Millennial Paradox

COLLECTIVE INDIVIDUALISM
AND
LIFE AND LEISURE
From travel and tourism to work-life balance,
the Millennial Paradox is ever present across India’s Generation Y

Collective Individualism; re-defining life and leisure for today’s 21-35 year-olds

Today, India’s 21-35 year-olds are characterized by a tendency towards self-expression, individual choice and personalization; they reject conventional labels opting instead, for self-definition and direct/personal communication via platforms such as Facebook and Twitter¹. Personal/individual values take precedence (over traditional forms of conventional or collective thought) and these values are applied equally to people’s personal lives as to their professional ones. Customers, employees, shareholders, partners, collaborators, resellers, brokers, unions, trade associations within this demographic are all diffusing personal opinions on today’s issues whether or not they are “qualified” or “authorized” to do so in the traditional or hierarchical sense.

The ‘Paradox’ is apparent in the fact that – despite the above – this demographic exhibits an unprecedented desire to share and belong to some form of community, both in the professional and personal context. These communities are present both online (LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter etc.) and offline and are sustained by this group’s appetite – even, compulsion – to share, anything from holiday photos to their innermost thoughts with people who they may have never met. Sharing has become a form of ‘validation’ or ‘endorsement’ for 21-35 year olds. Specifically, the ‘Millennial Paradox’ is that while today’s 21-35 year-olds have never been more self-expressive and individualistic, they have also never demonstrated a greater desire to share, seek endorsement from their peers and be part of a wider community. This behavior has been entitled ‘Collective Individualism’².

The Life and Leisure of India’s Collective Individuals

Reflections of the above paradox can be viewed in every aspect of Indian millennial lives; whether at work, at home, with friends or online. There is a compulsion to be different, personal and unique while constantly sharing with others for approval and validation. The following paper examines these in the context of travel, entertainment and work-life balance where the Millennial Paradox remains an underlying and defining force.

¹ See: http://www.tata.com/media/releases/inside.aspx?artid=TY7t9l9l6w
² See: https://www.facebook.com/TitanIndustriesMillennialParadox
The Collective Individual; from traveller to protagonist

Travel finds a good space in the priorities and ‘bucket lists’ of millennials today with over 40% willing to go on a backpacking trip around the world. It also perfectly encapsulates the collective/individualist contradiction. No travel experience counts unless it is deeply personal, unique, in which the millennial is a protagonist and which, as ever, can be shared with others as the only form of validation.. In common with other consumer contexts, millennials possess a voracious appetite for other people’s views and insights on all aspects of the travel experience; four out of five cite online reviews as important when making travel decisions.

Their collective nature is further revealed by the imperative to remain completely connected throughout the travel experience; 40% of 20-22 year olds used social media every day when on vacation, compared with just over 20% of those aged 35 and over. 45% would be motivated to book a hotel if offered free Wi-Fi (the highest response after ‘room discounts’) . 25% millennial business travellers reported having posted a negative review online within the past year.

It is, today, the motivation and meaning behind travel that exposes millennials’ individualistic side. For them, the act of travelling is a currency in itself; the more obscure and personal the journey, the greater the gratification and prestige when shared. 78% of millennials would prefer to learn something new when travelling, while 70% indicated they expect special places to offer immersive experiences that are interactive and hands-on. Over 90% strongly agree that “being well travelled was a competitive advantage in the workplace” ; the same poll found that student travel fosters ‘an appreciation for diversity, an appreciation and acceptance of cultural differences and helps to build confidence’. Almost all the respondents agreed that the increased cultural awareness provided by youth travel enhances opportunities for success by enabling you to connect to others more easily.

The success of accommodation sharing services such as RoomWhale and Airbnb – currently valued excess of $10billion, more than conventional hotel chains such as Hyatt and Wyndham – perfectly reflects the shift from travelling to witness or experience to travelling to participate; couch surfers are not merely ‘guests’ but ‘members’ of the household during the course of their stay.

