

Manipulating impressions in the 'ME' culture: A study of millennial consumers

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Abstract There have been significant discussions by academicians and industry practitioners on how to effectively communicate with millennials. Most marketers agree that communicating with the millennial cohort group, which is one of the most diverse generations, poses significant challenges, as understanding their implicit needs reveals their paradoxical nature. The present research focuses on understanding the communication styles of the millennial. Researchers have attempted to understand the various facets of impression manipulation, as revealed by the millennials' styles of communication, using the Communication Styles Inventory (CSI, de Vries, Bakker-Pieper, Alting Siberg, van Gameren, & Vlug, 2009). The key findings indicate that the millennials show a high inclination for ingratiation and inscrutableness in their communication styles. Understanding manipulation will help marketers have more personalised conversations with millennials, which the researchers believe may help with understanding how to create curated content in order to engage with this highly connected yet dis-engaged audience.

Keywords Impression management, Millennial, Communication styles

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INTRODUCTION

The millennial generation born during the 1980s and up to the mid-1990s, making up the majority of the working population, is optimistic and hardworking, but at the same time unable to handle criticism, and self-absorbed (Dimitriou & Blum, 2015; Korzynski, 2013). Compared to earlier generations, this generation witnessed a change in communication dynamics as they primarily adopted social media to connect and obtain information (Paulin, Ferguson, Jost, & Fallu, 2014), and this introduced new challenges in connecting with professional peers and social circles. Millennials are self-confident and sure of their competence, and for them (Goudreau, 2013), technology has become a part of their daily lives, which places a high value on image and money (Paulin et al., 2014), and on achievement, happiness, and fulfilment (Farrell & Hurt, 2014). This paper aims to focus on impression management tactics embraced by millennials as a communication style adopted and manipulated by them. An understanding of these tactics can be used by marketers to their advantage by designing appropriate messages for them.

Millennials spend a lot of time on social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, etc., viewing and following their peers and influencers, and are more open to sharing personal aspects of their lives, including success stories. Anecdotal evidence suggests that a lot of content on social media is not really accurate in depicting the truth, and in fact is more about impression management. With Impression management individuals can create and maintain an image for themselves and they can also strategically make efforts to protect or alter an image that has been created by them (Bozeman & Kaemar, 1997). A specifically desired image is carefully created by appropriate behaviour and communication styles (Jones & Pittman, 1982; Tadeschi & Melburg, 1984).

Communication styles of individuals, as a manifestation of their individual personalities, reveals a lot about them by their own self-disclosure and portrayal of different personalities around different people and social surroundings. Given that millennials are the largest consumer base, an understanding of their communication styles can assist in comprehending the factors that will help to engage them in a better and a more purposeful way.

Hence, the authors believe that studying the communication style that involves impression manipulation by this group would be highly beneficial for marketers and advertisers, to understand how to create curated content in order to be able to engage with this highly connected yet dis-engaged audience. The millennials may be understood by their unique communication style patterns, and an understanding of these styles will give an edge to those marketers who are aiming to attract this diverse and fragmented segment as an audience. The communication patterns revealed in this paper will help in understanding the uniqueness of this population and marketers should be able to curate, tailor and customise their communication strategies according to them. Impression Management perspectives emphasise the way a specific communication style helps people to express an image of who they want to appear to be. Given that brands are now using brand stories as a form of communication for an enduring and distinct advantage, a consumer can think about brands and relate to them as they relate to their own self (Fournier, 1994).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Communication and millennials

Communication today is not about the transference of information but more about creating a positive image with lasting impressions. The increased use of computers among the millennial generation has provided them with the confidence to communicate (Kapoor & Solomon, 2011), and has also meant that they have developed a unique relationship with technology, where electronic communication has replaced face-to-face communication (Eastman, Iyer, Liao-Troth, Williams, & Griffin, 2014; Farrell & Hurt, 2014). Generational differences can be observed, as individuals in a specific generation share common attitudes, behaviour, values, and beliefs (Costanza, Badger, Fraser, Severt, & Gade, 2012). A supportive atmosphere, rewards and attention (Cekada, 2012) has imbued millennials with a high level of confidence and belief that they can achieve anything (Johnson, 2006; Smith, 2012). In social networking sites, like in niche sites such as LinkedIn and Facebook, impression management is carefully tailored by individuals for selective representation (Hogan, 2010). Carefully crafted online identities (Angwin, 2009) according to an individual's wishes and requirements for fitting in socially (DiMicco & Millen, 2007) have been observed. Also, there are direct correlations between appearance, presentation and self-narratives (Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008), as individual's appearances on social networking sites are manipulated to be more socially desirable. Being more self-assured and individualistic, millennials focus on personal achievement and success (Pew Research Center, 2007), and they are motivated by the internal desire to fulfil an unfulfilled need and to improve performance in achieving a particular objective (Dobre, 2013).

