



**SOCIAL
RECESS**

LIVE OUTSIDE THE TIMELINE

A case study on Millennials' relationship with social media

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SUMMARY

001

How do you sell something to a Millennial? Many marketers would go straight to social media, where its common knowledge that this tech-savvy generation offers up their opinions, ideas, and unsolicited information about their lives. The most digitally connected generation ever turns to social media for their inspiration, connection, and functionality. It also appears that Millennials have unique emotional behaviors when it comes to social media: they use social media to validate their feelings and experiences.

Social Recess is a project by five Mullen ad agency interns that aims to reevaluate Millennials' relationship with social media. The team conducted a longitudinal study in which three Millennials gave up all social media for three weeks and two producers documented their journeys along the way. This paper presents the observations and findings of the experiment alongside with supportive primary survey data gathered from millennials all over the country. From these core insights, the team created a model that explains how to create meaningful engagement with Millennials over social media. The results include surprising revelations and generalized implications that offer a wide perspective on the changing social and digital landscape.

LANDSCAPE

002

MOST VALUABLE AUDIENCE

Millennials are commonly recognized as individuals currently between the ages of 18 and 34, but the true definition of the generation is much more complex. Often called the Digital Natives, Millennials are characterized by the effects of digital and social media on their attitudes, behaviors, and lifestyles. Millennials were the first to grow up with computers in their homes, and the youngest to witness the expansion of the mobile sector, bringing the internet from the home to the hand.

As a result, Millennials are ultra-savvy when it comes to technology. They are comfortable with the tools and platforms that deliver what they want in the way they want it.

Sharing, creating, and consuming content on social media platforms has become a trend with Millennials at a faster pace than any other age group, with an 86 percent representation on major social media platforms. The rise of mobile technology has only increased the level of connectivity between Millennials.

In addition to being the most connected generation, they are also the most educated. 75 percent of the Millennials we surveyed have at least a Bachelor's degree, an indication that more and more Millennials are going to college and graduate school; as a generation, they have aspirations and confidence in their financial success.

Currently, they're 50 billion strong with 170 billion dollars in purchasing power, a value that is sure to grow as they progress in life.

The amount of information available to them helps them make informed consumer decisions. These statistics are proof that marketers will have to dig a little deeper to reach this group and understanding them is integral to their success.



CONNECTED

86% are on major social media platforms



EDUCATED

75% have at least a Bachelor's degree



POWERFUL

\$170 billion in purchasing power

LANDSCAPE

DEFINING SOCIAL MEDIA

Many believe that the roots of social media stretch back further than the Web 2.0 movement. Rather, social media roots go back to the earliest form of any networked Internet. In essence, the very core and foundation of the web stemmed the creation of the definition of social media. Social Recess takes this definition one step further, defining social media as:

The platforms that provides Millennials with the tools to connect, explore their interests and investigate their social networks.

Social media is the saloon of a new generation. It's a place where people feel their opinions and knowledge are valued, and where users feel comfortable and empowered to gossip and start conversations on any topic, even those normally considered taboo. From this perspective, it's obvious that human behaviors are largely the same, but manifesting in new and optimized way. This is true for the macro trend called 'FOMO,' or 'fear of missing out,' an emotional condition that was not brought on by social media, but rather already existing and given an opportunity to manifest in a whole new way.

The points outlined here identify the key reasons why social media has become so imbedded in the daily life of Millennials. Social media now guides personal decisions, interests and behaviors like no other digital platform has ever dared. The emotional balance of social media teeters between bringing people together and bringing others down: So what is it that social media is really doing?



PROBLEM

004

DIGITAL VALIDATION

Millennials have ushered in a new generation that seeks constant connectivity, and being connected 24/7 has created a new normal that they simply don't realize.

The problem has become bigger than digital addiction. More importantly, it's the fact that Millennials live their lives digitally, so they rely on social media for validation. They wait for "likes" and "retweets" and "repins" to validate their thoughts and experiences. This need to live and breathe in the approval of digital circles has never affected a generation more.



56% think it's most important that their social connections view them as interesting.



64% feel cared about when someone likes or comments on their Facebook status.



58% say they can't live without Facebook

Millennials are said to experience FOMO ("fear of missing out") from social media and often feel the need to live up to digital standards of being interesting.

That's why Social Recess took the chance to challenge the notion that being connected is essential to feeling validated.

“(Social media) is a way to compare your own life with other peoples' lives. It's a way to feel good about yourself when other people post negative updates about what's going on in their life...but also vice-versa.”

