iPods), cars, clothing, and sporting goods. When asked why these products were better suited for conversation Shelby said, “because everyone uses them” (415). A majority of participants agreed that they talk about products/brands that many people use. I asked Shelby how a car differs from a box of cereal in regards to the number of people who use it and she said, “it’s just different. People don’t get excited when you talk about cereal, but they do when you are talking about something like a new car” (417-419). While they were not able to completely explain why some products were talked about more than others, the participants made it clear that there is a hierarchy in place and only certain products/brands are worth discussing.

Participants noted that some brands/products simply don’t make for good conversation. “People just don’t care about some stuff. Like, if I bought some new soda brand or something like that people won’t care because it’s just a soda” (Simon: 420-421). Simon’s comment was met with head nodding and affirming expressions by all members of that group. When asked why they felt this way participants stated they felt like communicating this type of brand/product information would be viewed as a waste of time by their audience. “It’s just random information. No one is going to care one way or the other” (Simon: 426-427). This again suggests that there is a hierarchy in place and only large impact items (technology, clothing, cars, etc...) are deemed worthy of communication. More research should be done on this topic in order to gain a better understanding of the potential phenomenon.

Survey Results

The following tables indicate the results of the preliminary survey:

Table 1: Brand listings

Top Brands Listed	Number of Participants Listing
Nike	22
Apple	9
Coca-Cola	6
Adidas	5
The North Face	5
Aeropostale (clothing)	5
Wrangler	4
Levi's Jeans	4
American Eagle (clothing)	4

Table 2: When you have a positive experience with a brand how do you tell others?

Method of communication	Most Prefer %	Least Prefer %
Face-to-face	74%	6%
Over the phone	0%	19%
Text message	13%	19%
Instant message	2%	2%
Email	2%	35%
Social networking sites	4%	15%
User review on website	4%	2%

Table 3: When you have a negative experience with a brand how do you tell others?

Method of communication	Most Prefer %	Least Prefer %
Face-to-face	71%	6%
Over the phone	0%	20%
Text message	13%	19%
Instant message	0%	4%
Email	6%	24%
Social networking sites	0%	15%
User review on website	10%	6%

Before the discussion portion of each focus group took place participants were asked to complete a brief survey. The survey asked participants to list 5 of their favorite brands as well as a series of questions relating to their brand communication habits. The

survey also contained an interactive learning component where participants were asked to stop their work and listen to an explanation of the Foote Cone Belding Grid (FCBG), which measures brand involvement. Once an explanation of the FCBG had been given, participants were asked to answer three questions regarding their brand involvement. The following section will discuss the findings of this survey.

The first section of the preliminary survey asked participants to list 5 of their favorite brands. The responses for this question were surprisingly similar in that they were all related to clothing, food, automobiles, and sporting goods. Some of the most frequently listed brands include North Face, Nike (22 out of 50), Apple (9 out of 50), Adidas (5 out of 50), Wrangler (4 out of 50), Coca-Cola (6 out of 50), and Aeropostal (5 out of 50). There were a few participants who listed tobacco products, but this had no impact on the results of the survey. Once participants had listed their favorite brands/products, they were asked a series of questions regarding their communication habits when talking about brands/products.

The communication habits questions asked participants the same set of questions for two scenarios, positive brand/product experience and negative brand/product experience. The results from first set of questions, dealing with positive experiences with brands/products, showed that face-to-face, text message, and social networking websites were the most commonly selected methods of communication. When asked which method they most preferred participants responded almost unanimously with face-to-face communication (74%). Text messaging was a distant second (13%), and only few participants listed social networking websites as their most preferred method (4%).

When asked which method of communication they least preferred to use when

talking about a positive brand/product experience, the most common response was email (35%). After email, the highest number of responses listed over-the-phone as the least preferred method of communication (19%).

The second set of questions was identical to the first except it asked participants about their communication habits after a negative brand/product experience. The results of the second set of questions were almost identical to the answers from the first set.

Participants noted that their preferred method of communication is face-to-face (71%), followed by text messaging (13%). The method of communication least preferred by participants was, once again, email (24%), followed by over-the-phone interactions (20%).