Twenge, in her books *Generation Me* (2006) and *iGen* (2017), has dubbed millennials 'Generation Me'. *Time Magazine*, in 2013, ran a cover story entitled 'Millennials: The Me Me Me Generation'. The emphasis is on extrinsic values like money, fame, and image rather than on intrinsic values like self-acceptance, group affiliation and community.

COMMUNICATION STYLES AND IMPRESSION MANIPULATION

As communication styles are an expression of one's personality, they play an important role in personal relations (de Vries et al., 2009), and in deception and impression management research (Burgoon et al., 1996; Goffman, 1959). Impression manipulateness may be particularly important when communicative behaviours like ingratiation, use of charm, and concealing information are used for obtaining status or other rewards (de Vries et al., 2011), as in deception and impression management studies (Burgoon et al., 1996; Goffman, 1959). The broader personality traits of individuals guide their motivations and emotions (Bakker-Pieper & de Vries, 2013). Also, the overconfident millennial generation has not given much importance to skill development for professional success (Hartman & McCambridge, 2011; Wheelless & Berryman-Fink, 1985), and their preferred communication style patterns (Saphiere, Mikk, & de Vries, 2005) focus on efforts to establish or reinforce a constructive image for themselves.

Ambivalence is observed regarding deception and lying (Serota, Levine, & Boster, 2010); it is probably normal to use charm and ingratiation in conversations, and to

conceal information, and this is connected to dishonesty, as explained by HEXACO-PI-R (Ashton & Lee, 2008, 2009; de Vries, Ashton & Lee, 2009). According to the communication competence model (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984), competent communicators can distinguish, identify, and accordingly perform, communicative behaviours which are appropriate in a situation. Interpersonal deception theory (Burgoon & Buller, 1996; Burgoon et al., 1996), similar to impression manipulativens, essentially revolves around the knowing transmission of a false belief or conclusion by a sender to a receiver. Like in the communication competence model (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984) and interpersonal deception theory (Burgoon & Buller, 1996), impression manipulativens may similarly be used successfully in transmitting a false belief or conclusion.

The communication behaviour items in the communication styles inventory (CSI) (de Vries et al., 2009) are: expressiveness, preciseness, verbal aggressiveness, questioningness, emotionality, and impression manipulativens. The impression manipulativens style has facets related to ingratiation, charm, inscrutableness and concealingness. In settings where ingratiation, use of charm, and concealing information are expected to be used as communication behaviours, the importance of impression manipulativens increases. The use of manipulation entails finding people's psychological points of weakness and exploiting them to suit one's own purpose. Used negatively it can involve lying, misdirection, and whatever else it might take to get your way, but it is generally looked at extremely disapprovingly and is considered unhealthy for building relationships with others (particularly if one gets caught in the act). Though the definitions and contexts for all terminologies and facets of different communication styles are provided by de Vries (2013), communication styles inventory, terms like "charm", "ingratiation" and "concealingness" have been part of other research studies as well. A lot of interest and attention has been given to ingratiation and self-promotion (Bolino, Kacmar, Turnley, & Gilstrap, 2008; Bolino, Long, & Turnley, 2016).

Ingratiation (de Vries et al., 2009) is a simple method of influence and is used by people as a persuasive way to appear more amiable to another person or group, for acceptance and so that they might comply with the instigator's requests. There are three methods of ingratiation used by people who are adept at it - other-enhancement or a form of flattery; opinion conformity or continuous agreement with someone in particular; and self-presentation (Jones, 1964). New research suggests that those who ingratiate themselves are likely to be healthier than their surly counterparts. When used skilfully, ingratiation is an effective weapon against ostracism - defined as being systematically ignored by peers. Ingratiation has neutralised the relationship between ostracism and psychological stress. Ingratiation is a form of impression management (Bailey, 2015) aimed at increasing liking (Jones, 1964), and is used by individuals so that they are considered more attractive by others (McFarland, Challagalla, & Shervani, 2006). Studied in an organisational context (Bande Vilela, Gonzalez, Ferrin, & del Rio Araujo, 2007; Blickle, 2003; Higgins & Judge, 2004; Pandey & Singh, 1987; Proost, Schreurs, De Witte, & Derous, 2010), it indicated ways by which people tried to present themselves so that they would be approved and appreciated (Wooten & Reed, 2000) and not only get along well with others but also get ahead (Celuch & Slama, 1995); and to cope with the fear of being evaluated negatively (Pontari & Glenn, 2012). Ingratiation is defined as a type of social influence behaviour, and "*an attempt by individuals to increase their attractiveness in the eyes of others*" (Liden & Mitchell, 1988, p. 572). Research suggests that those who ingratiate are likely to have healthier work relationships (DiSalvo, 2011) as ingratiation improves one's ability to

get a better job (Stern & Westphal, 2010; Westphal & Stern, 2007; Zhao & Liden, 2011). More recently (Bolino, Klotz & Daniels, 2014), the effect of ingratiation on performance ratings has been studied by researchers.