“ I can't enjoy the sunset because I'm too busy trying to take the perfect picture to share on Facebook or Instagram. ”

PURPOSE

005

SHATTERING MISCONCEPTIONS

Social media is so much more, and so much less than we think. Our project was built on the theory that social media is so native in the daily lives of Millennials that they are blind to its effects on their lives and behaviors, positive or negative.

It became obvious that **our purpose was to provoke contemplation, to regain perspective, and to compel participants and observers to reframe their attitudes around social media's role in their lives.**

This project was an opportunity to view the inner workings of how voluntary and necessary our relationships with social media truly were. Our deliverable goal was to compile our findings into a comprehensive case study for people to develop a more meaningful understanding of how Millennials, the most connected generation, engage with social media.

EXECUTION

006

OUR APPROACH

We recognized a problem in the collective understanding of the digital behaviors of Millennials, and wanted to instigate change in this area. Members of the Millennial generation ourselves, our team observed that even with the abundance of social media sites to connect us, we do not truly understand how the quality of those connections impact daily life. Keeping this in mind, **we wanted to disrupt the status quo by challenging ourselves to reevaluate our relationship with social media.**

We moved forth with a phrase that guided the subsequent project period, boiling down our insights and hopes for our longitudinal research:

[“LIVE OUTSIDE THE TIMELINE”]

As Millennials, we spend countless hours scrolling through one directional feeds on myriad devices. It became obvious that to truly understand how these feeds affect our attitudes and behaviors, we first needed to take a step back and live our lives in-person and not through a screen.

LONGITUDINAL
RESEARCH



PRIMARY
SURVEY DATA



CASE STUDY

EXECUTION

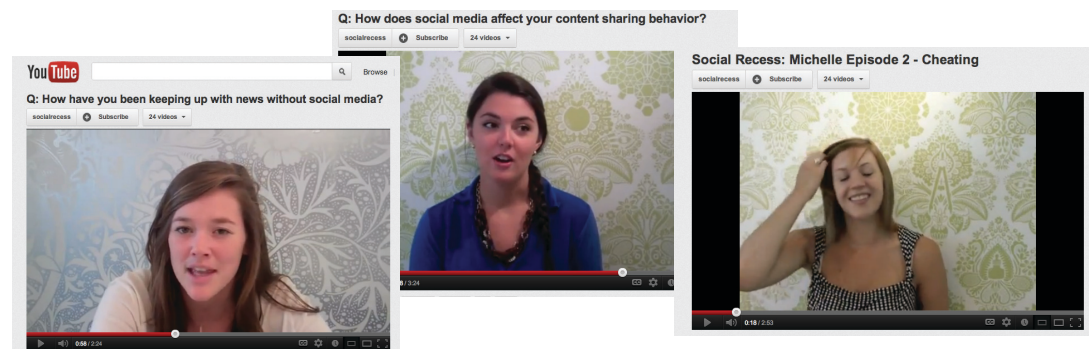
GROWING IT

✓ YES	✗ NO
CALLING & TEXTING 	SOCIAL NETWORKING 
EMAIL & CHAT 	CONTENT SHARING 
SNAIL MAIL & CARRIER PIGEON 	BLOGGING 
FACE TO FACE 	SOCIAL AGGREGATION 

Deprivation Strategy

This execution is built on the belief that to truly understand how something impacts our daily life, we often need to take it away. In our case, we used social media deprivation as the strategy, because it gave the participants the opportunity to truly feel the effects of not having constant connectivity. We asked three team members, all Millennials, to give up all their social media accounts for three weeks. Two producers documented their journeys in a real-time multimedia case study, where viewers could follow the highs and lows of their experience.

The main content of our project manifested in videos uploaded on a daily basis to the Social Recess YouTube channel. These videos included weekly episodes of each participant that updated viewers on their progress, and a “Question of the Day” series that prompted each participant to personally reflect on a specific topic around social media. The participants also wrote blog entries and filled out daily behavior logs to chronicle their thoughts and emotions during the experiment.



EXECUTION

SUSTAINING IT

We decided that our project would live on social media because, as Millennials, we do not underestimate its power as a sharing and mobilization tool.



In addition to videos and blogs shared across Youtube and WordPress, we created Facebook and Twitter pages to seed Social Recess. We used both of these platforms to push out our daily content and spark engagement with call-to-action posts, such as starting discussion on relevant articles and asking our fans questions through polls.

We further explored Millennials' attitudes and behaviors on social media by collecting primary data through a focused survey.

**226 survey participants
from 21 states**

We wanted to see if our Social Recess participants' experience aligned with those of the rest of this generation. By comparing our longitudinal research observations with our survey data, we discovered that we were not alone with the implications we came up with. We uncovered some key findings that were more surprising and generalizable than we expected.