Participants were then asked what people they communicate brand/product related information to, in both positive and negative scenarios. When asked whom they tell about positive brand/product experiences, participants responded with friends, family, and significant others, respectively. Participants were also asked which group they were most likely to tell about a positive brand/product experience, to which they responded, friends first and foremost, followed by family members. Participants were then asked which group they are least likely to tell about a positive experience and they responded with co-workers and strangers as the top two answers.

When asked whom they tell about negative brand/product experiences, participants' responses were much more varied. The responses to this question ranged from friends and family, to co-workers and acquaintances. When asked which group they most preferred to tell about negative experiences, participants responded with friends, family, and classmates. Participants were then asked which group they least preferred to tell about a negative brand/product experience, and responded with acquaintances and strangers as the

top two answers.

At this point in the survey participants were asked to stop working and listen to an explanation of the Foote Cone Belding Grid. After an explanation was given participants were asked to answer the remaining three questions. These questions asked participants about their level of brand involvement. The first question required participants to look back to the 5 brands they listed at the beginning of the survey and decide what needs they saw them fulfilling. The answers here hit on all four quadrants on the grid. Products such as clothing were viewed as fulfilling self-esteem and ego needs, while products/brands such as automobiles and technology were viewed as informative items that require economic considerations. Participants were then asked to rate their level of involvement for the brands they listed. The answers to this question varied greatly, but a trend did emerge. Participants listed products such as clothing and automobiles as highly involved, and items such as foodstuffs and cosmetics as low involvement.

The final question on the survey asked participants which brand/product, out of the 5 listed, they would stop using if they had to choose one. The majority of participants listed either clothing or food brands as disposable. Participants were also asked to provide a reason why they would stop using said brand/product and the results show that price plays a key role. A majority of participants noted that there were cheaper alternatives to the products they listed, and some participants even stated that there were other brands they like as much as the one listed at the beginning of the survey.

The results to the preliminary survey shed some light on Millennials' brand communication and brand involvement. Some of the answers to survey questions were consistent with the information gathered in discussion portion of the focus groups, and

some were not. The following section will compare and contrast the two sets of data.

Comparison of Survey Data and Focus Group Discussions

The two sets of data collected through focus groups come from the preliminary survey and the discussion section of each group. There are consistencies and inconsistencies between the two sets of data. The main finding from both sets of data is Millennials prefer to interact face-to-face when communicating about brands and products. In both components participants were adamant that face-to-face communication is the method they most prefer. In the survey results participants responded with text messaging as the number two method they preferred to use when talking about brands/products, however, in the discussion portion of all 5 focus groups participants stated they did not like using text messaging when discussing brands/products. This may be a result of a few very vocal participants stating their distaste in text messaging and the other group members following suit.

Another area where the data sets are consistent is in the groups they talk to about brands/products. In both components, in all 5 groups, participants stated they primarily talk about positive brand/product experiences with their friends and family. The information regarding negative brand/product experiences, however, is not consistent. In the surveys participants' responses ranged from friends and family, to co-workers and classmates, but when asked a similar question in the discussion section, the majority of participants listed their friends as the primary recipient of this communication.

Another inconsistency can be found when looking at responses to the question "what method of communication do you least prefer to use when talking about positive/negative experiences with brands/products?" In the survey participants listed

email as their least preferred method of communication for both positive and negative brand/product experiences but, in the discussion portion of the focus groups, participants focused on text messaging as a method of communication they did not at all prefer.

The differences between the two sets of data did not hurt the overall findings of the study. It is interesting to look at the data sets and view responses in both group and individual settings. The data collected in the pilot study is consistent with the data collected in the discussion component of the focus groups; however, a preliminary survey was not given during the pilot study.

DISCUSSION

This qualitative study on branding, communication, and Millennials yielded new and interesting insight into the communication habits and motivations of a large group. This chapter will discuss themes discovered through focus groups.. This chapter will use the findings discussed in the previous chapter to answer the research questions presented at the end of chapter 2. Following a discussion of the implications of this study, limitations and areas for future research will be reviewed.

Research Question 1: How do Millennials Learn about Brands?