Charm (de Vries et al., 2009) is used to get a foot in the door of new relationships, new jobs or any new initiative. It might not necessarily entail deceiving others to make yourself look good, but may include a tactical highlighting of one's strengths and the effective use of the tools of social interaction to maximum advantage. Charm helps in creating positive impressions, to help individuals to move ahead and move up professionally and in their personal lives, as well as helping them to look good without lying, or changing who they are as people. In a nice way, it helps individuals to do their best, to try to reveal the positive side of who they are as people. Charm, according to brand personality dimensions, is a facet of sophistication (Aaker, 1997). It is an essential tool to make people feel good about themselves, and men use charm as a tactic more than women to increase the compliance of others (DuBrin, 1989).

"Inscrutableness" (de Vries et al., 2009) comes from a style of communication which relies on the sixth sense or tacit knowledge. According to the Cambridge Dictionary it is a person's *"quality of not showing emotions or thoughts and therefore being very difficult to understand or get to know"*. Millennials practice the art of skilful self-disclosure through social media like Facebook and Instagram.

To conceal means *"to prevent something from being seen or known about"*, according to the Cambridge Dictionary. *"Concealingness"* (de Vries et al., 2009) involves a tendency to keep secret incriminating information about oneself. Even the information that is provided is selectively screened to their advantage. Millennials have distorted their social media representations to fit the idealistic standards they have set for themselves. Millennials handpick photos to share publicly. Anything that hints of an imperfection gets tossed into the bin. They only share things that portray the versions of themselves that they want the world to see. Social attraction and self-disclosure have a significant relationship with each other (Sheldon, 2010). Concealingness as a facet of impression manipulation emerges as an important factor for understanding millennial communication.

While millennials are promoting and accepting carefully curated and crafted images, they want authenticity (Daneshkhu, 2018), and it is interesting to see how concealing and inscrutable the millennials are in their communication styles. A lot of research that focused on authenticity centered around self-concept (Cable, Gino, & Staats, 2013; Harter, 2002; Kernis & Goldman, 2003), and self presentation (Grandey, 2000; Hochschild, 1983). Research indicates (Guerrier & Adib, 2011) that individuals often *"actively seek spaces... that they see as reflecting their authentic selves"*. Authenticity begins with self-awareness, by selective self-disclosure, and an understanding of what to reveal and when.

The increased use of computers among this generation provided the confidence to communicate with the help of technology (Kapoor & Solomon, 2011). The key to effective self-disclosure includes good communication skills (Rosh & Offerman, 2013), and particularly in work settings it is seen that a variety of impression management tactics are used by men more than women (Bolino & Turney, 2003; Guadagno & Cialdini, 2007). Occupational psychologists include jobseekers' behavioural approaches, that indirectly influence hiring, as impression management, as these involve overtly manipulative tactics of public self-presentation with the intention of maximising projected benefits. People commonly shape their behaviours and manipulate their appearance in attempts to control how others view them. Social attraction and self-disclosure have a significant relationship with each other (Sheldon,

2010). Studies confirm that impression management appears to work (Higgins & Judge, 2004; McFarland et al., 2006). One of the findings of the current paper shows impression manipulation as a style adapted to further self-interests, and hence brands can curate their strategies around this quality.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Interpersonal deception theory (Burgoon & Buller, 1996; Burgoon et al., 1996), similar to impression manipulateness, essentially revolves around the knowing transmission of a false belief or conclusion by a sender to a receiver. It illustrates the “*dynamic properties of interpersonal communication, nonverbal behaviour, message processing, credibility, and deception as it is achieved through interpersonal interaction*” (Burgoon & Buller, 1996, p. 204). Deception could be authentic or simply perceived. Interpersonal deception theory makes an attempt to find an explanation for deception and the responses and reactions of individuals towards it (Burgoon & Buller, 1996). It provides an explanation and clarity in the context of the communication situation, and justifies and rationalises that interpersonal deception depends on the circumstances of communication and relationship in which the interaction occurs. Deceivers are adept at strategically managing their behaviour by suppressing particular actions or mannerisms that might reveal their deception, or they may adjust their behaviour to appear more credible. As in the communication competence model (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984) and interpersonal deception theory (Burgoon & Buller, 1996), a fake belief, or assumption by a person, may be successfully transmitted by impression manipulateness.

