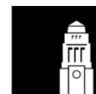
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Student millennials/Millennial students: how the lens of generation constructs understandings of the contemporary HE student

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Abstract

The massification of Higher Education (HE) has seen a significant rise in university participation over the last quarter century, meaning that young adults born between 1981 and 1996 – 'Millennials' – have generally higher levels of educational qualifications than previous generations. Millennials have 'grown up with' the marketisation of HE, and this generational label is often used interchangeably with 'students'. Focusing on the UK, this chapter argues that the boom in HE participation, and the knock-on effect for conceptualisations of the millennial cohort, has led to narrow generational thinking about who HE students are and what they represent. Synthesising critical analyses of media commentary about HE and academic literature, this chapter argues that contemporary commentary about HE students' values, responsibilities and outcomes often elide with broader narratives about generational change and crisis. Millennials are often portrayed as embodying a contradictory mix of privilege and precarity, hyper-sensitivity and indifference, and rampant self-interest. We illuminate how this generational concept operates to generate two dominant tropes within the construction of HE students: 1) as passive and entitled; and 2) as fragile snowflakes. The discursive effect of these is to negate important differences in the student body, individualising and obfuscating the material and political difficulties students and graduates face.

Key words:

Generation; Millennials; Social Media; Cultural Representations; Marketisation.

Introduction

The massification of Higher Education (HE) has seen a significant rise in young people attending university over the last quarter century, meaning that young adults born between 1981 and 1996 – so-called 'Millennials' – have generally higher levels of educational qualifications than previous generations. In broader terms, this cohort has in recent years, taken on significance in wider debates about politics, civic participation, work-life balance and personal relationships. The figure of 'the millennial' is highly contradictory, becoming synonymous with self-interest and a sense of entitlement whilst at the same time embodying emotional fragility and economic precarity (Allen, Finn and Ingram, 2020). More often, the millennial is imagined through discourses of lack, failure, and decline. This emerges in fairly broad terms, however, it manifests with particular veracity in relation to the contemporary HE student, as exemplified by this article in the *Times Higher*:

> Millennials don't read. They don't think as critically as they could. And they're not interested in learning for learning's sake. They want the Dream. They will go into debt to get that degree they believe will help them pursue it, but they have lost respect for knowledge, rigour and hard intellectual work. Working among such entitled puppies makes me feel like an academic platypus out of water.
>
> (Vehko 2018, para. 30)

Focusing on the UK, this chapter argues that the boom in HE participation since the mid-1990s, and the attendant increasing marketization of the sector, has important implications for the ways contemporary students are imagined and understood. We demonstrate how the Millennial generation has 'grown up with' the rapid growth in HE participation and, crucially, the creeping normalisation of fees and debts associated with university study. Moreover, their experiences of HE have been set against a backdrop of the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) and austerity, both of which have adversely impacted on the young (Mendick et al 2018). The impact of this, we argue, is that pervasive public discourses around Millennials, like the one expressed in the excerpt above, have been transposed onto debates about contemporary HE students, regardless of age or social background. 'Millennials' and 'students' are often used interchangeably within popular media discourse, especially those expressing a sense of disdain at declining standards or a sense of entitlement among contemporary students. In this chapter, we show how this engenders narrow and

decontextualised imaginings of the contemporary HE student, which obscure important differences within the student body, and individualise the challenges students and graduates face.

Interestingly, the slippage between Millennials (Generation Y) and students neglects that, since 2015, most young students actually constitute Generation Z ('Zoomers' born between 1995-2015). We are not suggesting that Zoomers should be conceived as radically different from previous generations, or that generational concepts are unproblematic. Rather, our aim is to highlight how the discursive construction of Millennials has led to partial and problematic imaginings of contemporary HE students. Whilst debts and fees were relatively novel for many Millennials, they are now, to a large extent, 'the new normal' for UK Zoomers. Indeed, the youngest Millennials (born in 1996) entered HE in 2014, just two years after the introduction of higher-level tuition fees in England and Wales. However, for the last five years there have been further changes to fee regimes and the costs associated with HE participation have become accepted, if not necessarily welcome for the current generation. Moreover, as students now graduate with an average £50,000 of personal debt (Belfield, Britton, Deardon, & van der Eyre, 2017), as wage growth remains weak (Costa & Machin, 2019), and as fears about the costs and standards of university accommodation become prominent (Busby, Booth & Blackall, 2019), the material conditions of contemporary students require much closer engagement. We argue here that the generational discourse shrouding debates about students prevents such conversations; ushering in a focus on individual dispositions that deflects attention to the increasingly challenging material context of student transitions in, through and out of HE.

