

Review Article

# Marketing, Wearable Messaging & Millennials

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Received Date: 25 March 2020

Revised Date: 06 May 2020

Accepted Date: 07 May 2020

**Abstract** - “Just Do It”©, Daddy’s Princess, and Coffee First are just a few catchphrases we have become used to seeing on t-shirts, book bags, and pillows. The Millennial generation of American consumers has given rise to a significant marketing trend through wearable messaging, and this research will take an exploratory look at their use of, and the growth in, this trend. The potential intent and role of wearable messaging, and opportunity for global growth in the trend, are outlined in view of the optimal distinctiveness theory of consumer behavior. Sampling results and suggestions for further research are outlined. Thoughts are offered as to why, at a time when other American products and styles are quickly replicated in the international arena, wearables messaging is still uniquely and solely American.

**Keywords** - Millennials, Consumer Behavior, Marketing, Wearable Messages.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Although the words now adorn the title of a major theater movie, a BlogSpot, and several articles, the phrase, “And now a word from our sponsors” can be traced back to the days of radio programming and families gathered around a central family or church radio to catch the latest news or events. Sponsorship, and what we would later call advertising, has been a central force of not just marketing, but the promulgation of news, sports highlights, and even the mundane. Large corporations, university programs, and small entrepreneurs use marketing sponsorships to get the brand and image of their product, service, or company to as wide an audience as possible. Additionally, the age of the internet and web accessibility has brought a new realm and audience dimension to the ability to get out one’s message.

“Just Do It”©, Daddy’s Princess, and Coffee First are just a few catchphrases we have become used to seeing on t-shirts, book bags, and pillows. Wearable messaging is the idea of words, not just symbols or logos, printed on a visible piece of clothing worn in public. The intertwined letters of NY might be an easily recognized symbol of the

New York Yankees Baseball team, but they are not considered wearable messaging. Instead, think of the running tights, emblazoned in large and clear print, from waste to calf, with the words, “I may run like a turtle in peanut butter, But I Run.” The intent and form between these two examples are readily apparent. Wearable messaging has branched out from, most notably, t-shirts to hats, to running tights, jeans, and seemingly all clothing items. Gloves, knit hats, hoodies, and tennis shoes now have the possibility of carrying the wearer’s message. While the term wearable messaging encompasses a broad spectrum of printed words on clothing, this work will primarily focus on messages on t-shirts for simplicity’s sake. Wearable messaging includes the universal message understood behind the words, ‘Just Say No’ and now includes personalized or unique messages that seem indicative of a deeper part of the wearer’s personality or beliefs.

Much literature and research have been devoted to investigating every aspect of radio, TV, print, and internet marketing. Academicians and practitioners have looked at, analyzed, and researched numerous questions about efficacy, reach, appeal, and various other outcomes for these traditional forms of getting one’s message out to the general public. We easily recognize the way in which the consumer’s power and voice have evolved in the internet age through the use of reviews, posts, and frequency of input and feedback. However, little time seems to have been spent on understanding the impact and purpose behind the proliferation of messages now seen on clothing. This research focuses on Millennials’ use of wearable messaging as the dominant trendsetters and promulgators. Intent, use of, and perceptions are investigated in order to lay the foundation for more research and focus on this growing trend.

Market research companies have found that Millennials are three times more likely to refer to social media before making a purchase, and 59% say they are influenced by their friends, while 70% feel directly responsible for giving feedback about the company



through social media (Thickstun 2016). Millennials prefer, by 54%, the decision by consensus and trust word-of-mouth recommendations more than any other form of promotion (Bradley 2010). Marketing and business people are probably familiar with the adage 'if you don't tell your story, someone else will'. Millennials want to tell their own story, write their own script, and share it with as wide an audience as possible, as quickly as possible.

This work looks at the trend of wearable messaging that has exploded in recent years, in order to introduce and analyze several areas of consideration and future exploration. This trend and the unique characteristics of the Millennial generation are discussed in relation to one another in order to better understand both. The potential intent and role of wearable messaging, and opportunity for global growth in the trend, are outlined in view of the optimal distinctiveness theory of consumer behavior. Sampling results and suggestions for further research are offered.

