

# MILLENNIAL MATTERS

The Millennial generation has gained a reputation for wanting it all and wanting it now. But is the stereotype matched by reality?

SUSIE O'BRIEN

**I**N the gritty heart of Melbourne, there's a young guy in a laneway offering free hugs. "Going overseas tomorrow, so hug now," his sign reads. He's cute, but the young people passing don't seem inclined to take advantage of a few seconds of no-strings-attached love.

How Millennial.

In the US, Pepsi pulls a commercial showing model Kendall Jenner quelling a protest by offering a police officer a can of soft drink. It's ripped apart on social media, with many mocking her with witty memes.

How Millennial.

On *60 Minutes* Melbourne housing entrepreneur and young rich-lister Tim Gurner says young people can't expect to buy houses when they're "buying smashed avocado for 19 bucks and four coffees at \$4 each". He is lambasted by his peers who don't like being called selfish.

How Millennial.

There's no doubt the Millennial or Gen Y generation, ranging in age from those born in 1980 to 1996, frequently get a bad rap.

Motivational speaker and author Simon Sinek has been highly influential in creating a Millennial stereotype characterised by self-absorption, indulgence and petulance.

In a YouTube clip that's been watched 6.6 million times he says Millennials have grown up in a world of instant gratification and been told constantly that they are special and can have anything they want in life.

"Millennials are unmanageable in corporations because they are impatient, lazy and entitled as a result of bad parenting, addiction to cell phones and Facebook depression," Sinek says.

Gurner's comments have also galvanized debate about the unreal expectations of Millennials.

"They want to eat out every day, they want to travel to Europe every year. This generation is watching the Kardashians and thinking that's normal," he said on Channel 9.

The backlash to his comments was swift and fierce. Many people pointed out the lack of home ownership among young people has more to do with the growing gap between the cost of houses and the average wage than what's on the brunch menu.

Such debates reflect the fast pace of social and economic change that characterises the Millennial era.

"We will look back and see this as an era of disruption — a time when things are in turmoil,"

Australian Institute of Family Studies director Anne Hollonds says.

Hollonds and other social experts suggest there are other problems ahead for Millennials. Although they are well-educated, adaptable and technologically savvy, demographic trends suggest there are dark times in their future.

Social modelling suggests up to one-third will live alone as they age. Many will struggle to get fulltime employment in their preferred fields. They're unlikely to be able to afford to buy a house in a suburb they desire. They're also likely to be affected by depression and anxiety in record numbers.

However, Millennials themselves, and those working with them, don't share this pessimism.

David Willey, 32, director of a Millennials marketing conference held in Melbourne last weekend, says people in their 20s and 30s are just as hardworking as other generations.

"When the going gets tough, Millennials up their game and make it work. They are very entrepreneurial, very creative and very innovative," Willey says. "They've grown up with (Facebook co-founder) Mark Zuckerberg, so they think anything is possible and they'll be the one to create the next Facebook or the next Uber."

Hockingstuart real estate agent Tim Mursell, 26, from Camberwell, objects strongly to the notion of Millennials like himself being entitled.

"I laugh when people say that because I wonder what we're meant to be entitled to?" he says.

"Gone are the days when people had a nine-to-five job and three houses by the time they're 25. We're not entitled to get a property of our own, that's for sure."

But Mursell does admit people his age "don't stick at things as much" as his parents' generation.

"My dad did the same job for 38 years, but no one does that now. Technology allows Millennials to break out and there's more opportunity to do different things and make your own job," Mursell says.

He has bucked the trend in choosing real estate, which he says is a very "traditional industry" to work in.

Mursell is a reminder that not all Millennials wear black T-shirts to work and get paid to write blogs on their laptops in hipster cafes.

He says even old-style industries like his are being shaken



**Hard workers:** Sophie Dunn, a marketing and communications manager for tech company Tribe; (far right) real estate agent Tim Mursell; and (left) model and social influencer Stephanie Smith.

PICTURES  
IAN CURRIE,  
STEVE TANNER,  
RICHARD DOBSON

up due to technological advances driven by his generation.

As market researcher Neer Korn sees it, technology is the defining marker of the Millennials.

"With absolute certainty they know more than the adults do when it comes to technology," Korn says.

"This gives them a massive advantage."

On paper, Sophie Dunn, 23, a marketing and communications manager for Tribe, is a typical Millennial, surfing the technological wave with great success.

She works for a firm that connects brands to "social influencers" and is hungry to get ahead.

Unlike her parents, who she says "got everything out of the way — kids, house, work — before they travelled", she had her first big overseas trip to Europe last Christmas.

"Going over there showed me how exciting the world is and I'd love to get back and get my career up and running and closer to my end goal," Dunn says.

But a closer look at Dunn shows the perils that come with trying too hard to fit Millennials into a neat, predetermined stereotype.

She may live in the trendy Melbourne enclave of St Kilda and work for a cutting-edge tech firm, but she's not just skating through on charm and style alone.