Contrary to findings from previous literature (Seckler, 2006; Yarrow & O'Donnell, 2009; Greenberg & Weber, 2008), participants in this study noted that they primarily learn about brands through observation. Previous research indicates a move toward technology for brand discovery (Seckler, 2006; Greenber & Weber, 2008), however, participants were quick to dispel this notion. Focus group participants stated that their knowledge about new brands and products was generally a result of observing their peers. There were also comments from a small number of participants (15) who claimed that they learn about new brands by observing popular culture (e.g., television, print, and internet ads), which is discussed below.

Observation is one of the key components of Social Learning Theory's (SLT) sub-concept of observational learning (Bandura, 1977; Grusec, 1992; Ormond, 1999). Bandura's observational learning model was adapted for use in this study, and participant responses suggest that observational learning is part of their discovery of new brands and/or products. Participants stated that when they first encounter a brand or product that is

new to them, they either decide to ignore it or explore it further. Participants noted that when they encounter a new brand or product that they are interested in they will explore it by looking at online reviews. This finding does support previous research that states Millennials rely on technology to explore brands and products (Seckler, 2006; Greenberg & Weber, 2008).

Participants also noted that they prefer to observe brands and products through their peers because it allows them to see the brand or product in person. Participants stated that it was important for them to view a product up-close because they would be able to touch, feel, use, and discuss the product with its owner. This finding suggests that Millennials are more responsive to interactions with a product than they are with advertisements about a product. Previous research suggests that Millennials prefer to discover new brands and products through technology (Seckler, 2006; Greenberg & Weber, 2008), but the findings in this study suggest otherwise.

A small number of participants (15 out of 50) stated they prefer to learn about new brands and products by observing popular culture (e.g., television, print, and internet ads), which supports previous research by Seckler (2006) and Greenberg & Weber (2008), however, this finding does not represent the majority of focus group participants. Future research could focus in more depth on brand learning in order to gain a better understanding of how Millennials learn about new brands and products.

Participants reported observation of peers as the primary method of discovering new brands and products. Participants noted their preference to observe their peers as having to do with seeing the physical product. This finding is particularly relevant marketers who focus their efforts on electronic ad campaigns due to the assumption that

Millennials use technology to learn about brands and products. Now that I've discussed how Millennials learn about brands, let's move on to what motivates them to communicate the brands they prefer.

Research Question 2: What Motivates Millennials to Communicate their Brand Preferences?

Price, brand/product experience, and product type were the three main motivations participants reported for communicating their brand/product preferences to others. Participants consistently noted that price plays a large role in motivating their communication about brands or products. Participants noted that price only acts as a motivator if the product purchased was expensive and that small purchases supplied very little motivation for communication. For example, a person who bought a new television would be much more likely to communicate that purchase to others than a person who purchased something inexpensive like a food item or a new pen. Participants noted that this is due to the excitement over spending a large sum of money, and agreed that small purchases were seen as insignificant and would be thought of as such by their peers. Participants saw price almost as a way of measuring the importance of a purchase: the more expensive the product, the more important. This translated to a system of communication where only the "important" (i.e., expensive) purchases were communicated to others. Participants also noted that they generally do not report the brand of the expensive item they purchased, but rather the product type. This suggests that Millennials may be more concerned with product type and less concerned with brands. Price alone does not determine whether or not a Millennial will communicate about a brand/product, but when paired with a positive or negative brand/product experience the end result

becomes clearer.

Brand/product experience, both positive and negative, was another area consistently mentioned by participants. When asked about communicating positive brand/product experiences, participants stated they were hesitant to share their experience with others. A small number of participants talked about bragging and how they would actively try to avoid sounding “braggy” by keeping positive experiences to themselves. The majority of participants noted that they choose not to communicate positive brand/product experiences because they did not think others would be interested. Instead of communicating about positive experiences with brands/products participants stated they generally communicate more about negative experiences. This finding connects back to previous research from Zemke (2000) and Gorman, Nelson, & Glassman (2004), which state that Millennials are more likely to communicate experiences than previous generations. The results of this study suggest that Millennials are more motivated to communicate negative brand and product experiences. The results of this study both support and counter previous research: participants noted that they communicate more about negative brand experiences and less about positive experiences. This suggests that there may be limits to Millennials’ tendency to over-share, which is not stated in previous research (Gorman, Nelson, & Glassman, 2004; Greenberg & Weber, 2008; Yarrow & O’Donnell, 2009).