## II. WEARABLE MESSAGING AND MILLENIALS

Recent years have brought about the idea and application of getting our message across quickly and efficiently. Whereas in years past, we were reliant on formal, clearly communicated messages delivered by radio announcers, professional television, and print advertisers, technology has put the power of sending a message into the realm of the wider population. The internet, email, text message options, and various communication apps have aided this trend. Market professionals and companies have recognized the potential speed and effectiveness offered to reach wider, more diverse, and highly segmented markets, but a quick look around on any given day will confirm the observation that our clothes and bodies have embraced this same trend. The 'body art' or tattoo trend is one example. While tattoos have increased in number and frequency for all genders and age groups over age eighteen, recent statistics estimate that 20% of Americans have tattoos, and this number doubles for the Millennials (Johnson 2016). Clothing, too, offers an abundance of opportunities for us to read, engage, guess and wonder. Just like when we drive down the road and decipher the meaning of a cryptic personalized license plate, we now too can decipher what the message is behind someone's words on clothing. The fad is not entirely new, but it has taken on exponential proportions and options.

While we are familiar with the idea that the brand name or symbol on clothing sends a message of status or inclusion, clothing today now relies on explicit messaging with words beyond the company logo or even name. In the past, clothing choices sent the message. For example, Evalds (2014) looks at the choices made by first lady Grace Coolidge, and the clothing selection specifically made based on the varied audiences she had to accommodate and in light of her husband's notoriously laconic character. His lack of words and non-effusive manner meant the first lady had to take extra measures to

get their Whitehouse message across, and she did this by carefully selecting the outfit based on the audience.

Washburn (1996) discusses the fact that clothing choice is often made based on unconsciously held criteria right alongside the conscious choice and consideration of what to wear on any given day. Cultural barriers prevent us from necessarily knowing why the choice is made, but she goes on to point out that clothing is used in every culture and society across the world to communicate status, wealth, ethnicity, age, occupation, and societal rank.

The marketing literature to date has not spent much time looking into the current trend of wearable messaging, but the millennial's embracing of it makes sense with what we know about this largest of all American generations and their highly individual nature. Rajagopal (2011) notes that the consumer market for fashion apparel has become more diverse through several factors, including personalization. Additionally, he states that observation in the field of consumer behavior shows that the global fashion apparel market has been highly influenced by trends in the USA. Rajagopal uses the theory of optimal distinctiveness to demonstrate an individual's need to fulfill two competing needs: the need to belong and the need to feel unique.

Applying the theoretical framework of optimal distinctiveness to wearable messaging may help us understand Millennials and this particular fashion trend. Clothing is a form of non-verbal communication and a way to transmit information about the wearer (Johnson et al. 2002; Damhorst 1990). Danforth (2013) tells us that a Harris Interactive survey found that Millennials are less likely to communicate face-to-face. Instead, this group prefers the less confrontational, quicker, and easier option of texting and e-mail. Millennials embraced the declaration of the Baby-boomers and Gen Xers that mass marketing was dead (Feld 2008). "We live in a world of fragmented media surrounded by cynical consumers who can spot and block an ad message from a mile away" (Feld p.1). Conversely, mass brand experiences do appeal to the Millennials, who are more communal and pro-social as compared to previous generations. They are a group that is civically connected, and they find strength in numbers, but they want to be in control of the relationship they have with any brand. They seek ways to customize and personalize experiences and daily living. These findings, with elements of belonging and distinction, support the application of optimal distinctiveness theory to further understand the consumer behavior of Millennials and wearable messaging. "This generation has a high demand for experienced," states Jeff Fromm (2013), who co-authored a book *Marketing to Millennials*, which interestingly uses cover-art on the book front of a t-shirt emblazoned with words, including the title of the book. Despite the imagery, the authors do not address the idea of wearable messaging as a trend or marketing tool. Experience matters to this group of consumers (Bluestein,

2017), and part of the overall experience seems to be how frequently they can get their personal message across.

Barrett (2013) reiterates and highlights Fromm's findings that the millennial generation has a need for the personal touch and a built-in sense of adventure to engage with a product or brand. Wearable messaging endorses both aspects of this need quite effectively. What could be a greater adventure, on a daily and ongoing basis, than to put your 'message' out there, wearing it, to own it, and risking the consequences, for anyone to read at anytime and anyplace?