HYPOTHESIS

009

WE WERE WRONG

Originally, when we looked at the landscape, problem, and purpose, we thought we had it all figured out. We walked away with what seemed like a workable insight:

Social media and the endless chase for validation are preventing people from appreciating their lives for what they are.

However, it quickly became evident that this was a 'tip of the iceberg' insight. As it turned out, the most powerful part of this insight was the sheer fact that we immediately proved it wrong. We walked into a new insight, brought on by our chance to step back from our expectations through deprivation:

We all have strong expectations and attitudes about social media and how it affects our lives and behaviors, but many of these ideas aren't accurate.

Our research subsequently revolved around trying to introspectively dispel our own expectations and build a case for understanding Millennials' use of social media in a more meaningful way.

Michelle, Day 4

"Why am I suddenly obsessed with my LinkedIn account? I feel a weird anxiety about not being able to see who's looking at my profile. And here I was thinking I'd miss the drama of the Facebook feed, when it turns out I am desperate for some professional attention."

Kelly, Day 12

"How am I supposed to get a good recommendation for a sandwich? I never realized how much I rely on the reviews I get from Yelp. It's also really interesting how the unique site design allows for users to create utility for others using their own creativity."

Kait, Day 17

"I'll admit, I thought I was going to be lost without my Pinterest account, but what's really making me crazy is now being able to check out tutorial videos on Youtube."

Above: Journal entry excerpts from Social Recess participants - Their initial predictions of what information was valuable to them was not what they expected.

IMPLICATIONS

010

CONNECTIVITY

Social media offers constant connectivity in a different way than anything that preceded its advent. Social media fosters complex communication in platforms that are instantaneous, easy, and have broad reach and extended longevity. Social media also facilitates specialized communication by way of its varied platforms, including powerful personalization and aggregation, content creation, or social sharing tools.

Millennials have grown to expect easy access to the people and information that they want, when they want it, due to their digital fluency. They understand that their thoughts and opinions can be formed, shared, debated, dispelled, and evangelized to their connections, which could number in the thousands, at the click of a button. As a result, they are led to believe that without constant connectivity, they are missing out on a tool that substantiates what they know, and the way they communicate it.

**When social media is your autobiography,
every moment seems to matter.**

FOMO, or Fear of Missing Out, arises out of this insight. FOMO affirms the notion that Millennials are constantly seeking self-validation from these platforms, using their constant connectivity as a way to seek affirmation that the things they are doing, saying, and sharing are reflecting positively on their reputation. Put simply, Millennials have a warped sense of meaningful connectivity because social media supports the idea that 'bigger is better,' and they've grown up in a digital culture where their wildest dreams and opinions can be validated only moments after inception.

In the Millennial's mind, social media is an autobiography in the works and a chance to represent and cultivate their ideal selves. Their sharing behavior therefore aligns more with what they want to be seen sharing with their followers and the reputation they want to build than with what they see interesting, themselves.

IMPLICATIONS

CREATIVITY

The Millennial creative process has changed from that of past generations. Social media, rather than being a form of distraction, actually inspires creativity and offers nonstop access to inspiration and creative feedback for its users. Channels such as Youtube, Pinterest, or Instagram, and blogging platforms such as Wordpress or Tumblr, all offer Millennials resources for inspiration and outlets for creativity, integrated with social features that allow users to share, comment, or take inspiration for themselves. These platforms offer evidence of creativity as a great connector and, therefore, a natural partner for social media. A distinction must be made, however, between social media creating artists and social media creating influencers.

According to our primary research, 56% of people surveyed just want their followers to think they are interesting, and an effective way of being an interesting influencer is by creating original content.

Content creators make the social media world go 'round, and report interesting differences in their social media behavior. Among those surveyed who self-identified as content creators, 33% reported their feelings of self-confidence as directly

relating to their feelings of creativity. This compares to 4% of those surveyed who identified as content consumers and 20% of those who identified as content sharers, which indicates that content creation behaviors, such as blogging, vlogging, or creating videos for sharing, relate directly to feelings of inherent creativity.

The rich creative and social environment facilitated by social media makes many users feel empowered to embrace their creativity, a process that is reinforcing DIY culture and changing its core meaning. While social media enables everyone to become a content creator, it eliminates the solitude of creation.

**‘Doing It Yourself’ is never just yourself
when the mode of inspiration and the method
of sharing is social media.**

There's no doubt that creativity is a shared commodity in the social space, and it appears that content-creation platforms allow users to feel temporarily and pleasantly alone while maintaining the comfort of instant gratification from their social connections.

IMPLICATIONS

UTILITY

Millennials rarely associate the social media platforms with utility: In fact, 70 percent of the Millennials we surveyed said they have considered giving up social media because they deemed it a waste of their valuable time. However, the Social Recess experiment and research concluded that utility related to social media is irreplaceable and thus invaluable in Millennials' lives.

