THE IDEAL MILLENNIAL WORKING WOMAN:
A THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF HOW PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY, IMAGE, AND
CAREER ARE CONSTRUCTED ONLINE

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The ideal Millennial working woman:

A thematic analysis of how professional identity, image, and career are constructed online

In American culture, traditional gender roles are socially constructed around binaries of male and female and femininity and masculinity. This categorization forces women and men to conform to socially constructed views of gender (Aker, 2006, p. 444; Wood, 2012). Accordingly, men must be masculine, or “dominant, independent, assertive and strong” (Weisgram, Dinella, & Fulcher, 2011, p. 244). On the other hand, women should be feminine, that is “warm, sympathetic, sensitive and soft-spoken” (Weisgram, Dinella, & Fulcher, 2011, p. 245). These stereotypes infiltrate the minds of men and women and can even subconsciously affect occupational choices (Buzannell, 1994; Buzzanell & Lucas, 2006). Indeed, in the workplace, men are “described as achievement-oriented” and value independence, competitiveness, courage, and autonomy (Ciolac, 2013, p. 2). Women, on the other hand, are expected to be submissive, supporting the social and emotional health of the organization (Wood, 2012, p. 235).

However, Millennials born between 1982 and 2000, seem to be pushing back on these traditional constructions of gender (Lucas, D’Enbeau, & Heiden, 2015). For example, Millennials are more likely to “believe that men and women should contribute equally to childcare and home maintenance” (The Reference Shelf, 2014, p. 182). Moreover, Cotter, Hermsen, and Vanneman (2011) explain that these contemporary gender roles and norms do not necessarily represent a reversal of traditional roles but instead represent a new set of gender norms that highlight gender equality and choice.
One arena that offers the opportunity to further explore how gender is socially constructed in terms of generation is popular culture.

Popular culture has the power to both subvert and reinforce dominant gender regimes and constructions (The Reference Shelf, 2014, p.139). For example, Buzzanell and D’Enbeau (2014) explore how the hit TV show Mad Men depicts female characters that allow viewers to consider how much has changed in terms of gender and how much remains the same. In another example, D’Enbeau (2011) highlights how feminist media can encourage young women to reclaim their sexuality while also maintaining their femininity. These analyses demonstrate that how gender is constructed in popular culture is often wrought with contradiction, tension, and complexity.

In this spirit, this study examines how the ideal Millennial woman is discursively constructed online. Specifically, I conducted a thematic analysis of the Ten Best Websites for Millennial Women 2013 as outlined by Forbes magazine. My analysis demonstrates how the ideal Millennial woman must strategically craft her identity, is defined by her relationships, and requires ongoing career mentoring. This study extends understandings of Millennial women’s professional identity by encouraging women to look for mentorship and career advice from a diverse group of sources. It encourages women to push past the limits of individual progress, and consider working toward institutional change. In doing so, this study sheds more light on how Millennial women, in particular, are perceived in the workplace within generational and gender-based frameworks.

In the following sections, I highlight how women and Millennials are discursively constructed in the workplace. I then articulate the key tenets of feminist communicology,
the theory guiding this study; the role of popular culture in perpetuating gender norms; and introduce this study’s methodology. Next, I articulate this study’s findings before moving into a discussion of this study’s contributions to the literatures on gender and generation.

**Literature Review**

**Women in the Workplace**

It would seem on the surface that in the past century, women have gained a legitimate position in society. Women can vote, are educated, eligible to be President of the United States, and live independently of their husbands. In the last 30 years, the number of women graduating from institutions of higher education has more than tripled. As of 2012, women made up 47% of the labor force in the United States (U.S. Department of Labor & Women's Bureau, 2014). Female workers accounted for over half of all workers in financial settings, education and health services, and leisure and hospitality; however, women are majorly underrepresented in agriculture, construction, mining, manufacturing and transportation. (U.S. Department of Labor & Women's Bureau, 2014). Although there appears to be parity in numbers, the industries that female workers represent hinders female achievement. Professions in education or healthcare can be described as women’s work. These are jobs that are “often feminized or dominated by women [and] are more likely to remain non-professional or at best achieve the status of ‘semiprofessional labor’” (Cheney & Ashcraft, 2007, p. 164). The stereotypes of “pink collar” labor create additional barriers to achieving equality with men.
Stereotypes of women, the assumption of work life balance, and expectations of women in the workplace overwhelmingly hinder their ability to achieve parity with their male counterparts (Buzzanell & Lucas, 2006). While women may be an equal force in numbers (U.S. Department of Labor & Women's Bureau, 2014), there are economic, social, and discursive barriers that prevent women from reaching the same professional status as men. The U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics & Women’s Bureau (2014) reported that nationally, women make about 81% of men’s wages for the same work. The Center for American Progress argues that equals out to $.78 on the dollar for women (Glynn & Satter, 2015). These are economic realities that Millennial women will face as they enter the workforce (Lucas, D’Enbeau, & Heiden, 2015, p. 222). To be clear, economic barriers are not only limited to pay inequity, they also include carrying the emotional weight of organizations and bearing a disproportionate amount of household maintenance and childcare as well (Glynn & Satter, 2015).