Brinkley (2015) points out that this is a fashion-oriented generation whom some marketers refer to as the 'Project Runway' generation, coming of age at the mall. Their clothing is thus important to them, and what better place to get their message across, especially in the shortest possible lingo, just like how they text. Wearable messaging may not have been invented by the Millennials, but the circumstances and characteristics of this group have certainly taken the trend to new highs and heretofore unsearched depths.

Leo (2003) enumerates the three nouns that "professional generation watchers" use to describe Millennials: authenticity, authorship, and autonomy. When your message, your slogan, your belief, or your ideology are worn literally 'on your shirt,' you are claiming and adhering to an all-new level of authenticity. There is no hiding behind excuses or misrepresentations when it comes to wearable messaging. At the same time, even if the local retailer sold 50 more shirts just like the one you are wearing, there is a level of autonomy in that you do not know the other purchasers and may never cross their path. You purchase the shirt and wear it, specifically because the words feel like your very own; the message is yours at the moment of wearing, and you take ownership of the message on that day or occasion just as a writer signs their name to their work. However, as suggested by optimal distinctiveness theory, you are still part of a 'group' that shops at that store and purchases the same clothing.

Leo (2013) goes on to use the description of Millennials as being "family-oriented, viscerally pluralistic, deeply committed to authenticity and truth-telling, heavily stressed and living in a no-boundaries world where they make short-term decisions and expect paradoxical outcomes." For the purposes herein, let's look at two of these characteristics in more depth as they relate to wearable messaging. Short-term decisions with paradoxical outcomes are particularly relevant to the trend of wearable messaging. The decision to buy an article of clothing and wear it on any given occasion is certainly a short-term decision. The responses to that message or shirt would almost certainly expect to be paradoxically received in any setting based on the sheer number of people that one comes across on a daily basis. The other characteristic to consider with particular regard to wearable messaging is that of being viscerally pluralistic. The Millennials are a

generation willing to trust their instinct and feel confident in doing so. The exact expected outcome is not defined or important, and their confidence allows them a measure of comfort in whatever the outcome is, just as they are comfortable with the inclusive elements of society. Clark and Smith (2015) also noted this need for authenticity in the millennial generation where statements such as "I'm just me ... an authentic individual who just happens to be gay" were the norm. They do not need standardized society or standardized outcomes. Thus, this generation embraces words, messages, and clothing emblazoned for anyone and everyone to read, interpret and understand within their own parameters and filter systems. For the millennials, how the message is received may not be as important as their own ability to get the message out there.

Take, for example, the t-shirt emblazoned with the words, *'I had an Abortion'*. "Pragmatically, the t-shirt sets a new extreme for wearable messages in the future. Rhetorically, the message expressed on the t-shirt may be self-defeating: while it seems a step forward for women who have had abortions to be able to disassociate shame from their actions, the message may be perceived as negative to some. Though the t-shirt itself may not serve as an action to strengthen abortion rights, it does seem to serve as a catalyst for discussion. The purpose of the t-shirt is to at least discursively advance the pro-choice cause in the public eye." (Swift p. 57 2007). Does someone feel able to wear this shirt, given the potential negative reception it may have, because they know they are not alone in the message? Controversial wearable messaging may be uniquely the domain of Millennials because it balances the elements of group identity (those who have had abortions) and autonomy (no one else at this event is wearing this shirt) characterized by this generation and supported by optimal distinctiveness theory. Additionally, Urick (2014) found that individuals behave in ways that may make them personally uncomfortable but that are in accordance with expected generational behaviors, which is relevant to this particular area of wearable messaging.

Rajamma's (et al. 2010) empirical findings reveal that consumers' need for uniqueness does influence retail patronage behaviors, and there were significant similarities between American and Taiwanese respondents. The implications of the similarities and differences between American Gen Y consumers and their Taiwanese counterparts serve as potential managerial mechanisms for building and sustaining retail patronage in a globalization era and the potential spread in the retail trend of wearable messaging to overseas markets. Bradley (2010) found that Millennials tended to prefer consensus-based decision making, interactive technology and marketing, and word-of-mouth recommendations. Additionally, Vander Schee (2008) found that Millennials are communication addicted. With regard to wearable messaging, these are important traits to take note of, and researchers would expect these trends could continue to grow in the same direction for the next generation.