Social desirability (SD), as the core structure of personality (Acosta-Canales, & Domínguez-Espinosa, 2012, 2014; Paulhus, 2002; Paulhus & John, 1998; Uziel, 2010), is also based on the idea that individuals try to portray themselves positively, with enhanced skills, prowess, and social values, to evade social disapproval (Acosta-Canales, & Domínguez-Espinosa, 2012; Domínguez-Espinosa & van de Vijver, 2014; Lalwani, Shrum, & Chiu, 2009; Paulhus, 1984, 2002). Social desirability is one of the core elements of the general response style used by people to integrate successfully into groups, and for social acceptance, besides creating harmonious relationships (He, van de Vijver, Domínguez-Espinosa, & Mui, 2014; Smith, 2004), which may be influenced by cultural characteristics as well. “*The need for social approval indicates a desire to conform, a concern with others’ opinions, and an urge to be socially acceptable*” (Twenge & Im, 2007, p. 173). Social desirability according to Paulhus (1984) may take two forms: one of self-deceptive enhancement and the other of impression management.

As seen from the literature review, various facets of impression manipulation have been studied, however this study focuses on understanding millennials’ preference for various communication styles. Further, this study will elaborate on the differences in the preferred impression management styles adopted by male and female millennials.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE AND HYPOTHESES

The main objective of the research was to understand the communication styles used by millennials while interacting with others. The communication styles that were

measured were inscrutability, ingratiation, charm and concealingness. The hypotheses tested were as follows:

- H1 Within the impression manipulation communication style, inscrutableness is significantly higher than ingratiation, charm and concealingness.*
- H2 Within the impression manipulation communication style, ingratiation is significantly higher than concealingness.*
- H3 Within the impression manipulation communication style, concealingness is significantly lower than all other facets.*
- H4 Ingratiation, charm and concealingness, as facets of the impression manipulation communication style, are significantly higher for males than females.*
- H5 Ingratiation, charm and inscrutableness, as facets of the impression manipulation communication style, are significantly higher for those with non-technical work experience than those with technical work experience.*

METHODOLOGY

The authors used the existing communication styles inventory (CSI, de Vries et al., 2009) and the facets therein that refer to ingratiation, charm, inscrutableness and concealingness for their research. The study used the quantitative research approach with the help of a structured questionnaire. A 6-point Likert scale (with 1 = strongly disagree and 6 = strongly agree) was initially used with four items of 'inscrutable', four items of 'concealing', four items of 'ingratiation' and four items of 'charm'. The researchers used a six-point Likert type scale, as it normally gives higher discrimination and reliability values than a Likert 5-point scale (Chomeya, 2010).

The survey was conducted among millennials belonging to tier I and tier II cities (primarily the metro and mini metro cities) in India with work experience ranging from 1 to 10 years. The sample size was 404. The number of respondents contacted was 450, of which 428 were part of the final survey. After screening the questionnaire for errors and incompleteness, the final sample size was 404. The first part of the questionnaire captured demographics like age, gender, work experience, industry, type of work, etc. The second part of the questionnaire measured facets of communication styles which were impression-focussed. The demographic data included nominal and ordinal scales, while the communication style inventory scale was interval data.

To summarise, impression manipulation comprises inscrutability, concealing, ingratiation and charm. Ingratiation includes saying the right things to impress people; use of charm is the ability to impress through a pleasant nature; inscrutability involves selectively keeping inner thoughts and saying everything is pleasing and positive; and a concealing communication style is selective exposure of information and thoughts.

KEY FINDINGS

In total there were 404 millennials who took part in the research. Seventy-five per cent were male and 25% were female respondents, from the age of 25 years up to 35 years. The respondents in the research were given copies of the communication style inventory (CSI) (de Vries et al., 2013) and asked to respond to statements for each facet of the impression manipulateness communication style ($4 \times 4 = 16$ questions), and the sum of scores across all variables for a given facet was considered. The total score for the impression manipulation communication style, consisting of ingratiation, charm, inscrutableness and concealingness, was 57.1089 out of 96 (maximum score for 6-point scale across 4 items in each facet equals $96 \{4 \times 4 \times 6\}$), indicating that the target audience agreed to a large extent with the use of impression manipulation as a communication style (Table 1).

As observed in Table 2, with a p value of 0.05, inscrutableness as a facet of impression manipulation communication style is significantly higher than ingratiation, charm and concealingness. Thus hypothesis 1 is supported: communication by millennials is inscrutable and they are not transparent in their interaction.