To advance these arguments, the chapter first outlines the rise in generational thinking and dominant definitions of generational cohorts. We reflect on the ways the millennial cohort have 'grown up' with a marketised HE sector in the UK, and how in turn, contemporary understandings of student experiences and values have been subsumed within broader attempts to imagine and define generational change, inequality and crisis. To demonstrate this, we outline two significant representational tropes that characterise constructions of the contemporary HE student. These were identified as part of a wider research project exploring the discursive constructions of millennials (Allen, Finn and Ingram 2019). This involved a search for news articles (using the term 'millennials' in the headline)

from UK national newspapers (from September 2017 to September 2019). The search, conducted using the comprehensive online media database LexisNexis, returned 1368 results which were coded by the authors. A significant theme in the news coverage related to university students, and our analysis identified two key representational tropes: (1) *Passive Consumers, Entitled Learners* and (2) *Fragile Snowflakes, PC Warriors*. What we present here is not a definitive or comprehensive analysis of how students are constructed across all media or indeed elsewhere. Rather, our intention is to unpick the ways in which contemporary constructions of students are framed by notions of generation, we consider the discursive effects of such framings in how students are understood.

Millennials and the HE landscape

Whilst there is no 'official' definition of Millennials, they are usually defined as those born between the early 1980s and late 1990s/ early 2000s (Dimmock, 2019; Strauss & Howe, 2000; Intergenerational Commission, 2018), with 1981 to 1996 being the accepted range in US research. Millennials are commonly pitted against other generations, most notably they Baby Boomers (those born between 1946 and 1964) with whom they are imagined as 'at war'. As noted elsewhere, a focus on intergenerational division can mask the inequalities and diversities *within* generations related to class, gender and ethnicity (Roberts & Allen, 2016; Shabi, 2020). This, below we sketch out some of the key changes in UK HE policy which have differently affected students entering the sector since the late 1990s. We draw attention to the *intra*-generational complexities of Millennial experiences of HE in the UK and consider current context for contemporary Zoomer students.

The millennial cohort and the shifting fees and loans landscape

In the UK, the Millennial generation entered HE at a significant policy juncture, which saw significant shifts in relation to tuition fees, bursaries, student loans and university participation. As the oldest Millennials (those born in 1981) were coming to the end of compulsory schooling, the Dearing report (1997), commissioned by a British Labour government, paved the way for tuition fees to be introduced across the UK by recommending that working graduates should bear partial responsibility for the costs of their tuition. Acting on the recommendations of the report, tuition fees of £1000 were introduced in 1999 through the Teaching and Higher Education Act 1998. This was the very

point at which Millennials were first entering universities, making them the first generation to not have access to free university tuition. The introduction of tuition fees was justified through debates about the growing numbers of young people entering the system, the forecast for participation to continue to increase over 20 years, and an assumption about the continued positive link between HE and graduate earnings (the so-called 'graduate premium'). Within seven years this modest contribution to tuition fees was increased under the Higher Education Act 2004. This enabled universities to charge variable tuition fees of up to £3000 per year for students enrolling on courses beginning in the 2006-2007 academic year in England and Northern Ireland, and in Wales for students enrolling in the 2007-2008 academic year. The fees increased significantly to £9000 for those enrolling in the 2012-2013 academic year, following the publication of the Browne Review in 2010. The youngest Millennials (born in 1996) began to enter HE just two years after this increase and are thus among the first swathe of graduates to be leaving university with in-excess of £30,000 debt. The millennial cohort is therefore unique in that they are a generation that have experienced significant changes in tuition fees within a generation, and yet both ends of the generational cohort have very different fee experiences ranging from £1000 to £9000 per annum. The youngest Millennials' experiences of fees and student debt is therefore aligned with that of the subsequent generation (Zoomers), who now face fees of £9250.