Participants pointed out that they are more likely to communicate about a negative brand/product experience because they feel frustrated and because they want to warn others so they do not make a similar mistake. Participants noted that they generally only communicate the brand, and not necessarily the product, with which they had the negative

experience. The concept of warning others is in contrast to the writings of Twenge (2007) and Twenge & Campbell (2009), because it shows Millennials shifting away from themselves and toward the well-being of others. In the focus groups conducted for this study, a large majority of the participants noted that they mainly want to ensure that their friends do not make the same purchasing mistakes they make, so they communicate their negative brand/product experiences in order to warn them.

Along with warning others, participants noted that they communicate about negative brand/product experiences because they feel frustrated and want others to sympathize with them. It should be noted that frustration and the desire to warn others are not mutually exclusive. Many participants talked about these concepts in tandem; stating they often feel both motivations pulling them toward communicating about a brand or product. A person can feel frustrated after having a negative experience with a brand or product and want to broadcast their frustration in order to gain sympathy, while also wanting to let their peers know that they should stay away from a certain brand or product. This suggests that the motivation to communicate about a brand or product has more to do with the broadcasting of a personal experience of the consumer, and less to do with the actual brand. The need for sympathy can be tied back to the research of Twenge (2007), who states that Millennials have a constant need for attention. While this finding does not indicate that Millennials are using brand or product information as a means for garnering attention, it is supported by previous research which states Millennials have higher self-esteem needs (Greenberg & Weber, 2009; Twenge, 2007; Twenge & Campbell, 2009; Yarrow & O'Donnell, 2008;). Personal experience was also shown when participants discussed price. Many participants stated they mainly communicated the type of product

purchased, and not the brand. This suggests that product type takes precedence over brand names.

Participants also discussed product type as a motivation for communicating about a brand/product. Participants noted that they were more willing to communicate about certain types of products. The product types listed by participants as worthy of communication were technology, automobiles, clothing, and sporting goods. Participants viewed these products as communication worthy because they are expensive and desirable. Participants noted that they generally only communicate the type of product purchased, however, they also discussed how they would communicate about a brand when prompted by others. This finding is in contrast to previous research by Tapscott (1998), who stated Millennials are more willing to share information with others than previous generations. The findings in this study suggest that Millennials may be more selective when it comes to certain types of information. Participants noted that they prefer not to communicate about brands/products, unless it is seen as important information for others to hear.

The findings from the focus groups conducted for this study suggest that Millennials are motivated to communicate about their brand and product preferences in a variety of ways. Price, positive and negative brand/product experiences, and the type of product all factor in to Millennials decision to communicate their preferences. Millennials' motivations for communicating their brand preferences are complex and contingent upon several factors, but the modes of communication they use are decidedly less complicated.

Research Question 3: How Do Millennials Communicate their Brand Preferences?

Participants noted they communicate differently about brands/products based upon the experience they had. Although, a large majority of participants stated they prefer to use

face-to-face communication when discussing brands/products, regardless of whether the experience was positive or negative. This suggests that participants may prefer face-to-face communication above other methods, but still use digital communication more heavily when discussing negative brand experiences. Participants noted that face-to-face communication requires less explanation and leaves less room for miscommunication than digital communication. Additionally, participants noted that they generally did not use digital communication to talk about positive experiences with brands/products because they did not view brand/product information as worthy of that communication mode. Instead they viewed face-to-face interactions as the best method of communicating about brands and products because they view the topic of brands/products as small talk, and not the main topic of a conversation. However, participants stated they would use digital communication in order to share a negative brand/product experience with others. Participants noted they would use digital communication in this scenario because it is the fastest way to tell a large number of their friends about their negative experience.