This is Collective Individualism in action; millennial travellers aspiring to be not merely visitors but genuine protagonists in the places they visit.

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3 MTV Curious Minds Study – mtvplay.in
4 See: http://www.31081018.co.in/company/releasesinside/DfVf9siULm4e/TLYVr3YPkMU=
5 http://www.huffingtonpost.com/conde-nast-traveler/what-millennials-can-teac_b_4151176.html
6 http://staywyse.org/2013/05/27/eight-hospitality-trends-that-define-millennial-travelers/
7 http://hotel-online.com/News/PR2013_2nd/Apr13_MillennialTrends.html#Fnt9
9 http://www.roomwale.com/
10 https://www.airbnb.com/s/India
This shift from voyager to protagonist, is echoed within the context of music and entertainment, as MTV’s recently launched Indies channel would attest. Contrary to traditional music and entertainment media – including MTV – Pepsi MTV Indies is not driven by big budget music videos, perfectly manicured physiques and toned bodies or unattainable excess. The channel’s Balcony TV show, consists of – literally – musicians playing live on a balcony; no special effects, no light shows, not even make-up! Just the ‘boys or girls next door’ sharing their music. Pepsi MTV Indies is a pure Collective Individual phenomenon; it’s deeply individual and personal; viewers could easily imagine themselves appearing on the channel, and it is popular but not mainstream – avoiding the ‘winner’s curse’. It is also completely and compulsively sharable; Balcony TV’s YouTube channel boasts over 50,000 subscribers, for instance. Gloss and high production is pop culture and minimalism is sub-culture. The younger generation is driven by and attracted to sub-culture. In effect, it contains all the characteristics of the Millennial Paradox.

**Work-life balance; a false distinction for the Collective Individual . . .**

Millennials are said to have ‘focused whimsicalness’. This suggests that today’s generation is unpredictable, curious and creative but with their head on their shoulders. For millennials it’s not just about making a living but also about living life with a sense of purpose and achieving other priorities too. Spontaneity exists, but so does focus. This attitude allows millennials to sync both work and personal life for a wholesome living experience.

Returning to the travel theme, millennials are already travelling for work and more frequently than their older colleagues. But they don’t appear to be too stressed by the prospect; millennials are also 62% more likely to extend a business trip into a vacation and are quicker to embrace loyalty programmes than older generations. Millennials are firm believers in the concept of ‘bleisure’; business related work and leisure combined.

Why no stress? For millennials work is simply another medium of individual, personal self-expression. For them, it’s all about me - 83% believe that a job should help them to ‘pursue their passion’. Their capacity to multitask is well-documented. According to a study conducted by Regus, work-life balance may not necessarily mean being remotely operational or being away from office. This is a way to strike a perfect balance between work and personal life, thus finding time to pursue interests other than your routine job roles. Work-life balance, for millennials, is not a question of compromise. In fact, Indian millennials are the most ambitions generation on earth; 37% expect to be in a management position

12 http://www.pepsimtvindies.com/
15 MTV Curious Minds Study – mtvplay.in
18 http://www.wpp.com/~/media/388EE62929EE4CF0B880DF4E723E3B19.ashx
19 http://content.timesjobs.com/gen-x-and-y-are-better-at-work-life-balance-study/
within one year of graduating and 25% expect to be in senior management positions or running their own business within two years.

For today’s millennials, work is an intensely individual and personal activity; and much more than simply the extraction of ‘surplus labour’. Over 80% millennials believe business can exert a positive impact on issues such as climate change, 56% believe business can contribute more to issues such as resource scarcity; 55% climate change; 49% income inequality. And they expect to be treated as individuals throughout the process; around 70% of them see themselves working independently as entrepreneurs ‘at some point’ in their lives.