The values of coming-of-age Millennials in the United States, Sweden, and New Zealand were studied to determine if their values were similar, thus enabling marketers to stress the same values pan-culturally (Schewe, et al., 2013). While similarities were found on some value dimensions, many differences were noted as well. U.S. and Swedish Millennials were most different from one another, while New Zealand Millennials were more similar to U.S. respondents than Swedes, a finding consistent with Hofstede's model of cultural values. The findings support the need to understand cohort-based values and cultural values in designing a marketing strategy targeting Millennials across cultures. To date, very little cross-cultural research exists for marketing to Millennials, and there is a noticeable dearth of research on wearable messaging for any culture.

### III. THE INTENT AND ROLE OF WEARABLE MESSAGING

The use of optimal distinctiveness theory to evaluate clothing choices and wearable messaging is supported by previous marketing research (Rajagopal 2011). According to this theory, an individual will strive to reach a balance between group membership, such as peer group, age or family group, and personal autonomy and uniqueness (Sorrentino et al., 2007). Rajagopal (2011), applying this theory, found support for his hypothesis that personalization of apparel increased self-esteem.

Is wearable messaging just a fashion fad? Or is it a way for this largest of all American generations to brand their self-identity and enhance self-esteem? Are the words scripted to fit their beliefs, or do they embrace the beliefs upon seeing them in print on a piece of clothing that appeals to them? Given the sheer number, buying power, and influence of the Millennials, the field of consumer behavior would benefit from a further understanding of wearable messaging. Initial observations do not indicate a decrease in the trend, and more importantly, most business trend patterns would indicate the spread of the trend to the larger global marketplace in the near future. Rajagopal (2011) states that the market for fashion apparel has been strongly influenced by trends occurring in the United States, and Millennials represent the largest of all consumer groups. Research is needed in understanding the impact and purpose behind the proliferation of messages now sent through words on clothing, and optimal distinctiveness theory may play a key role in shedding light on this fashion trend and consumer behavior.

So the question becomes, is wearable messaging purposeful? Ember (2015) discusses the struggle marketers have had in reaching Millennials who tend not to watch much TV, or read magazines or online ads. Marketers have had to get creative, unique, and inventive to reach this group. Another consideration for marketers is whether the trend of wearable messaging, if it continues to grow in scope and breadth, will debunk the power of the brand. As stated earlier, research has shown us that the last 3 generations, including the Millennials, have

eschewed mass marketing. While the Millennials, in particular, are interested more in their own message than any corporate message, how should clothing manufacturers and retailers respond?

Thickstun, (2016) notes that purchase decisions by Millennials are highly affected by friends and testimonials. This unique blend of authentication of self and a more universal acceptance of trust in others is unique to their generation. Marketers will need to understand both of these elements and how they work together in order to develop marketing campaigns and products within that framework

### IV. SAMPLE AND OBSERVATION: A STARTING POINT

The group used for this study represents a sample of individuals born between 1992-1998. College students from three very diverse campuses and geographic locations were observed. Convenience sampling and observation were chosen since the study was exploratory in nature, and it was important to determine if the subject warranted further investigation.

College students' attire in the classroom was observed and noted on 10 randomly chosen days. The observation dates were selected at a point about 25% of the way into the term in order for the professors to observe with full independence. By this point in the term, the professor was aware of a student's home country and birth-year range selected for observation. Observations were held in 15 separate groups (classes) over a period of one year. Observation notes were made for distinct groups of American (USA) and International (with 12 subcategories) students. Observations were further delineated by several subcategories of: School Logo, School Sports Logo, Pro-Sport Teams, No Verbiage, Words (wearable message). For the purposes of this work, the interest is primarily in the categories of American students and words.

The data includes 420 students observed ten times each for a total of 4,200 observations. In an attempt to gauge the initial observations against an observable control group of non-Millennials, an 'Over 40' informal athletic league was chosen. The ability to reliably identify and unobtrusively observe a group that did not include Millennials is not easily accomplished. Additionally, there was no way for the observer to know if all those being observed were American or International participants, so the observations were made only for initial fieldwork into the viability for further study.