Participant responses are in contrast to previous research, which suggests that Millennials do the majority of their communicating digitally (Greenberg & Weber, 2008; Seckler, 2006). The findings from focus groups show Millennials as a group who only use digital communication for communicating about specific things. Participants noted that they did not like using text messaging or online chats to talk about brands/products because there is a high risk of miscommunication. This finding, in conjunction with the finding that participants are concerned about appearing boastful highlights the differing motivations for brand communication. This finding differs from the general understanding of Millennials as generation that prefers to communicate digitally (Greenberg & Weber,

2008; Yarrow & O'Donnell, 2009). The participants in this study did not prefer digital communication, and some even stated that they avoid it when talking about brands/products. Previous research suggests that Millennials avoid face-to-face interactions (Yarrow & O'Donnell, 2009), however, the majority of participants in this study reported that they prefer face-to-face communication when communicating about brands and/or products.

The findings here suggest that Millennials are more selective in their communication habits than previous research has stated (Gorman, Nelson, & Glassman, 2004; Tapscott, 1998). Instead of relying on technology to communicate their opinions, Millennials choose which brand-related messages they deem worthy of certain modes of communication. Social learning theory, where individuals learn which behavior is socially acceptable and which is not (Ormond, 1999; Bandura, 1977; Grusec, 1992), also helps us to better understand this communication behavior. Participants noted that certain brand messages are seen as more socially acceptable. These messages included venting frustration after a negative brand experience, discussing a brand after being prompted by others, broadcasting expensive purchases, and warning others of a low quality brand or product. This suggests that brand-related communication behaviors could be based on social learning: an individual must learn what messages others view as worthy of communication. These findings complicate the conventional wisdom regarding Millennials reviewed in chapter 2.

Millennials' high levels of technology use have led marketers to believe that they prefer to communicate online (Seckler, 2006; Yarrow & O'Donnell, 2009). These assumptions have also led to marketing campaigns that focus on the tech-savvy nature of

Millennials (Greenberg & Weber, 2008). The findings in this study suggest that Millennials' use of technology is more complex than previously assumed. Participants noted that their communication habits are contingent upon many factors. They prefer to discuss brands/products face-to-face, and noted that they generally do not initiate conversations about brands/products unless they know the recipient of the message will benefit from it. Participants viewed brand related information as small talk, which may come as a surprise to marketers who assume Millennials are constantly broadcasting their brand and product preferences. Small talk, as described by focus group participants, is the conversations about miniscule matters. When asked for other examples of small talk, participants listed weather, sports, and course work.

Participants repeatedly stated that they are hesitant to communicate about brands/products unless prompted by someone else. These prompts include peers asking for their opinion on a brand/product, someone asking for their advice about a purchase, or discussing a brand or product with an individual whom they view as having similar interests to their own. This links back to SLT where individuals learn what behavior is socially acceptable (Ormond, 1999). Participants noted they typically communicate about brands and products when prompted by others. This process can be viewed as a social norm, and individuals have learned that brand and product related communication should only be done in certain ways, and in certain situations. These findings complicate previous research, which states that Millennials are more willing to share their opinions than previous generations (Gorman, Nelson, & Glassman, 2004). The findings of this study suggest Millennials' communication habits are based on experience and the message being sent.

Participants noted that they primarily communicate their brand preferences to their friends, defined by participants as the people they interact with most often, and family. Previous research suggests that Millennials are more than willing to share information with anyone who will listen (Gorman, Nelson, & Glassman, 2004; Yarrow & O'Donnell, 2009) but the findings in these focus groups suggest that Millennials actually tell very few people about their brand/product preferences. Participants noted that they tell their friends about their brand/product preferences because they are constantly near them. Participants also noted that they tell their friends because they are the people who share many of the same interests or participate in the same activities as they. This finding links back to Stafford's (1966) finding that social groups affect brand preference. Participants never explicitly stated that their brand preferences are a result of the social group they occupy, but they repeatedly stated that they primarily share brand related information with their friends (whom are likely to be similar to them).

Brand/product experience was a factor in who participants told about their preferences. Results from the preliminary survey indicate that participants primarily discuss brands and products with friends and family, which was reinforced in the discussion section of each group. Participants noted that when they discussed brand/product experiences, it was primarily with their friends and family because those were the groups they thought would be interested in hearing about the experience. Participants stated that they generally did not communicate positive brand experiences, but when they did it was communicated to their friends and family.