The next facet which is ingratiation, was not found to be significantly higher than charm. The observations in Table 3 show that ingratiation and charm had a high correlation of 0.626, indicating that ingratiation and charm were perceived as similar. Therefore, we may infer that for integration in social situations, millennials use both ingratiation and charm to further their agenda. However, the facet ingratiation was found to be significantly higher than concealingness, at p value of 0.05, thus supporting hypothesis 2, and confirming that the millennials are not averse to concealing their true intentions.

Concealingness was the facet with the least importance and was significantly lower than all other facets of impression communication style. Thus hypothesis 3 was supported. We may therefore come to the conclusion that millennials conceal their true intentions, are inscrutable in their communication and they use ingratiation and charm as a tactic of self promotion.

Impression manipulation was then studied by gender (male vs. female) and by work profile (technical vs. non-technical) to see if there were significant differences in the impression manipulation style being used. An independent sample t test between males and females indicated that ingratiation, charm and concealingness were significantly higher for males compared to females, at p value of 0.05. (see Table 4 and Figure 1). Hence hypothesis 4 was supported. This indicates that males tend to use ingratiation and charm for manipulating impressions. They are also more concealing in their communication style. Women, too, score highly on inscrutableness, which is an interesting observation, as both genders show similarity in their approach. This indicates that both males and females in the millennial cohort are similar in their approach and focus on impression manipulation by masking their true intentions (inscrutableness), and men also use more charm in their communication style while women use charm to a lesser extent. Interestingly, women are less concealing than males when it comes to impression manipulation.

An independent sample t test between types of work experience (technical vs. non-technical) indicated that ingratiation, charm and inscrutableness were significantly higher for the non-technical work experience group as compared to the technical work experience group at p value of 0.05 (see Table 5 and Figure 2), hence hypothesis 5 was supported.

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics for IM (Impression Manipulativeness)

	Total IM	IM ingratiation	IM charm	IM inscrutableness	IM concealingness
n	404	404	404	404	404
Mean	57.1089	14.2228	13.9802	15.2351	13.6708
SD	8.89297	4.16649	3.55106	2.76663	2.33498

TABLE 2 Paired samples test

		Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	Sig (2-tailed)
Pair 1	IM ingratiation - IM charm	.24257	3.38447	1.441	403	.150
Pair 2	IM ingratiation - IM inscrutableness	-1.01238	4.30100	-4.731	403	.000
Pair 3	IM ingratiation - IM concealingness	.55198	4.44651	2.495	403	.013
Pair 4	IM charm - IM inscrutableness	-1.25495	4.13685	-6.097	403	.000
Pair 5	IM charm - IM concealingness	.30941	3.75831	1.655	403	.099
Pair 6	IM inscrutableness - IM concealingness	1.56436	3.50091	8.981	403	.000

TABLE 3 Paired samples correlations

		N	Correlation	Sig.
Pair 1	IM ingratiation and IM charm	404	.626	.000
Pair 2	IM ingratiation and IM inscrutableness	404	.283	.000
Pair 3	IM ingratiation and IM concealingness	404	.156	.002
Pair 4	IM charm and IM inscrutableness	404	.160	.001
Pair 5	IM charm and IM concealingness	404	.237	.000
Pair 6	IM inscrutableness and IM concealingness	404	.066	.187

TABLE 4 Independent samples t test

	Gender	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Sig
Ingratiation	M	303	14.76	4.131	0.00
	F	101	12.60	3.858	
Charm	M	303	14.53	3.235	0.00
	F	101	12.30	3.929	
Inscrutableness	M	303	15.35	2.723	0.128
	F	101	14.86	2.874	
Concealingness	M	303	13.93	2.258	0.00
	F	101	12.87	2.390	