The 'Over 40' athletic league data contains 267 individual observation points. Of these 267 observations, 9 contained wearable messages. This is 3% of observations and would easily be interpreted as a significantly low proportion of occurrences. Of these 9, one was on a pair of socks, one on a baseball hat, two on shorts/tights, and five on shirts.

Of the 4,200 observations of Millennials, 2,898, or about 2/3, were Americans. Of the non-American millennial observations, 156 out of 1,302, or about 12%, displayed wearable messaging. For the American Millennials, 1,217 of the 2,898 observations, or about 41%, displayed wearable messaging. In summary, for these three observation groups, non-Millennials, international Millennials, and American Millennials, the percentages for wearable messaging are 3, 12, and 41 percent.

An additional item is worthy of noting here. The category of international Millennials has an added interpretation issue in that these are international Millennials currently residing in the USA. Also, 99% of them had been in the USA for less than four years, but the influence of American habits, trends, and shopping options should be accounted for.

These observations and data indicate that further information and discernment are needed. Any trend that elicits a 41% response from the largest population group in American history is something that businesses and marketers should be taking note of. Additionally, it should be noted that the percentage was fairly consistent across time-frames and classrooms observed. Further research would also allow for the specific application of theoretical concepts of optimal distinctiveness in ascertaining motivations and intentions behind the behavior of adorning wearable messaging.

In light of American leadership in setting fashion trends, as stated earlier, attempts were made to replicate the sample on three international campuses. One was in Asia, one in the former Soviet Bloc, and one in Scandinavia. However, each of these campuses had dress codes in place for students that would eliminate any possibility of a student donning a wearable message. Observations were held in each of these areas in busy shopping areas, knowing this was a weak substitute for the aforementioned knowledge that a professor has in a classroom setting, and it also offered no opportunity for repeated observations of the same individuals. Each of the times the observed sampling took place, the results yielded less than 1% occurrence of wearable messaging. While this is not a definitive comparison by any means, it does seem indicative of the premise that wearable messaging is a uniquely burgeoning American trend.

Why, at a time when other American products and styles are quickly replicated in the international arena, is wearable-messaging still seemingly uniquely American? The need to study this trend and recognize the unique role of the Millennial generation in its development and use is supported by the thoughts and observations herein. How, and if, it will carry over into the international arena is a question and topic in and of itself that offers retailers and clothing manufacturers a unique edge and advantage in the next several years. Given the strength in numbers of the Millennials, and their steadfast characteristics of

communication styles and choice, there is good reason to believe that wearable messaging will continue to grow in many ways and across national markets.

The trend of wearable messaging seems to have grown organically, with little or no discernable push from the industry. Thus, increasing awareness and recognition of the trend offers opportunities to shape its growth and direction. Additionally, marketers would need to increase the breadth of any study beyond just the American Millennials. Will younger generations or older generations pick up on the trend and begin sending their own message to those around them? Will societal constraints and cultural factors be too strong a tradition in the international arena for the trend to breakthrough in Asia, Europe, or Scandinavia?

These are questions for research and marketing to consider in the near future. Only through time and patience will we be able to not only understand the effects of the trend, but the generation of people who have embraced it.

## V. CONCLUSION

The nature of marketing is to capitalize on trends and to create new ones. Even without knowing that the number of tattoo shops has increased from 300 in the mid-1970s to 21,000 today, we can use our intuitive powers of observation to know the direction of this particular trend. Optimal distinctiveness theory may offer the framework for us to better study and understand this particular consumer behavior and the way the Millennials have embraced it. Cultural change is reflexively created and reinforced through generational groupings (Edmunds and Turner 2002), and the size and examples already offered to us by this largest of all generations cannot be ignored.

There has been a marked increase in wearable messaging through clothing choices and designs. This work is a starting point for developing a theory in how and why wearable messaging is influencing consumer behavior, choices, and preferences and the dominant role of Millennials in this trend. This work presents a discussion of the topic with respect to the unique characteristics of Millennials in order to stimulate thought for future work and consideration. It would behoove us, as managers, business people, sociologists, or cultural watchdogs, to know and understand this aspect of the Millennial generation and the implications or repercussions for its spread to international markets.

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