Participants also noted that they communicate their preferences only to those whom they believe will benefit from the information. This finding connects to the theoretical

framework used to guide this study. Participants stated they are hesitant to share positive brand/product experiences because they believe that it is not socially acceptable to share information that has little impact on those receiving the message (Ormond, 1999; Grusec, 1992; Bandura, 1977). This connects to social learning; participants base their communication habits on what they have observed socially. Because being overly communicative about brands/products is viewed as bragging, participants are careful how/to who they communicate about brands/products. Bandura's SLT (1977) states that individuals learn what behaviors are socially acceptable and in turn model that behavior. Participants in this study noted that they generally do not talk about brands/products because it is viewed as negative social behavior when done in excess.

The major finding here is that Millennials are only willing to share their brand/product preferences with certain groups. Previous research suggests that Millennials communicate their preferences to anyone and everyone who will listen (Yarrow & O'Donnell, 2009; Greenberg & Weber, 2008), but the findings here suggest that Millennials are very discerning when choosing a target for their brand/product related communication.

Future Research and Limitations

There are five major limitations to the generalizability of this study's findings. First, the sample consisted entirely of college students between the ages of 18 and 24, and thus did not contain older and younger Millennials, who may have differing perspectives on this topic. Future research should gather a more wide-ranging sample in terms of age. Second, all participants attend a Midwestern university and may be subject to the conventional wisdom of the region. This conventional wisdom may be related to

participants' view of brand related communication as bragging: Midwestern values typically focus on modesty and this may have been a factor in participant responses. Given that limitation, future research should recruit participants from different regions of the country. Third, the majority of participants were white and American, which may have limited the diversity of their views on these topics. Future research should include more diverse perspectives in order to gain a more holistic understanding of the group. Fourth, the majority (35 of 50 total) of the participants in this study were male, which may have limited the diversity of viewpoints on these topics. Future research should include more diverse gender perspectives in order to gain a more holistic understanding of the group. Finally, the findings in this study rely on self-report data, and are only valid insofar as participants' reports of behavior match what they actually do. Future studies of Millennials could use observational methods to account for the limitations inherent to self-report data.

One other area where future research could focus is the concept of price. In this study the major finding regarding price was that the higher the price of a brand or product, the more likely participants were to communicate about the brand or product to others. This goes against current marketing research, which has found that a low price will motivate a purchase above all else. It is interesting that high prices might motivate communication about the brand or product, while low prices motivate purchases. This is an area in need of more research because it shows a high potential for discovery.

Conclusion

Millennials are a unique group with complex communication habits. Previous research has painted a picture of Millennials as narcissistic, technologically dependent, opinionated, and quick to share information. This study examines how Millennials

communicate their brand/product preferences, what motivates that communication, and to whom they communicate this information. Many assumptions about Millennials have prompted marketers to market in specific ways; this study sought to investigate those assumptions by studying Millennials on their own terms.

Participants listed price, brand/product experience, and product type as the top motivators for brand/product related communication. They were most motivated to communicate about a brand/product when it is expensive. The motivation lies in the excitement of spending a large sum of money, and not necessarily on the brand of product purchased. Negative brand/product experiences also motivated participants to communicate their brand/product preferences. Participants reported communicating their negative experiences to more people because they felt frustrated and because they wanted to warn other against purchasing the product responsible for their negative experience. The type of product purchased also acts as a motivator for brand/product communication. Participants reported that they tend to communicate about certain types of products; clothing, automobiles, sporting goods, and technology.

Participants reported that they communicate their brand/product preferences primarily in face-to-face interactions. This is due to the direct nature of face-to-face communication and the low risk of miscommunication. Participants also stated that they avoided using digital communication when talking about positive brand or product experiences because of the high possibility of miscommunication, and because they did not view brand and/or product related topics as worthy of digital communication. However, participants were more willing to use digital communication to talk about brands and/or products after having a negative experience with a brand and/or product. This links back to

their motivation for communicating a negative experience; participants are able to warn a large number of people about a low quality brand or product by using digital communication.