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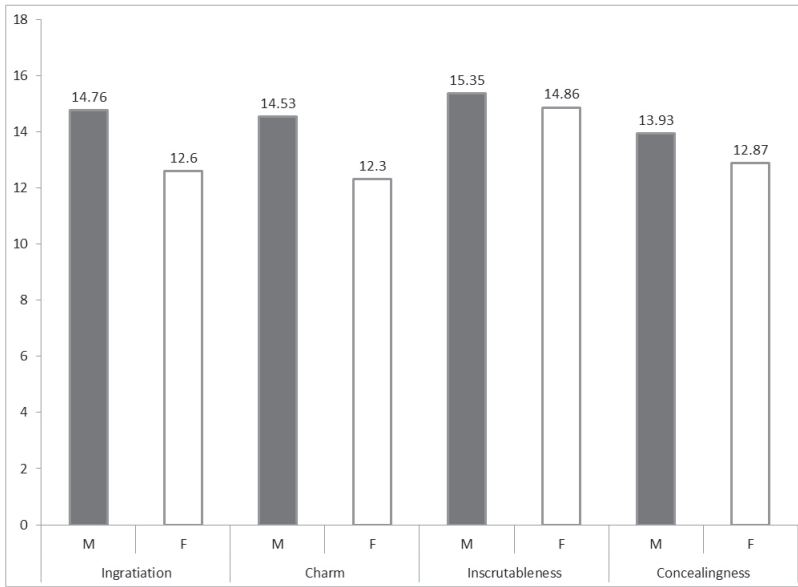
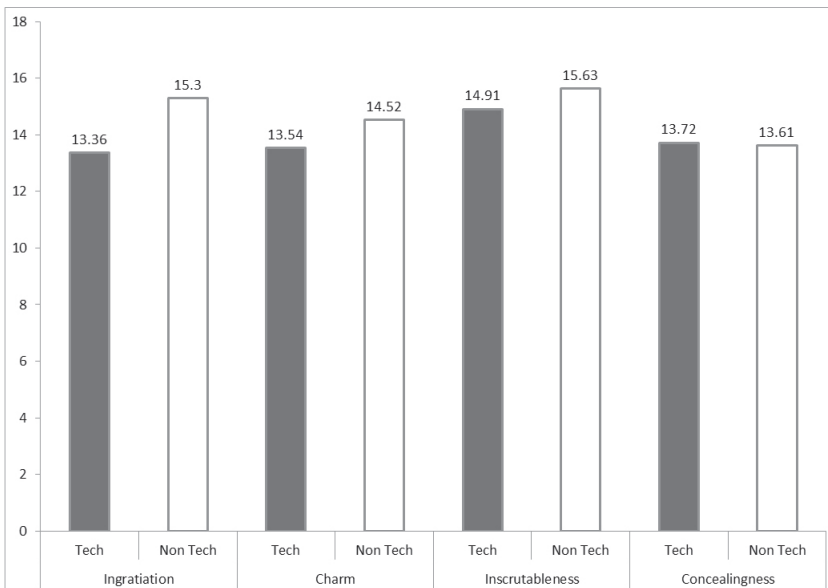
FIGURE 1 Impression Manipulation Communication Style by Gender**FIGURE 2** Impression Manipulation Communication Style by Nature of Work

TABLE 5 Independent samples t test

	Work type	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Significance
Ingratiation	Tech	224	13.36	3.695	0.00
	Non-tech	180	15.30	4.468	
Charm	Tech	224	13.54	3.275	0.006
	Non-tech	180	14.52	3.807	
Inscrutableness	Tech	224	14.91	2.775	0.009
	Non-tech	180	15.63	2.711	
Concealingness	Tech	224	13.72	2.567	0.646
	Non-tech	180	13.61	2.015	

The key findings indicate that the millennial respondents show a high inclination for impression manipulation as a communication style. As the scores reveal millennials use all four facets of impression manipulation i.e. ingratiation, charm, inscrutableness and concealingness, and their communication includes carefully crafted and socially accepted and appropriate messages for interpersonal interaction.

A look at the analysis indicates that the use of ingratiation and inscrutability are an important part of the millennial's style of communication and interaction. Also, they inherently conceal information while using their charm to be more appealing to people around them. The respondents may display different communication and interpersonal behaviour in different social settings, however, the researchers are of the view that individuals have a specific style of communication which forms the basis for all interpersonal interaction.

IMPLICATIONS AND THE CHALLENGE FOR MARKETERS

Distinctive consumer behaviours impact the development of new business strategies (Anshari, Alas, Razzaq, Shahrill & Syamimi, 2019) and brands make an effort to create images that represent consumers' personalities and communicate their values (Altınbaşak-Farina, Ayaz-Arda & Biçer, 2014). Inbound marketing with its focus on personalised interaction through social media and improved consumer experience is considered the best way to capture millennials' attention using blogs, podcasts, videos and other such options (Twenge, 2009). With reference to organisations, crafting the right image plays a vital role for individuals' success at work and in their private lives.

Millennials have a big spending power and therefore an understanding of their communication style will give an insight into their psyche. It would essentially help brands to communicate, so that the millennial consumer would feel closer to the brands and products, and relate more to them. Advertising and product communication may be designed in a way that the millennial consumer may feel that 'this is me' and 'this is how I want to be understood' and therefore 'this is my product and brand'. Understanding manipulation will help marketers to have more personalised conversations with millennials.

Research also reveals another interesting aspect of millennials as "secret introverts", who, while being the ultimate social butterflies, are inclined to be more restrained, quieter thinkers, and who tend to indulge their curiosity deeply. This paradoxical

focus may also lead to reflection and a tendency to read more deeply into issues and situations, versus simply taking them at face value (Rezvani, & Monahan, 2017).