There are also social barriers that women face in the workplace. These barriers come from how we socially construct the world around us, reinforce some behaviors over others, and collectively ascribe to gender roles. First, women in the workplace are often stereotyped as sex objects, mothers, children, or iron maidens (Wood, 2014). Sex objects and mothers are relatively easy to grasp stereotypes. The women as child stereotype suggests that women are not taken seriously. They are looked at as small and helpless or something to be protected (Wood, 2014, pg. 236). On the other hand, the iron maiden is the “independent, ambitious, directive, competitive” stereotype of a female in the workplace (Wood, 237). The catch with these traditionally masculine traits is that the
Iron Maiden is deemed unlikeable, cold, or insensitive (Wood, 2014, p. 237). These stereotypes limit women’s ability to be taken seriously in the workplace. Studies support the notion that stereotypes of women negatively impact career development and performance evaluation (Alvesson & Due Billing, 2009). For example, it is sometimes assumed that women do not want to work, are less committed to their careers, unable or unwilling to work long hours, are too emotional, or unwilling to make decisions (Gregory, 2003). Additionally, successful women in professional organizations struggle because they express conflicting allegiances to their families and to their careers (Buzzanell et. al, 2005, p.263). The perceived “good mother” is the one who devotes herself completely to her family (Buzzanell et. al, 2005). Women have an expectation to be nurturing and to serve in submissive roles within their organizations as well (Weisgram, Dinella, & Fulcher, 2011). That is, there is the expectation that women bear the burden of emotionally supporting the organization (Weisgram, Dinella, & Fulcher, 2011).

Feminist theorists point out how gendered stereotypes infiltrate the minds of men and women and can even subconsciously affect occupational choices (Buzannell, 1994; Buzzanell & Lucas, 2006). Women may search for careers that allow them to have more family time because it is what they are expected to do and, therefore, they sometimes avoid promotions and leadership positions they could have had (Weisgram, Dinella, & Fulcher, 2011). What is more, resisting these stereotypes can have consequences. For instance, women have a tendency to be judged based on their gender identity instead of qualifications and performance (Wood, 2014, p. 234). Hiring practices can impact the
ability for women to move up in organizations or be hired. There are several promotions ladders that are stereotypically related to “masculine career patterns” and are typically “linear [and] progressive” (Lucas, D’Enbeau, & Heiden, 2015, p. 3). This affects women disproportionately because they are encouraged by society to be the primary caretakers of infants and, therefore, less prone to a linear career path (Weisgram, Dinella, & Fulcher, 2011). These stereotypes also affect the types of careers both men and women tend to pursue and have the ability to limit the scope of a job search based on socially accepted occupations (Weisgram, Dinella, & Fulcher, 2011). What is more, these cultural expectations put women in a “double bind” which articulates women’s inability to please employers for management positions. Acker (2009) explains that women are either too masculine or too feminine to be taken seriously or to fulfill the role of their authoritative, masculine, and competitive male counterparts. Cheney and Ashcraft (2007) contend that professionalism is gendered and that there are aspects of it that conform to a “historical and cultural construction of masculinity” (p. 165). Moreover, women are sometimes expected to serve as mentors and problem solvers, which can create barriers for advancement and legitimacy (Weisgram, Dinella, & Fulcher, 2011).

A discursive barrier that women face lies in how we communicate the problem of sex discrimination. For example, the term “glass ceiling” describes the barriers that women face when trying to climb the corporate ladder (Wilson, 2014). The term was invented to represent women’s invisible barriers to senior management and discrimination based on sex. Terms like “glass ceiling” gender the very nature of the discussion by creating a conversation about a specific sect of the population rather than
framing it as a societal issue, relevant to all persons (Buzzanell, 1995). Terms including but not limited to “glass ceiling”, “sticky floors”, or “concrete walls” stifle women’s ability to climb the corporate ladder (Lucas, D’Enbeau, & Heiden, 2015). The language that we use to discuss women’s lack of social mobility continues to engender the issue (Buzzanell, 1995; Lucas, D’Enbeau, & Heiden, 2015). Furthermore, the gendered language we use to describe issues relating to women in the workplace carry over in female leadership styles and occupational decisions (Buzzanell, 1995). For example, Wiesgram, Dinella, and Fulcher (2011) explain that cultural gender stereotypes and gender role expectations can influence short-term goals and endorsed values. Women have also been found to prefer the type of typically feminine work that allows them to spend time with their children (Weisgram, Dinella, & Fulcher, 2011). As this pattern develops, women feel more and more that they should be at home with the children. Men are encouraged to look for high salaries, opportunities for advancement and risk-taking, which leaves women to fulfill the converse role (Weisgram, Dinella, & Fulcher, 2011). These categorizations leave women and men trying to conform to socially constructed, but limiting, views of gender (Aker, 2006, p. 444).

In summary, contemporary expectations of women in the workplace still include antiquated gender barriers. Women are still stereotyped into nurturing roles and the language we use to talk about the issue hinders progress. However, some research suggests that Millennials may be pushing back on these limiting gendered constructions and the masculine gendering of organizations (Lucas, D’Enbeau, & Heiden, 2015, p. 2). I now turn to the literature about Millennials in the workplace.
Millennials in the Workplace

Generational theory suggests that historical experiences, economic situations, and other changes that take place in a society influence people and create a shared set of beliefs and values (Lucas, D’Enbeau, & Heiden, 2015). Accordingly, a generational perspective allows us to explore how Millennials are significantly different than other generations and may have different approaches to life based upon their unique life experiences. The Millennial generation was born between the years 1982 and 2000. They are predicted to account for half of the workforce in the United States within the next decade and be around 80 million strong (Lucas, D’Enbeau, & Heiden, 2015). This generation has grown up through major technological changes and social movements that have shaped their opinions on work and life (Gibson & Sodeman, 2014). Millennials have always had technology as an integral component to their lives (i.e. computers, Internet, cell phones, pagers) (Taracini, 2007, p. 5). Contrary to previous generations, Millennials bring more collaboration and openness to the workplace than any generation before them (Lucas, D’Enbeau, & Heiden, 2015). They also appreciate freedom and flexibility in a work environment, rather than a rigid or structured approach (Lucas, D’Enbeau, & Heiden, 2015).