Participants reported that they primarily communicate their brand/product preferences to their friends and family. Friends are the group who have the most in common with them, and therefore are the group who will benefit the most from brand/product related communication. Participants reported that they were more likely to tell individuals outside of their friends and family groups after having a negative experience with a brand/product because of frustration and the need to warn others against using a low quality brand/product.

This study has many theoretical and practical implications. Social Learning Theory was used to guide this research, and through its use it was found that participants have learned what is socially accepted as the proper use of brand/product related communication. Participants noted they are hesitant to talk openly about brands/products because others might view it as bragging, so instead then wait until they are prompted by others to communicate about brands/products. On a practical level, this study provides information to marketers, as well as Communication scholars who seek to understand the communication habits of the largest generation in history.

This study also presents some practical implications for marketers who target Millennials. The participants in this study noted that they primarily learn about brands and products by observing others. This is important for marketers to realize because it shows a disconnect between advertisements and consumers. Participants also noted that they prefer to talk about brands and products via face-to-face interactions, which might interest

marketers who rely on digital communication to market to Millennials.

The conventional wisdom about Millennials is based on many assumptions. In order to fully understand how this group sees, perceives, and communicates information, it is important to investigate the validity of this conventional wisdom by conducting further research on Millennials as a unique group. This study has contributed to a better understanding of the brand-related communication habits of Millennials, but there is still much work to be done. It is my hope that researchers will pursue further empirical research with Millennials, seizing the opportunity to study a group unlike any other.

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APPENDIX A**Branding, Communication, and Millennials: Focus Group Protocol**

Sub-points represent possible follow-up questions.

1. How do you learn about brands/products?
2. In your opinion, why do you choose to use certain brands over others?
3. If you decide to stop using a brand what motivates that choice?
4. What brands or products do you really dislike/avoid?
 - a. Why?
5. When you find a brand(s) that you like who do you tell?
 - a. Why do you tell them?
6. When you have a bad experience with a brand who do you tell?
 - a. Why do you tell them?
7. How often do you talk about brands/products with others?
8. What kind of brands/products do you tell people about?
 - a. Why?
9. When you talk to others about brands you like, what method of communication do you use to tell them?
10. When you talk to others about brands you dislike, what method of communication do you use to tell them?
 - a. Why?
11. Is there anything else you think I should know about this topic?

APPENDIX B

Branding, Communication, and Millennials: Focus Group Preliminary Survey

1. List 5 of your favorite brands

2. If you have a positive experience with a brand, which of the following ways would you use to tell others about it? (Select all that apply)
 - Face-to-face
 - Over the phone
 - Text message
 - Instant message
 - Email
 - Social networking sites
 - User review on website

Other _____

3. Of the methods you selected above, which do you *most* prefer? (Select 1)

4. Of the methods you selected above, which do you *least* prefer? (Select 1)

5. If you have a negative experience with a brand, which of the following ways would you use to tell others about it?
 - Face-to-face
 - Over the phone
 - Text message
 - Instant message
 - Email
 - Social networking sites
 - User review on website

Other _____

6. Of the methods you selected above, which do you *most* prefer? (Select 1)

7. Of the methods you selected above, which do you *least* prefer? (Select 1)

8. When you have a positive experience with a brand, who do you share that with? (select all that apply)
 - Significant other
 - Close friends
 - Acquaintances
 - Classmates
 - Co-workers

Other _____

- Immediate family
- Extended family

9. Of the groups you selected above, who are you *most* likely to tell about that positive experience? (Select 1)
10. Of the groups you selected above, who are you *least* likely to tell about that positive experience? (Select 1)
11. When you have a negative experience with a brand, who do you share that with? (select all that apply)
- Significant other (?) Other _____
 - Close friends
 - Acquaintances
 - Classmates
 - Co-workers
 - Immediate family
 - Extended family
12. Of the groups you selected above, who are you *least* likely to tell about that negative experience? (Select 1)

Congratulations! You have made it to the second half of this survey. Please wait for directions before answering the following questions.