The achievement-focussed millennials have a need to excel, and strive to go beyond all goals and aspirations (Kaifi, Nafei, Khanfar, & Kaifi, 2012; Kowske, Rasch, & Wiley, 2010), and they continuously seek opportunities for career enhancement (De Hauw & De Vos, 2010). Technology and social media use are naturally important for them, not only at work, but also in portable form (Bannon, Ford, & Meltzer, 2011), as is the need for continuous feedback (Cahill & Sedrak, 2012) for reassurance and confirmation. Similarly, they need brands and products to be involved with, and a part of, their life journey. A product or marketer that shows an affinity and closeness to them through brand communication, is likely to win them over as consumers.

The communication style patterns revealed will further help in understanding how different methods of impression manipulation are used by millennials for what they want to achieve and for fulfillment of their requirements. Millennials use ingratiation and charm and are selectively concealing. Marketers may use this as a key to get closer to them, marketing “through” them as one of them, and not “to” them from a distance.

KEY TAKEAWAYS - THE MILLENNIAL PARADOX

The key takeaways of this research on impression manipulation among millennials are that the results reveal the paradoxical nature of the millennials style of communicating. With millennials as their audience, advertisers and marketers can communicate with a generation that’s passionately and determinedly, or stubbornly individual in the way that it acquires and uses information, makes choices and reaches opinions, but at the same time shares everything, from activities to opinions, and constantly seeks affirmation and encouragement. This influences the brands that they endorse and their use of specific media. This would help marketers in crafting the messages aimed at catching their attention, as well as ensuring their involvement.

Marketers “*Please use our complexities to get under our skin*” is what the millennial consumer wants. Millennials love simplicity, want multiple choices and unlimited options, and work hard every day to make life easier. Basically, they want everything now, or they don’t want it at all. For them, everything should be at their fingertips, including music, television, books, news, food, dating, transportation, and probably anything else you can think of. They tend to select products that most clearly broadcast membership in groups with specific social identities. Millennials cannot be pigeonholed in distinct sections, with clear likes and dislikes, because of their elusive nature, and that is what makes them a perplexing paradox for brand marketers.

A millennial consumer is Individualistic but loves to share.

- I need marketers to make me feel strong affection.
- I need advertisers to unearth what is important for me as a consumer even if it has nothing to do with the product.
- Brands need to come closer to me as a person, fit organically into my life and become a part of it.

Along with their highly individualistic existence, millennials continue to be believers in a sharing economy, exemplified by Uber and Airbnb. They may be digital natives but they also yearn for real-life interaction; they are highly futuristic but also have a deep sense of nostalgia. They are snapchat-loving, socially-conscious, entrepreneurial youngsters. They like to be exclusive and they want to share this exclusivity through Facebook and Instagram and other social media platforms. Millennials are embracing a so-called experience economy, making memories that will last a lifetime.

Virushka, the name given to the partnership of Bollywood actress Anushka Sharma and Indian cricketer Virat Kohli, defines and fits in with millennial relationship goals and symbolises the perfect relationship which they aim for. The couple has a very large fan following on Instagram, which makes their popularity with millennial couples evident.

Appealing to millennials' sense of personal individuality

- I need others to explore me, my mind, define what I love, what problems I have, survey the environment of my existence and the way it changes.
- I want to feel important; I want to be a part of an exclusive group.

Netflix - living with choices: Millennials love to experience and create stories, and they love to participate, so creating an experience that encourages millennials to participate and share their unique perspective goes a long way in connecting with them as consumers. This explains the success story of *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*, an interactive "choose your own adventure" film on Netflix (Damiani, 2019). The film encourages very active fan engagement with a lot of interactive content that creates a novel circuit between the viewers, the platform and the content. The film's appeal for brands and marketers is the very interactive and participatory nature which helps to give new insight into Netflix subscribers' tastes and likes in the choices they make for characters in the film. This can help Netflix create storylines according to the taste of its viewer base as it already had an idea based on the past choices made by viewers (Damiani, 2019).

Give millennials the chance to live the brand story

There is a new concept emerging which is of customers as co-creators in the value delivery process rather than mere value recipients (Braun, Hadwich, & Bruhn, 2017). Millennials want to be treated as individuals, and interestingly millennials value authenticity. They are more likely to listen to a fellow consumer as opposed to a piece of promotional copy. For them it is important to see others using and experiencing something, and such an approach is more successful. They feel closer to brands that offer a service that is custom made to their specific wants and needs, and such brands are sure to get their attention. *MakeMyTrip*, with its theme of handling unforeseen issues like needing to change plans at the last minute, flight cancellations, assistance during foreign trips for consumers travelling abroad, is closer and familiar for them. The product appeal increases when a typical millennial couple, Bollywood actor Ranveer Singh and actress Alia Bhatt, is associated with it.