There is considerable research that already stereotypes Millennials and predicts how their performance in the workforce will differ from the generations before them. There are three predominant stereotypes. First, Millennials are perceived to be entitled (Lucas, D’Enbeau, & Heiden, 2015). They presumably have expectations of grandiose work environments and ideal conditions. Some research speculates that these
characteristics stem from the way that Millennials were raised; research shows there was considerable positive reinforcement for participation rather than performance (Thompson & Gregory, 2012). The Millennial generation is by far the most formally educated generation (Anderson, 2012). Compared to other generations, both men and women are earning degrees from institutions of higher education. Accordingly, some research proposes that rather than feeling entitled, Millennials see themselves as products of intense pressure to perform well earlier in life (Thompson & Gregory, 2012). The significance of this misconception is that Millennials are willing to work provided they receive appropriate praise and recognition. If they do not receive praise, there is a chance their organizational commitment will lower, as will their performance (Lucas, D’Enbeau, & Heiden, 2015).

The second common misconception of the Millennial generation is that they perceive work as an informal or casual part of their life (Thompson & Gregory, 2012). Work-life balance was the term used by previous generations to explain the compartmentalization of work and familial responsibilities (Thompson & Gregory, 2012). Winograd and Hais (2011) emphasize the shift away from work-life balance of Generation X to the work-life blend of the Millennial generation. A work-life blend emphasizes the combination of work and family/social life. There is more flexibility in how to create harmony between the two worlds rather than separating them. In the age of technology, Millennials see no problem working outside of the office. Thompson and Gregory (2012) describe work as “a thing you do” not “a place you go,” therefore
Millennials are more inclined to work outside of the office if the work can be done (p. 242).

Finally, Millennials are sometimes perceived as disloyal (Thompson & Gregory, 2012). Trends indicate that Millennials are more likely to change jobs and less likely to stay with one company for the duration of their lifetime (Thompson & Gregory, 2012; Winegrad & Hais, 2011). This is a major change from Generation X. However, the reason for the perceived lack of loyalty is caused by the psychological need for positive human relationships. Some studies suggest that Millennials require more formalized socialization in order to perform well in a corporate culture (Briggs et. al, 2011). Millennials are known to value genuine personal relationships in the workplace. This personality shift represents a need for change in the management styles of employers in order to decrease turnover from Millennial employees (Lucas, D’Enbeau, & Heiden, 2015; Thompson & Gregory, 2012).

Taken together, Millennial women represent an interesting generational cohort at the intersection of gender and generation. Indeed, some research comments on the prospective personality and characteristics of the Millennial generation such as acting entitled or disloyal (Gibson & Sodeman, 2014; Thompson & Gregory, 2012). At the same time, this is a highly educated generation. The number of women in the paid workforce is nearly equal to that of men (Alvesson & Due Billing, 2009, p. 53). However, Buzzanell (1994) noted that even enlightened or female friendly organizations still have women conforming to stereotypical gender roles and subordinated status. Yet, Millennials are thought to be an extremely hard working and self-important generation who value
reinforcement, meaningful work, and work-life balance (Thompson & Gregory, 2012). There is also significant pushback on the traditional masculine engendering of organizations (Lucas, D’Enbeau, & Heiden, 2015). Indeed, Millennials crave personal relationships that were traditionally stamped as being more feminine. The need for constant feedback and attention represents needs for more communication and guided growth than previous generations. Feminist communicology offers a theoretical lens that can further explore how gender and generation intersect online.

**Feminist Communicology**

This study takes a feminist communicology approach to explore how Millennial women are discursively constructed online. A feminist communicology approach highlights how communication, including the ways in which we talk about gender, implicates how we perceive the social world (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004). In this way, communication is the means society uses to express and create culture (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004). Language is not solely a way to explain the phenomena around us, but also a mechanism to create culture. In this way, communication has the potential to reinforce or transform the status quo.

According to feminist communicology, gender performances can be described as “the continuous activity of managing conduct in light of common expectations for appropriate gender behavior” (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004, p. 2). The feminist communicology of organization theory emphasizes the importance of discourse and interaction in the performance of gender. In this way, gender is “something we do together” (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004, p. 9). The significance of this definition is that there
are “common” and “appropriate” expectations of gender performances. This suggests that resistance could provoke an unfavorable response in the workplace or society in general.

Moreover, a feminist communicology approach contends that there are micro and macro levels of discourses that inform gender performances. Micro aspects of discourse refer to the everyday interactions that normalize particular performances. The importance of time, social setting, and context inform these micro-level gendered performances. At the macro level, broader cultural Discourses perpetuate particular “scripts” of gender performances (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004, p. 9). For example, gendered performances at the micro-level are in part determined by macro scripts about gender that are informed by broader cultural discourses.

Last, a feminist communicology approach is rooted in a co-constructed reality. This premise suggests that social actors use an interactive process to construct social identities and social structures (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004). Therefore, the world we live in and societal constraints and expectations that we adhere to are likely the result of generations of co-constructed experiences that reflect the attitudes of the time. The significance of a co-constructed reality is the idea that we can change reality at any time. Slowly, we are making changes as a society. As the Millennial generation emerges, the values and behaviors they display have the ability to change the reality we experience. One way to assess the potential for these changes is by exploring popular cultural representations of gender and generation.
Popular Culture Representations of Gender

Popular culture has the power to both subvert and reinforce dominant gender regimes and constructions (Buzzanell & D’Enbeau, 2014). Indeed, popular culture reflects our society and helps us understand the world around us (Childs, 2014). However, popular culture does not present a neutral framework about gender. Rather, popular culture normalizes, reinforces, or critiques gendered relations (Buzzanell & D’Enbeau, 2014). Popular culture can represent day-to-day lives, reflect stereotypes, and challenge stereotypes (Buzzanell & D’Enbeau, 2014). The images that popular culture present also create opportunities for critique and change through clarifying the dominant paradigms under which we operate (Buzzanell & D’Enbeau, 2014).