Student Debt

An obvious outcome of increases in student fees is an increase in student and graduate debt. Crucially, from a generational perspective, Millennials comprise a significant proportion of the first cohort of graduates to exit HE with both fee and maintenance loans. For older Millennials entering the system in 1999, tuition fee loans were not available but income contingent maintenance loans were, and from that year both the average loan amount (of approximately £2000) (see Gayardon, Callender & Green, 2019) and the number of students taking out student loans has steadily increased as new fee regimes were introduced:

> There was a large jump in the average amount owed by those who first became liable to repay from 2010. These cohorts were the first to mainly consist of students who had taken out fee loans for variable fees. The average amount owed by the

> 2009 cohort (when first liable to repay) was £11,800, £14,700 for the 2010 cohort, £16,200 for the 2011 cohort.
>
> (Bolton 2019, p.18)

These figures jump sharply for the first cohort of post-2012 students who meet the threshold for student loan repayment, whose average debt is reported to be £32000 (Bolton 2019). These figures reflect the debt of those who have made the threshold salary for repayment, which was £21000 in 2012 and now sits at £25000 per annum. What the figures do not capture is the average debt of students leaving HE, which under the 2017 system sits at just over £50000. According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, "[t]he combination of high fees and large maintenance loans contributes to English graduates having the highest student debts in the developed world" (Belfield, Britton, Deardon, & van der Eyre, 2017, p.2). There have been complex shifts in the way that HE is funded in the UK since Millennials first entered the HE system and this has seen the move away from a system of maintenance grants available to poorer students to a system of means tested maintenance loans. The result is that "students from the poorest backgrounds will accrue debts of £57,000 (including interest) from a three-year degree" (Belfield et al., 2017, p.2). Their wealthier counterparts, however, still emerge with significant levels of debt, reported to be £43000 for the wealthiest 30 percent of families, and this is argued to be more than double the amount of debt that students would have incurred if the system had not changed in 2012 (Belfield et al., 2017). Thus, younger Millennials are perhaps much closer in experience and expectation to their Generation Z counterparts than their fellow (older) Millennials. Moreover, whilst the burden of debt is a normalised feature of labour market transitions for graduates from across the social spectrum, speaking in generational terms obscures entrenched inequalities (e.g. social class, ethnicity) when understanding orientations and outcomes.

Graduate employment and the diminishing returns to education

The fee changes experienced largely by Millennials and Zoomers were initially justified in the Dearing report (1997) by the fact that graduates at the time experienced higher earnings than those without a degree, and therefore a significant return on their investment. There was also an expectation that this positive link between learning and earning would be

sustained for future generations. However, this link is less straightforward for both younger Millennials and Zoomers graduating into a congested graduate labour market in conditions of post-crash (and now post-COVID) austerity.

Whilst returns to HE have been diminishing over time (Boero, Cook, Nathwani, Naylor & Smith, 2019), graduates still earn more than those without HE qualifications and this graduate premium becomes particularly acute as their careers become established in their late 20s and early 30s (Belfield et al., 2018). Boero et al. (2019) compared data from different birth cohorts and established that Generation X graduates earned on average 19 percent more than their non-graduate counterparts by age 26, whereas graduate Millennials at age 25 earned just 11 percent more than non-graduates from the same cohort.

As the sector has expanded with greater numbers of students from working-class and minority ethnic backgrounds, the idea of the graduate premium has been further questioned. Graduate earnings vary enormously by gender, ethnicity and social class (Britton, Dearden, Shephard & Vignoles, 2016; Ingram and Allen 2018). Goldthorpe (2016) reveals the link between origins and destination has largely remained the same over successive decades despite a weakening of the link between class of origin and educational attainment. He argues that "any equalisation in educational attainment that may have been obtained in relation to class origins is being offset by a decline in the 'class returns' that education brings" (p.102). This has implications for considering the differential prospects for Millennial graduates, who are as a cohort experiencing diminished returns on their investment in HE, whilst also accruing higher debts than previous generations. Moreover, within the cohort, working-class and minority ethnic students are not only exiting with higher debts than their White, middle-class counterparts, but their investment in HE is less likely to bear the same fruit in terms of employment status and salary that those from similar origins in their parents' generation enjoyed.