She has a double degree in business and design, coaches netball in her spare time and one day would like to work in print for a niche print publication.

Dunn's acceptance of hard work reflects the fact Millennials are more willing than other generations to do further formal education in order to remain employable, seek.com.au spokeswoman Kendra Banks says.

It's yet another way the twee put-downs applied to Millennials often aren't matched by the reality. But technology brings with it a dark side that's never far away.

Dunn readily explains the way social media — that drives, satisfies and rewards her generation — is not always positive.



"There have been times when I have been anxious over work or something else and I can see social media doesn't help," Dunn says, adding that fitness bloggers have an impact on the way people feel.

"Is your gym routine good enough? It's about, am I doing enough? Am I good enough? Am I enough?" she says wearily.

Willey agrees there's an anxiety underneath the Millennials' frantic fabulousness.

"They might think their life is not that good compared to the carefully curated life of someone on Instagram, which might actually be a lie," he says.

Dunn's boss Jules Lund, the founder of Tribe, is upbeat about the talents of the Millennial generation.

"The Millennials do apply themselves. They want a lot out of life — they want to travel, have a great lifestyle and will work for it," he says.

Lund's company connects more than 2000 brands with about 10,000 social media users, who get paid for posts about products.

It's the kind of Millennial-era job that leaves many Gen-Xers and Baby Boomers shaking their heads in disbelief. How could taking bikini shots on a mobile phone be considered paid employment?

Lund says one of the social media "originals" and key "social influencers of her generation" is Melbourne model Stephanie Smith.

Smith, 23, has been a fulltime model for five years, but it's the astonishing 1.2 million followers she has on Instagram (@stephclairesmith) that have made her an international name.

"I've been lucky that through modelling for some reason people are interested in my life, and that has given me a following on social media," Smith says.

She's now recognised around the world, which she says is "surreal".

"It makes me excited when people see me and want a photo," she says.

Smith is keen to dispel the notion that what she does isn't real work.

"I have been fortunate in the opportunities I have had, but it all comes down to hard work and dedication," she says.

However, even Smith acknowledges the increasing pressures and expectations on her young shoulders.

"Everyone is starting to question whether posts are real or fake," she says. "Now I am worrying more about the images and what they look like. Six months ago it would take 30 secs to get a photo, now I take the time to get it right."

Smith, like Dunn, has a solid background. She and partner Josh live with their cavoodle Ari in a house they've bought in the coveted eastern suburbs of Melbourne. Ari, naturally, has his own Instagram account.

Lund sees Smith as one of the lucky ones. He is more cautious about whether all Millennials "will transition from 20 to 30 somethings to having a foundation for a family".

He's not the only one questioning how well Millennials will adapt to a less self-focused life as

they age. Part of the problem, according to Korn, is the fact that many Millennials have "very traditional dreams in non-traditional times".

"They want a partner, a house and a child. It's hard because the housing dream has collapsed, so it means they have unreal ideals, which will probably not be met," he says.

Korn also notes that in the future one-third of households will have a person living alone — and "they're not all widows in their 80s".

"What does it mean not to have a child, a partner? People will have to find purpose in other ways," he says.

Indeed, there are many signs Millennials will spearhead a new type of society dominated by couples without children, couples who won't be married and singles without partners.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics has forecast that between 2023 and 2029, couple families without children will become the most common family type. Hollonds sees this sense of disruption also affecting Millennials in terms of work and housing.

"They are a transitional generation," she says. "For many it will be hard to get a job, given the high rate of insecure employment, and housing affordability is an absolutely massive issue."

"Very few people in this generation could contemplate affording a property in one of the major cities without help and that's a huge change in a short amount of time. It's a shocking fact that will hit at around 30, just when they are looking at having kids."

It's telling that all three Millennials interviewed here want to get married and have children. However, only Smith has managed to buy a house in her 20s.

Despite working in real estate, Mursell is still worried about being able to afford a house.

"I see the auction results — when would I be able to buy?" Mursell says. "Back in the '60s, '70s, '80s our parents bought in the sticks, which is all they could afford. Now people my age want established suburbs and don't like to think they have to look further out or buy something smaller."

Korn believes there is a further internal contradiction afflicting many Millennials. As he sees it, many have high expectations for how they want their lives to turn out, but on a personal level are undermined by a sense of real vulnerability.

"They expect and demand that they will be happy but they are also vulnerable and see others at their ideal on social media," he says.

"Part of the problem is that they're not a particularly charitable generation."

"Would they go and volunteer in Africa if they couldn't take a camera? No. There has to be a return for them — a mention in the CV. They wouldn't sit in a back room stuffing envelopes; they want to be in the van serving soup to the homeless and posting it on social media."

Ultimately Lund says there's "good reason to be jealous of the Millennials' generation".

There might be dark times ahead for Millennials battling to buy a house or get permanent job, but there's no doubt the future is bright — whether or not they accept free hugs, drink \$4 lattes or eat smashed avocados. [susan.obrien@news.com.au](mailto:susan.obrien@news.com.au)