The pervasiveness of popular culture, some estimate up to 30,000 images per day, significantly impacts how we perceive gender (Media Education Foundation, 2005). One realm where women have the power to potentially author their own stories and advance alternative ideas of gender is the Internet, in particular, the blogosphere. Some studies show that blogs can appear more credible and objective than other traditional sources of information (Greenberg, Yaari, & Bar-Ilan, 2013). Further, women use these blogs to help make sense of the working world (Greenberg, Yaari, & Bar-Ilan, 2013). Some in the communication field suggest there is the possibility that our cognitive function and ability to navigate our world will change because of technology, which is why blogs could be more popular (Anderson, 2012). Finally, Millennials are slowly looking for more connectedness online, such as friendship and motivation (Tarcini, 2007). These factors
significantly contribute to how Millennial women may be choosing to make sense of and navigate the world, and the role that popular culture, in particular, blogs, can play.

**Summary and Statement of Research Question**

Millennial women represent a distinct cohort that could potentially push back on limiting gendered stereotypes and barriers encountered by women in the workplace. Given the potential for popular culture to present alternative conceptualizations of gender and Millennials’ propensity for blogging, an exploration of blogs targeting professional Millennial women has the potential to enhance understandings of how gender and generation intersect. Toward this end, this study is guided by the following research questions (RQ1): What advice is given to Millennials by professionally-oriented blogs?; and (RQ2) What are the implications of this advice for how gender and generation intersect?

**Method**

**Texts**

This study explores the Ten Best Websites for Millennial Women 2013 as outlined by *Forbes* magazine. The mission of *Forbes* is “to deliver information on the people, ideas and technologies changing the world to our community of affluent business decision makers” (Forbes, 2014). *Forbes* is a well-respected magazine that is notorious for its “access to the most powerful people” (Forbes, 2014). Most recently, a *Forbes* blogger compiled a list of the ten best websites that will ideally help Millennial women to prepare themselves for the workplace.
Kate Taylor, the author of the initial post, is a 2013 graduate from Dartmouth. In her article, she explains the criteria for Forbes selection of websites. First, she articulates that Forbes “wanted websites that took women seriously.” She defined being taken seriously as having a large selection and variety of topics and being started by or run by women. She also said “we searched for websites that are as creative, ambitious and intelligent as the Millennial women we know and respect.” Finally, she touched on finding websites to help new graduates and professionals with helpful career advice. Forbes set lofty goals in posting this article, and the following analysis will evaluate their claims.

To introduce these websites, I concluded they most accurately fell into the specified category of blogs, rather than the more general term of websites. One article defines blog as “a journal that is written and maintained online over the Internet. The one characteristic about it is that it is frequently updated and open for the public to read” (Taracini, 2007). The majority of the blogs in this study are from a group of contributors, posts are not terribly long in length, are arranged by date, and very informal in style. Many include attributes like lists, personal advice, and opinion articles. This is an important distinction, as I will explain more about the importance of blogs later on.

In general, the blogs fall into one of three categories. First, some of the blogs are considered to be socially oriented. This means they have content relating to popular culture, beauty, relationships, sex, with sparse posts with professional advice (n=3). The second category of sites focuses explicitly on professionalism, practical advice for the workplace, and mentoring (n = 5). The final category of sites offers a professional good
or service (n = 2). These types of blogs do not carry a lot of content, but have some news posts and background information on their purpose. The blogs are also categorized by the targeted audience age. For example, some blogs were aimed at a teenage audience (14-18 years old) and featured more juvenile content (n=3). One blog had a very defined and narrow audience of college aged women (18-22 years old) (n=1). And the remaining blogs focused on ages 18 and above (n=6). These classifications are relevant considering the initial Forbes post aimed to span the entire Millennial generation. See Appendix A for Table of Blogs.

In narrowing down the specific texts of analysis, I chose posts based on their popularity on the site or blog categorizations to which they belonged. For example, most of the posts pulled from Her Campus came from their most popular posts of those few weeks. The most popular posts were determined by the blog itself. On the homepage, there would be a small banner of the most popular posts of the week. On the other hand, blogs like 20-Nothing do not have a most popular feature, so I chose a few from each sub-category. The subcategories were assigned by the blog author and were displayed as buttons at the top of the homepage. Examples include: love, relationships, beauty, culture, and advice. The total number of posts analyzed was 171, averaging 2-3 pages of content each. Posts were collected from October 1 to November 30, 2015. This range allowed time to visit and revisit blogs for new posts and catalogue accordingly.

Procedures

Guided by feminist communicology and with the research questions in mind, I used a two-phase inductive technique of open and axial coding (Tracy, 2013). To begin, I
went through each blog to develop a list of open codes that pertain to gender roles and norms, occupational preferences and choice, and other workplace issues. I focused on the sections of the blogs that provided background information about the site, advice for women, and relationships. Sample open codes include professional expectations, relationships/love, career, Millennial, or heterosexuality. I then developed interrelationships among the open codes by collapsing them into broader categories. For example, heterosexual relationship maintenance emerged as a theme during this collapsing process. See Appendix B for Code Book.

Throughout this process, I engaged in memoing, a process by which I was able to flush out ideas that came to me through my readings of the blogs and literature (Tracy, 2013). I also considered the plausibility of my findings by comparing the themes to previous research on gender, generation, and the workplace (Tracy, 2013).

**Results and Interpretation**

The research questions guiding this study asked about the kind of messages that 10 professional-oriented blogs send to Millennial women and the implications of this advice. My analysis reveals three intersecting themes: (a) Millennial women must construct a personal brand; (b) (white) Millennial women should focus on (heterosexual) relationship maintenance, (c) Millennial women need career advice to succeed. Taken together, these themes articulate how much has changed with regard to gendered expectations and how much remains the same, according to these Forbes nominated blogs.
Millennial women must construct a personal brand.

Personal branding is the process by which “the concepts of product development and promotion are used to market persons for entry into or transition within the labor market” (Lair, Sullivan, & Cheney, 2005, p. 309). In the case of these blogs, Millennial women are encouraged to craft a personal brand that emphasizes physical appearance and uniqueness. However, this focus ironically reproduces limiting notions of gender and a one-size-fits all approach to the personal brand.