1. Based on the brands you listed in the preliminary survey, what needs do you think they fulfill?
- Brand #1:
Brand #2:
Brand #3:
Brand #4:
Brand #5:
2. Do you feel a high or low level of involvement with the brands you listed on the preliminary survey? (Circle your response)
- | | | |
|-----------|------------------|-----------------|
| Brand #1: | High involvement | Low involvement |
| Brand #2: | High involvement | Low involvement |
| Brand #3: | High involvement | Low involvement |
| Brand #4: | High involvement | Low involvement |
| Brand #5: | High involvement | Low involvement |
3. If you had to give up one of the products/brands you listed on the front side of survey, which would you get rid of? Why?

APPENDIX C

Consent to Participate in Research

IRB Study # XXXXXX

Consent Form Version Date: 04-25-11

Title of Study: Branding, Communication, and Millennials

Principal Researcher: Dr. Carrie Anne Platt, Department of Communication

Co-Investigator: Christopher Mattix, Department of Communication

Study Contact telephone number: 701-231-7294

Study Contact email: Christopher.Mattix@nds.u.edu

What are some general things you should know about research studies?

You are being asked to take part in a research study. To join the study is voluntary. You may refuse to join, or you may withdraw your consent to be in the study, for any reason, without penalty.

Research studies are designed to obtain new knowledge. This new information may help people in the future. You may not receive any direct benefit from being in the research study. There also may be risks to being in research studies.

Details about this study are discussed below. It is important that you understand this information so that you can make an informed choice about being in this research study. You will be given a copy of this consent form. You should ask the researchers named above, or staff members who may assist them, any questions you have about this study at any time.

What is the purpose of this study?

The purpose of this research study is to learn more about Millennials' (people born between 1977 and 1997) brand preferences and how they communicate it to others. The study's results will also help us learn more about opinions and attitudes relating to consumer purchasing habits and how they are communicated to others as well as providing insight into how Millennials communicate to each other.

How many people will participate in this study?

If you decide to be in this study, you will be one of approximately 50-60 participants.

How long will the focus group last?

Your participation in this focus group will last approximately 60-90 minutes.

What will happen if you take part in the study?

The group will be asked questions about brand preferences (brands they like/dislike), communication habits, motivations for communication, and brand use. Questions will be addressed to the group as a whole. You may choose to respond or not respond at any point during the discussion. The focus group will be audio recorded so that we can capture

comments accurately for analysis.

What are the possible benefits from being in this study?

Research is designed to benefit society by gaining new knowledge. You may not benefit personally from being in this research study.

What are the possible risks or discomforts involved from being in this study?

We do not anticipate any risks or discomfort to you from being in this study. Even though we will emphasize to all participants that comments made during the focus group session should be kept confidential, it is possible that participants may repeat comments outside of the group at some time in the future. Therefore, we encourage you to be as honest and open as you can, but remain aware of our limits in protecting confidentiality.

How will your privacy be protected?

Every effort will be taken to protect your identity as a participant in this study. You will not be identified in any report or publication of this study or its results. Your name will not appear on any transcripts; instead, you will be given a pseudonym. The audio recording of the group will be stored on a password-protected computer. After transcription, the digital recording will be destroyed.

Will you receive anything for being in this study?

You will receive 10 research participation points for your COMM 110 course. If you are coming from a section of COMM 212 you will receive 5 points of extra credit in your course. If you opt not to participate in this study, your COMM 110 or COMM 212 instructor can provide you with an alternative assignment to complete for these participation points.

What if you have questions about this study?

You have the right to ask, and have answered, any questions you may have about this research. If you have questions, or concerns, you should contact the researchers listed on this form.

What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

A committee that works to protect your rights and welfare reviews all research on human volunteers. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject you may contact, anonymously if you wish, the Institutional Review Board at (701) 231-8908 or ndsuirb@ndsuidu.edu.

Participant's Agreement:

I have read the information provided above. I have asked all the questions I have at this time. I voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

Signature of Research Participant

Date

Printed Name of Research Participant

Signature of Research Team Member Obtaining Consent

Date

Printed Name of Research Team Member Obtaining Consent