But the need for sharing, the quest for feedback, validation and endorsement is ever-present; with one recent study suggesting that Facebook and YouTube account for more corporate bandwidth usage than any other site, social media has become a primary medium for self-expression within the workplace. Self-expression can mean anything from revealing details about a forthcoming product launch to commenting on the chief executive’s benefits package. India’s millennials see employment as a reflection of their wider selves, 69% seek out employers whose corporate responsibility efforts reflect their personal values; and they are applying the same values and logic to work as to their lives outside the office. This means that they expect to uphold the same commitment to the environment or to transparency as they would in their private lives. 50% want to work for a business with ethical practices; and if their employer does not meet these expectations, millennials would voice their opinions.

From ‘contacts to knowledge’ and ‘the revenge of the nerd’

According to McKinsey & Co, for instance, disposable income levels across India have more than doubled between 1985 and 2005, a feat which took Britain over 150 years and one industrial revolution to achieve and the US in excess of 40 years (not to mention the impact of a world war). The same report suggests that 291 million Indians will move from desperate poverty to a more sustainable life and that the country’s middle class will swell by over 10 times its current size to surpass 583 million by 2025. This ‘breakneck’ development is further exacerbating the contradictions between millennials’ collective and individual natures.

They reflect a wider transformation; the replacement of a patriarchal, “contact-based” economy to a more fluid, knowledge-based one; the shift from a ‘know who’ or ‘know what’ dynamic towards a ‘know how’ and ‘know why’ perfectly reflects millennials’ attitude to and relationship with work. India’s millennials view work as just one of the elements which defines them, the knowledge that they gain from the same could be equally applied beyond the workplace and vice versa, outside or so-called ‘soft skills’ are

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23 http://www.wpp.com/~media/388EE6299E4ECEFDB8885F4E72E3B19.ashx
increasingly valued within the same. Traditional currency such as contacts, physical attributes, even – formal qualifications, have been superseded by a new form of social currency based on knowledge, skills and experience drawn from and applied equally within the workplace and lifestyle. 78% millennials say success is dependent on intelligence and their personality.26

Collective individualists celebrate and share personal knowledge and expertise – the more esoteric and unconventional the better. Less than 10% of millennials look up to public figures as their role models, ‘doing something new independently’ is their number one priority.27 For them the new heroes are likely to be self-made knowledge specialists (entrepreneurs; nerds and geeks, in essence) as compared to the traditional ‘stars’ of stage, sports field or politics of the previous generation.28 Millennials don’t just look up to people who do good for the world but also aspire to contribute to that ideology with 56% wanting to enter politics to make a change.29

Collective individuals and the “millennial bell”

The contradictions at the heart of the Millennial Paradox are evident at every stage of India’s Generation Y, from travel and leisure to work and hobbies. But there is a pattern emerging between the way Indian millennials express their collective and individual natures. Prior to commitment to a decision (course of action, career move, purchase, journey), Indian millennials display extremely collective tendencies; they proactively solicit advise and insights from third parties in a very public and collaborative fashion. Despite these inputs, the eventual proposition (from job offer to purchase) must be decidedly individual, unique and tailored to their requirements; from hotel accommodation to career choice, millennials are looking for a truly personalized offer. Once consumed, however, millennials revert to classic collective mode proactively sharing their experiences and insights on the same in a quest for validation and prestige associated with the same.

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26 MTV Curious Minds Study – mtvplay.in
28 http://www.forbes.com/sites/jmaureenhenderson/2014/06/03/are-you-too-insecure-to-have-a-role-model/
29 MTV Curious Minds Study – mtvplay.in
The Millennial Bell Curve; from collective to individual; and back again . . .

Collective individualism is alive and present; India’s millennials not only exhibit these contradictions but embrace and nurture them. On a global scale, whether this Millennial Paradox will provide a force for peace and contentment or for resentment and unrest, only time will tell . . . One thing, however, is certain; India’s millennials are bound to tell you about it!

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