Another brand which has understood the importance of the personal element for millennials is Betabrand, an online clothing company. The customers of Betabrand become involved with ideation, designing, commenting and selecting an apparel or accessory which becomes a reality with the help of crowdfunding. (Behrendt, 2018).

Appealing to millennials - No mass advertising

- I feel closer to brands that take an active stand on issues relating to me as a millennial consumer, and directly or indirectly affecting my behaviour.
- There exist complex relationships between my senses, behaviour, emotions, and decisions. Simply put, my senses can control my behaviour and influence my decisions.

According to Butt, Mukerji and Shareef (2017), developing markets are more open to hard sell advertising, as such advertisements are thought to be more believable, leading to greater purchase intention among consumers. The authors believe that hard sell, coupled with compelling stories, would create greater engagement. Brands need to explore stories and experiences to understand the importance of an ongoing personalised dialogue with the millennial population. A seismic shift in the consumer landscape is leading to a lot of challenges for brands. Recent studies indicate that millennials are less likely to respond to traditional advertising, reiterating the need to create brand stories and consumer journeys. An international survey (Cohn & Wolfe, 2016) indicated that 87% of global consumers felt that it was important for brands to “*act with integrity at all times*”. In the same study, authenticity was ranked above innovation (72%) and product uniqueness (71%). Millennial consumers are hyper-connected, socially-informed and knowledge-driven, and are extremely suspicious of being ‘sold to’. *Image* is no longer *everything* and can be seen as highly suspect, as an advertisement may be photo-shopped or filtered. Messaging itself is crafted, scripted and spun ... and millennials aren’t buying it. Rather they are searching for the truth, and are relentless and obsessive in their quest for authenticity. They are all for viewing the raw footage and hearing what’s actually said; they want the real story from real brands, and smart brands are giving it to them, by responding to them and speaking to them. When Netflix had the Twitterati making jibes at the omnipresent Radhika Apte in Netflix shows, with memes and GIFs, the company came up with a sassy comeback, reasserting “Radhika apt hai” meaning Radhika “is” apt for every role as an answer to the Twitterati, and even went further to rename themselves as “Radflix” (Dhruv, 2018).

In a race towards projecting their authenticity, another example may be Olay’s ‘Behind the Beauty’ campaign, featuring behind-the-scenes footage and candid interviews with celebrities as real people talking about their everyday skin care routine, before they are ‘made-up and camera-ready’. More than the sum of its parts, brand authenticity is a package of core values, and what is also important is the degree to which a company adopts these values, and incorporates them into its mission, vision and daily operations. To sum it all up, when it comes to authenticity, brands are expected to follow Nike’s advice and ‘just do it’. Research focussing on millennials (Meg, 2019) reveals that they are loyal, they share information on what they love online, and they feel that brands using social media are more accessible and trustworthy as opposed to when they use traditional advertising. They listen to peers. They are an increasing demographic of high-earning individuals, are increasingly unmoved by brand names, and seek more for their money. The online marketplace offers them a contemporary appeal, with smaller brands and better deals.

THE WAY AHEAD

It is important to accentuate the current research findings for advertisers and marketers, along with retail and service businesses, as they attempt to approach and impress customers successfully. Future research can also look at understanding, observing and analysing the different facets of communication apparent in millennials in more formal settings, and the differentiators with relation to gender, industry type, nature of work, etc.

The large millennial population, with their spending power, is a marketer's dream. The communication style patterns revealed in the current study will further help to understand the unique way in which their mind works. This paper's findings on impression manipulativeness may be especially important in understanding communicative behaviours where ingratiation, use of charm, and concealing information are used by millennials for fulfilment or achievements of any kind. Millennials cannot be pigeonholed, and they continue to perplex brand marketers, as along with their highly individualistic existence, they continue to be believers in a sharing economy such as is promoted by Uber and Airbnb. They may be digital natives but they also yearn for real-life interaction; they are highly futuristic but also have a deep feeling of nostalgia. How an advertiser and marketer can communicate with a generation that's passionately and resolutely individual in the way that it obtains and uses information, makes choices and reaches opinions, but at the same time shares everything from activities to opinions and constantly seeks affirmation and encouragement for the same, would be an interesting takeaway from this paper.

The days of mass advertising are over and millennial consumers are looking to personalised conversations with brands. This research is particularly important as understanding impression manipulation with all its dimensions - ingratiation, charm, ingratiation and concealingness - as used by millennials, may help brands use stories and experiences for approaching and impressing millennials.

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