To begin, most of the blogs emphasize the importance of physical appearance in cultivating the ideal personal brand. For example, in a Her Campus post titled “How to Feel Your Best Self in Every Aspect of Your Life This Semester”, the author catalogs several ways to improve the quality of life for the average college woman. The first section is “Look Your Best Self.” Looking your best self means focusing on “upgrading your hair” and “dar[ing] to try a new look.” In the Look section, there is a discussion of a “make-up rut” and suggestions on bright new eye shadows to try. The assumption is that appearance is important, that make-up is necessary for a professional woman, and that readers are looking for ways to feel their best because they are inadequate or unfulfilled.

In another example from Hello Giggles, in an post titled “Tom Ford's newest lipstick is named after Drake, because of course it is”, the author reviews a new lipstick as part of Tom Ford’s “Lips & Boys” collection. At issue is that these blogs are purported to be good for Millennial professional women, yet much of the focus is on seemingly tangential content such as lipstick shades. Posts like “10 Ways to Accessorize You’ve Never Thought of” emphasizes how to re-vamp your everyday look with changes to
phone cases, planners, laptops, and Facebook picture changes. These upgrades are meant to improve the outside appearance in order to be trendy or fashionable.

Second, and relatedly, the blogs encourage a one-size-fits all approach to cultivating a unique identity. Several posts on multiple blogs suggest that Millennial women should differentiate themselves from others and point to their own unique features. For instance, *Ed2010* has an entire post dedicated to how to create a personal brand as a marketing tool that will help a woman to stand out in a job interview. However, the advice given is relatively generic. Examples of advice include having a social media presence. As stated, Millennials are the most technologically savvy generation so telling them to have social media is like telling them to make sure they have a cell phone. Other suggestions include “be authentic” in your appearance.

However, in the authenticity piece titled “How to Build Your Personal Brand” on *Ed2010*, the author simultaneously reinforces the need for uniqueness within that authenticity. Specifically, it says “Be yourself, but be unique in presenting that to the world. These conflicting suggestions are so generic that they encourage widespread and similar approaches to personal branding. In a subsequent *Ed2010* post, the author’s suggestions for an online portfolio follows the same blanket approach as the other post. At first, there appears to be useful content, however upon closer examination, the content has no substance. The suggestions are: decide where you want your blog to be hosted, choose a name for your site, design your site, and get the word out. These suggestions are standard procedure for creating a website and do not expand upon the nuances of individuality or personal branding.
At the same time that Millennial women are encouraged to target their own unique attributes, many blogs emphasize the need for women to conform to industry standards in creating their brand. Take blogging for example. Several of the blogs are written by female writing professionals. Examples from 20-Nothings and HelloGiggles all exemplify the importance of personal brand. In a post from HelloGiggles, “The 12 Rules of Success for a Beauty Blogger”, the author emphasizes that first impressions are crucial to the success of any blog:

Every successful beauty blogger understands the need for a responsive, professional, and clean website…It truly is your first impression to the world, so just like you’d dress up for a first date, make sure your website…reflect[s] how you want to be seen.

What is more, this example also uses a first date metaphor to articulate the need for women to embrace a personal brand, emphasizing a relational focus of femininity. In a 20-Nothings post titled “How to Start a Blog in 7 Easy Steps”, the author emphasizes the importance of a general focus for the blog: “The most important thing is that your blog is you and your unique perspective…Goal #1 is to write about what you love so that you’ll write often and not give up.” According to these sites, young professional women should focus on their unique interests and make sure they love what they do. However, the ultimate personal branding prescriptions offered by these sites work to replicate sameness.

In sum, this first theme highlights the need for professional women to create a personal brand that emphasizes physical appearance. Moreover, these blogs encourage
women to focus on their own uniqueness but, in doing so, ironically encourage women to conform to one-size-fits-all approach. There appears to be a tension between sameness and difference. While some posts encourage Millennial women to go out there and brand themselves, these posts simultaneously encourage a large group of people to all attempt the same things and offer the same advice about personal branding.

**(White) Millennial women should focus on (heterosexual) relational maintenance.**

This theme underscores how Millennial women’s identities are socially constructed online. In this case, most blogs articulate the importance for (white) Millennial women to focus on (heterosexual) relational maintenance in order to enhance their personal identity. Many of the authors of these personal blogs are cis-gendered, middle class, and white and write from this perspective. However, most authors did not articulate this positionality in laying out their content.

Because the vast majority of the blogs advance the experiences of their white, heterosexual authors, posts that engaged diversity stand out. Only one blog grappled with non-dominant gender identities. *Rookie Mag* featured a “Sunday Comic: My Gender is Weird” which is a visual representation of one contributor’s explanation of gender fluidity. The author talks about how they have not come to terms with a pronoun they feel is accurate, while most young-adults accept what is assigned to them at birth. This could also refer to the constant pressure of heterosexual conformity our society is used to. As an anomaly post, it becomes increasingly apparent that most identity based differences are not as emphasized to Millennials by these blogs.
Race is mentioned in only a few posts, “Color Struck” and “Who Gets to Be Successful”, both authored by Rookie Mag contributors. “Color Struck” explores the concept of “anti-blackness” and the struggle within the black community to compare skin color. The author writes about her journey to self-identification and her struggles against mainstream mindsets. She concludes that society has taught her to be anti-black and so she went on a personal crusade to unlearn the hate. She laments it was a struggle but she feels more confident than ever with her identity. “Who Gets to be Successful” follows a woman who places importance on understanding your own intrinsic values and motivations to achieve success and the role that mentorship and support plays in that journey. Her journey is based on overcoming the “black working class” stereotypes she felt had affected her entire life. She narrates the struggle between being a low performing black teenager who succumbs to the stereotype and the other who is ostracized from her friends for attending college on assumed affirmative action scholarships. She concludes with the realization that women need to support each other. Her Agenda posts talk about “important” women of color, like Oprah or Michelle Obama, yet never address the everyday individual lives of ordinary Millennial women of color.