The Social Recess participants detailed at length the loss of basic utility and productivity of social experiences without social media. Additionally, they realized that personalized and aggregated content in digestible and unbiased formats is a benefit of social media that formerly went unattributed.

We started our project by recognizing that social media is used by many people as an avenue to validation, but the irreplaceable, inherent utility in many social tools indicates that this definition is too narrow: More than anything, social media is a tool for finding guidance. Guidance manifests in myriad ways, fostered by native social platform utility: support or inspiration for a project, found on Pinterest, funded by IndieGogo, seeded on Twitter, or mobilized on Facebook. Advice for a new experience, from a person who has done it on Reddit, from friends and family on Facebook, or colleagues on LinkedIn. Direction in times of uncertainty, big or

small, from anonymous faces in Youtube tutorials, from former bosses on LinkedIn, or from friends of friends of friends on Facebook. Put simply,

**The tools have changed,
but the game remains the same.**

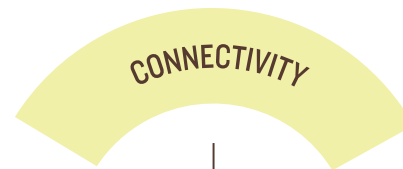
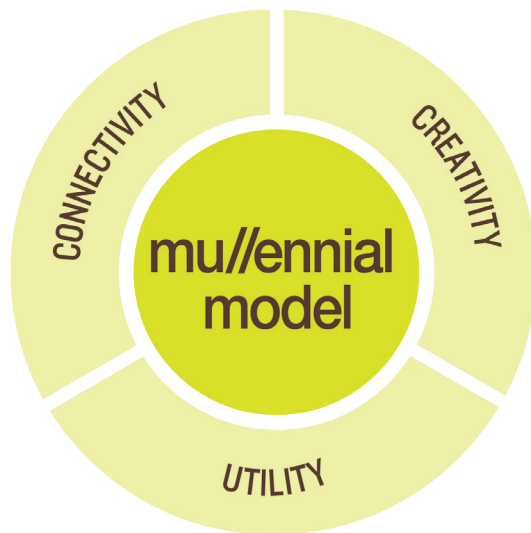
Millennials have been mercilessly chastised for their laziness and need for instant gratification. From the utility perspective, it is possible that Millennials are actually more efficient because their digital fluency allows them to harness the power of many to solve their problems, support their ideas, and share their opinions.

On a more basic level, social media has become a resource for solving life's daily tasks by providing immediate access to personalized information. We are multitaskers: 45 percent of those surveyed use their cell phone as their primary access to social media. Social media is information meant to be consumed on the go, for these Millennials. As our generation strives for more and more independence, social media provides us with the necessary information and tools to make informed decisions as consumers and provide us with a platform to learn and share content of any nature.

IMPLICATIONS

THE MULLENNIAL MODEL

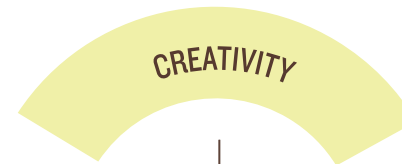
The Mullenial Model uses core insights from our research to provide implications on ways to create meaningful engagement with Millennials.



We stay connected because we value our digital lives as much as our real lives.

When social media is our autobiographies, every moment matters.

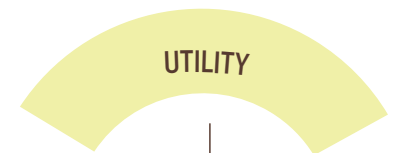
We are our own brands. We want to share content that reflects our idealized selves.



In our generation, creativity doesn't always come from solitude and being unplugged.

The Do-It-Yourself culture online is only an illusion of independence.

Social media is the new platform where we anonymously find inspiration and learn from others.



Where we spend the most time on social media isn't what we find most useful.

We value social media that gives us irreplaceable guidance.

We want categorized and aggregated content that we can access when needed.

CONCLUSION

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BIG LESSON LEARNED

We set out to do one thing, and came out with something way bigger than we could have ever imagined. It was no surprise that Millennials use social media all the time. Going into the project, we associated social media with social validation. People were living their lives on a digital front as they never had before. As it turned out, this was just the tip of the iceberg. By giving it up, we realized that social media ought to be recognized as an irreplaceable resource for three key elements: **utility, connectivity, and creativity.**

Going forward, these findings create several important implications for brands trying to target the Millennial generation. By understanding what Millennials find truly meaningful in social media, brands can leverage this information to become more relevant, engaging, and valuable to Millennial consumers.

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