Further, the majority of the blog posts focus on the relational maintenance of heterosexual relationships. Relationships are mentioned so often as to imply they are an integral part of a woman’s identity. Again, the women writing the majority of these blogs are cis-gendered women. The posts range in topic from how to create a strong relationship to how to survive a break-up or how to combine assets. For example, Jessie Rosen’s blog 20-Somethings features her husband “R” and their adventures and
experiences. The constant mention of her husband demonstrates what an important component he is in her life. Consequently, the conversations and adventures she has with her husband become part of her identity as a blogger, and she continues to subconsciously emphasize the importance of their relationship. Blogs like Quarterlette, and its many contributors feel that love is an important and relevant topic that seeps into many of the other posts. For example, the post titled “Protein Power Couples” talks about the importance of finding a balance in eating enough protein during the day. However, the language used is informed by the assumption that “we’re all looking for that special someone.” They use analogies that are explicitly heterosexual. For example, “like Brad and Angelina or any other power couple, they seem to have it all!” In an attempt to create a trend-worthy post, these blogs showcase the tendency toward white, heterosexual relationships.

Among other blogs, the notion of (heterosexual) relationship maintenance becomes very apparent. In two posts on 20-Nothings and HelloGiggles, it becomes obvious that Millennial women are being preached to about relational maintenance as a core component to their adult lives. The first post is called “Do Men Not Set Men Up?” by Jessie Rosen. The post summarizes how Jessie and her husband “R” have differing opinions on how to set up two mutual friends (male and female). The post makes a declaration about how men are not usually keen on setting up their male friends. To this, Jessie exclaims “Is half the population not helping people find love?!” Her assumption throughout the entire post is that men are looking for women and vice-versa. At one point she says “helping guys find girls (or guys)” suggesting that homosexual love is a
possibility, but never mentions it again. It seems like a politically correct addition to an overwhelmingly heterosexual focus.

Finally, in an post on HelloGiggles called “Why I Quit My Soul-Sucking Job”, a new mom tells her story of falling in love with her newborn child and feeling that she could no longer work a 40-hour a week job. The undertones of the whole post focus on the important maternal bond of a mother and child. However, she also makes it apparent that she has a husband, who in turn would be able to support the family with the choice that she made. The heterosexual family construction reinforces her important decision to pursue motherhood in light of a career. However, it also emphasizes the need for women to put their relationships ahead of their career.

In summary, this second theme points out that the majority of the blogs focus on the experiences of white, middle-class, heterosexual women and also assume that (professional) women should focus on the maintenance of their personal relationships.

**Millennial women need career advice to succeed.**

This theme explains the idea that Millennial women need career advice from other Millennial women. Indeed, these blogs focus almost exclusively on peer-mentoring, failing to account for the potential benefits of cross-generational mentoring. However, some blogs (n=2) feature contributors of various ages. Moreover, these posts do not account for the structural or systematic ways that gender inequality can be institutionalized, and instead, focus on how individual women can accommodate “inequality regimes” (see also Acker, 2006). In this way, these blogs do not encourage female opposition to male-dominated work structures. Much of the sentiment of the
career related posts relates to a “power feminism” approach to life. That is, women are
supposed to individually work hard and rise above, rather than challenge the societal
issues at hand (Hains, 2009).

To begin, these blogs suggest that Millennial women require a significant amount
of emotional support and reassurance to navigate the professional atmosphere. However,
they suggest that with this support, they will be able to be successful and productive
employees. Some scholars argue this is a result of the competitive nature of American
society (Buzzanell & Goldzwig, 1991). Throughout these posts, there is some affirmation
of Millennial and gendered stereotypes. A post from Hello Giggles is entirely dedicated
to what to do if you have to cry at work. The assumption is that women will eventually
have a difficult time hiding emotions in the workplace and adhere to the needy stereotype
of a women and of a Millennial. In Rookie Mag, an inspiring post about “The Art of
Failure” motivates women to pursue their dreams, even in the face of staunch opposition
from their families or cultures. An excerpt comforts the average disgruntled young adult
with the following piece of advice: “Success is temporary, and failure is inevitable—and
that’s not only OK, but necessary. Failure helps us become whole—and understand the
possibility that we don’t know everything after all. Because, friend: we are mutable.
We’re temporary and fragile!”

These posts are used mainly as a way to inspire Millennial women to pursue their
own dreams and to survive adversity. They do not encourage action against the system or
advocating for organizational change. Rarely is clear-cut advice offered that does not
revolve around motivation to push past individual obstacles. Even a post from
*HerAgenda* titled “Here’s What 7 Powerful Women Were Doing in Their 20s” leads with this introduction:

Societal pressures will have us believe that we must have our lives together by the ripe age of 25. And while many of our fellow independent women are currently kicking ass and taking names by the age of 21, we have to keep in mind that for some of us, it may take a little longer to reach that promised land. An post designed to motivate is then qualified by the reassurance that it is okay not to be the best version of oneself at this moment.

However, some posts deviate from the stereotypes and point to the fact that women often do not begin on an even playing field. A post from *Generation Meh* titled “You Don’t Need to Get Better at Self-Promotion, You Need to Get Better at Life”, highlights the importance of avoiding posts filled with lists to direct you in the way you want to go and instead argues that “It’s much easier to focus on how to massage the language of our cover letter than it is to face the fact we have to work harder and get better at our chosen craft in order to make the cut.” The in-your-face bluntness of this post is a stark contrast to the majority of posts that speak to the “you can do it” mindset of power feminism.

In summary, these blogs highlight the importance of career, but focus almost exclusively on how women can pursue their career goals, without damaging their self-esteem, and without pushing back on broader systems of inequality. Power feminism is easily attributed to the majority of these blogs and situations because of the whitewashed nature of the contributors and content and this focus on individualism.
Discussion

The aim of this study was to uncover the advice that Millennial professional women are given online and the implications for that advice. Specifically, I looked at the *Forbes* “Ten Best Websites for Millennial Women 2013”. Findings suggest that Millennial women are encouraged to craft a narrow vision of their personal brand that emphasizes physical appearance and traditional notions of femininity, reinforces limiting Millennial gendered identities, and emphasizes the role of individual Millennial women in finding career success. In the following paragraphs, I outline this study’s theoretical contributions and pragmatic implications.

This study’s first theoretical contribution is an extension of the literatures about personal branding through a focus on how gender and generation intersect in the context of branding. In this study, personal branding was emphasized as a way to stand out, however, recommendations focused on limiting notions of femininity that emphasized physical appearance over other more relevant attributes. Moreover, although the blogs encouraged women to tap into their own unique interests, the ideal Millennial woman was ironically constructed as a one-size-fits all entity that obscured individuality. Some research about Millennials would suggest that they want to be recognized for their unique contributions (Thompson & Gregory, 2012). However, in this study, the dominant discourses of personal branding appear to trump this generational feature by encouraging “women to get ahead at work, work as hard or harder than their male counterparts, and reach for the top but also to look womanly” and focus on their personal appearance (Lair, Sullivan, & Cheney, 2005, p. 328).
Second, the majority of the topics on these blogs that were gathered for professional Millennial women focus overwhelmingly on non-professional aspects, such as physical appearance and relational maintenance. When things like branding and career are discussed, traditional notions of femininity are reinforced such as submissiveness and being responsible for the relational health of organizations (Lucas, D’Enbeau, & Heiden, 2015; Wood, 2014). The notion of the professional is a constantly negotiated term (Cheney & Ashcraft, 2007). When talking about professional Millennial women, there is an assumption that their individual characteristics would lend themselves to marketability (Lair, Sullivan, Cheney, 2007). However, in the same sentiment, focusing on outer appearance and relational maintenance as a subset of female priorities reinforces the micro expressions of gender (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004). This becomes important in the overall discussion of workplace conversations. If we continue the practice of gendering the conversation about women’s professionalism, we fail to address the issue as a society.

Third, these blogs perpetuate the same limiting scripts about gender, sexuality, and race. That is, the majority of the content focuses on the experiences of white, middle-class, heterosexual women, which arguably works to conflate their professional experience. Ashcraft and Cheney (2007) conclude that “dominant cultural, institutional codes of professional demeanor reflect gendered, raced, classed, and heterosexual visions of national identity” (p. 165). In America, the notions of a white, middle-class, heterosexual woman are praised. The content of these blogs cater to women who identify in that way and therefore exclude a large group of American Millennial women. This is not to say that diverse women would not find some of the content helpful, however, it is
clear they are not the primary audience. Therefore, this study suggests the need for Millennial women to gain advice and mentorship from a diverse pool of resources. Unfortunately, through these blogs suggested by *Forbes*, women are getting a limited perspective of professional advice.

Fourth, these blogs assume that professional Millennial women need career advice, and that advice should come from their peers. Moreover, the career advice seems to reinforce limiting ideas of gender such as the idea that women should provide emotional support to other women. Indeed, Buzzanell and Lucas (2006) point out that the stereotypical roles of women in the workplace of the “nurturer” reinforce subordinate stereotypes, which could explain the supportive nature of the career articles. Furthermore, career advice on these sites perpetuates the idea that individual women are ultimately responsible for their career success or failure. This emphasis obscures the very real systemic and structural gendered barriers that are institutionalized and continue to perpetuate gendered inequalities (Acker, 2006).

Finally, the lack of emphasis on structural change was apparent throughout the texts reviewed. There was an emphasis on the power feminism aspect of female achievement that suggests that women simply work hard to overcome obstacles (Hains, 2009). The lack of attention to overarching structural changes indicates a bias toward individualism. This is highly characteristic of the individualistic nature of American culture, however, provides a barrier to overall female achievement (Brand, 2004).
**Pragmatic Implications**

This study offers three pragmatic implications for practitioners. First, the results of this study point out that the majority of resources targeted at Millennial professional women come from white, heterosexual women. The advice stems from a power feminist approach that encourages women to work harder and individually push through boundaries to achieve success. From these findings, it becomes important for Millennial women to consider a variety of diverse sources when searching for career advice. The majority of these blogs offer a whitewashed and oversimplified navigation of the career world that does not account for intersectionality. Therefore, it becomes imperative that Millennial women consider diverse opinions, advice, and mentorship in order to navigate the workplace in a holistic manner.

Second, this analysis found that these websites suggest that Millennial women step up and rise against individual scenarios. Women are encouraged to cope with daily situations and systematically better their own individual experience. From the sample of posts analyzed, only one blog talked about institutional change (“Girls Who Code” on *Girls Who Code*) while simultaneously marketing a product to get there. Millennial women should take the sum of these findings to encourage more institutional and social change consistent with challenging the status quo and pushing for organizational reform that benefits all women rather than individual situations. The lack of diversity in these posts already speaks to a need for diversification of authors and a push for more discussion of proactive topics.
Third, the conclusions of this study highlight the perceived requirements for Millennial women in the workplace. Relational maintenance and personal brand management stuck out as the two most prominent expectations. The relational maintenance component emphasizes the importance of female socialization in the workplace. Some extant literature suggests that this is how Millennials, in general, will better acclimate to an organization (Briggs et. al, 2011). The relational maintenance women need to provide applies to both friendships and romantic relationships. These blogs highlight an assumption that women are heterosexual and that lack of diversity or inclusion may cause some LGBTQ women to feel ostracized in the workplace. In terms of personal brand expectations, Millennial professional women must both cultivate a brand and display it both in person and online. However, the advice given on how to do this remains a one-size-fits-all approach to branding. Therefore, professional Millennial women will have to go above and beyond in their own environments to make their personal brands truly individualized and extraordinary.

Finally, there could be some practical Human Resource and management implications from this study. Not only does this study summarize some characteristics of the Millennial generation, it also talks about the importance of the intersection between gender and generation. The literature on Millennials speaks to their need for socialization and belonging. The results of this study reinforce that assumption that Millennial women should prioritize relational maintenance. Managers could use the findings of this study to ease Millennials into the work force by considering their needs.
One limitation of this study is that it assumes these websites were read through a feminist communicating and gender perspective. Not always is gender the focus of hiring practices, career advice, or blog creation. However, the initial post was framed to include that perspective and therefore was looked at through a critical and gendered lens. Additionally, this research cannot be generalized, since the sample pertains only to the blogs listed in the original article.

Conclusion

Overall, this study makes significant contributions to what popular culture representations of Millennial women are and suggests the impact the representations could have on Millennial women. This study articulates the need for Millennial women to break away from individual concerns and victories and to redirect their attention to societal changes. Millennial women should seek to align themselves with political candidates who advocate for women. They should involve themselves in organizations on their college campuses that allow them to work with administration to encourage better preparedness for women graduating college. Millennial women also have the opportunity to volunteer in their communities and experience the results of inequity first hand and give them the leverage and motivation to fight for change. As a society, we must look past individual accomplishments to the greater betterment of society. Armed with the knowledge that inequity exists, it becomes irresponsible not to act.

The gender components of these blogs reinforce heterosexuality and whiteness. They lack diversity and varied representations in both authors and content. Therefore, Millennials should do their best to seek diverse career advice as well as contribute to
giving advice to others from diverse backgrounds. This study provides the content of some career advice in terms of creating a personal brand, and encourages young Millennial women to consider how to move past the sameness of the blog recommendations and strive for genuine uniqueness. Finally, this research addresses a gap in current research about the prospective nature of Millennial professional women in the workplace. It serves as preliminary gauge of how popular culture, gender and generation intersect to provide a glimpse of what Millennial professional women can expect as they enter the workplace.
References


## Appendix A

### Table of Blogs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Blog Title</th>
<th>Blog URL</th>
<th>Founder</th>
<th>Type of Blog</th>
<th>Age Audience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intern Sushi</td>
<td><a href="http://www.careersushi.com">http://www.careersushi.com</a>/</td>
<td>Shara Senderoff</td>
<td>Professional Service</td>
<td>18+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B

Code Book

Advice- any phrase or sentence that is a suggestion
Alcohol- mentions of alcohol, how it fits into society, mentions concerning alcohol, could be a professional or social context
Beauty defines character- some implication or command that how you dress is a reflection of who you are
Beauty- anything that has to do with definitions of beauty, make up and sometimes style articles, emphasizes the physical
Career- mention of career pursuits, dreams, aspirations etc.
Challenge- anything that proposes a barrier to a women’s goal
Command of some sort based on society- These are things that women “should” “must” “have to” do stated in that manner
College- mention of higher education of any sort
Comparison- comparing to men, other women, societal expectations etc.
Culture- Anything that mentions culture or compares something to an attribute of today’s society in América
Diversity- anytime the specific word diversity is used
Education- Anything that has to do with the education of women, schools, institutes etc.
Entrepreneurship- any time an article mentions starting your own business, organization etc
Entertainment- like style, it is a category of article relating to celebrity news or pop culture event
Femininity- praise of stereotypically feminine characteristics- high heels, lipstick, make-up, the use of word feminine, could relate to a manner of acting or dressing
Feminist- any mention explicitly of feminism or feminists
Fitness/Exercise- recommendations, judgments, opinions
Food- mention of food as a social construct, or just food in general as a category
Friendship- relationships with others that aren’t romantic or professional, strictly social
Gender/gender equality - mentions of inequalities, need for equality or gender in the context of it being a relevant barrier or advantage
Glass Ceiling - anytime there is a reference or allusion to women not being able to succeed because of societal barriers
Health - Mentions of health benefits, spiritual, physical or emotional health
Heterosexual - any mention of heterosexual relationships especially in terms of using that style relationship as a generalization of all relationships
Independence - any author that emphasizes independence in the workplace, in relationships or in general
Leadership - Anything about women in leadership positions, mentorships, C-suite etc
Menstruation - anything talking about your period, time of the month etc.
Millennial - mentions the millennial generation specifically
Millennial characteristics - any mention of characteristics that are explicitly attributed to millennials
News - media coverage, public relations style article, reporting on an event etc.
Positive reinforcement - any articles in general, phrases or sentences that are meant to reassure the readers that everything will be okay
Power - the explicit use of the word power
Professional Expectations - this is a category of general instructions that any of the articles may provide to women as to how they should- speak, dress, act, interview, smell, respond etc.
Race - any mention where race is specifically mentions for the purpose of differentiation
Relationships/love - heterosexual, homosexual, friendships and sexual intimacy
Religion - any mention where religión is mentioned and somehow relevant to the article and not a descriptive trait
Self-care - physical, mental or spiritual well-being advice or content
Self-deprecating humor - any time an author of an article second guesses him or herself, or doubts their ability or physical appearance in a seemingly humorous way
Sex - physical sex, could be heterosexual or homosexual
Single- the relationship status

Social media- mention of a social media application or it’s usage

STEM- Science Technology Engineering and Math specifically as it applies to college an career tracks for women

Style- the word style, or the actual category of style for an article, relating to fashion trends

Technology mention- anything that has to do with technology, apps, careers, projects

¹ For the purposes of this study, Millennials were born between 1982-2000. Generation X was born between 1963-1981. Baby Boomers were born between 1943-1962. The Veteran Generation was born between 1925-1942 (Lucas, D’Enbeau, Heiden, 2015).