Imagining the Millennial, imagining the student

Having identified how the Millennial generational category has coincided with significant changes to HE and the graduate labour market in the UK, we now discuss two discursive tropes emerging from our media analysis: (1) *Passive Consumers, Entitled Leaners* and (2)

Fragile Snowflakes, PC Warriors. We demonstrate how these tropes are shaping the ways the contemporary student is imagined within the UK revealing that whilst the different narratives and articulations of young students do not always sit neatly together, even where there are contradictory interpretations the outcome is often the same. Specifically, these tropes work to shore up particular imaginings of students as departing from an idealised (and imagined) notion of the intellectual, engaged and resilient scholar of the past. Of course, media representations can be interpreted as humorous caricatures. Nonetheless, we contend that they are not purely benign exaggerations, and that they work in conversation with policy to bring particular subjects into being (Ball, Maguire, Braun & Hoskins, 2011). We return to this in our conclusion.

Passive consumers, entitled learners

Barely a day goes by without an article in the UK news media about Millennials and, invariably, these include representations of lifestyles and values that have become ubiquitous with notions of narcissism, excess and a sense of entitlement. The millennial label is loaded with mostly negative associations, including a poor work ethic, and millennials have been hailed the 'ME, ME, ME' generation' (Stein, 2013). Millennials are commonly imagined as expecting rewards without investing the requisite effort and for indulging in expensive 'avocado toasts' and lattes rather than saving for a secure future (Levin, 2017). These ideas circulate widely in media and popular culture, having resonance across advanced Western economies where HE participation has increased alongside the millennial generation coming of age. Indeed, the UK press often draw upon on research from the U.S. in order to paint Millennials as 'a generation of "deluded narcissists"' whose 'desire for material gain has been increasing steadily' and whose 'commitment to hard work has been decreasing' (Blair, 2018, para. 3). Elsewhere the connection to students and graduates is more explicit, and news outlets report that Millennials 'are a nightmare to employ' (Hoyle, 2017, para. 10) requiring more guidance than any other age group and presenting both a strong sense of entitlement and poor decision-making skills which impact upon educational spaces.

> Schools and universities are increasingly under pressure to follow some sort of student-led business model. Students not only believe that they're entitled to voice

> their point of view, but that theirs is the only valid view. This attitude has bled into the workplace.
>
> (Hoyle, 2017, para. 18)

The interlacing of generational discourses with narratives of contemporary students and graduates reinforces the growing perception of (and disdain towards) students as passive consumers and entitled learners. Images of the student as consumer (SAC) are bolstered by political and policy discourse (Brooks, 2018; Sabri, 2012; Naidoo & Williams, 2015) where the SAC subjectivity is encouraged through notions of 'value for money' and a focus on labour market returns. This particular view of SAC, whilst encouraged within policy, does little to dismantle the dichotomy between students as active, engaged learners on the one hand, and as entitled consumers on the other. Indeed, it appears that if and when students are imagined as consumers, they necessarily cease to be learners (or students or scholars) in any meaningful way. One identity negates the other; it is impossible to be both. As Brooks (2018) notes, a focus on students as *learners* is notably absent in policy. This is revealing of the ways students' own intellectual investments and identities are valued against their financial contributions and roles as paying customers. Thus, when students emerge as consumers, they are imagined as simply going through the motions of university in order to move on to the next phase (Brooks, 2018) and this plays into perceptions of their passivity and entitlement.

This is evidenced in the growing debate about grade inflation, which imagines students as undeserving of their degrees, or at least the particular classification thereof. In August 2019, the *New Statesman* ran a cover story titled *The Great University Con: How the British Degree Lost its Value*. It encapsulates the interconnection between the generational discourse about Millennials as entitled consumers and shores up fears about how this cohort have corrupted (and indeed have been corrupted by) HE and its (increasingly marketized) values. The image presented is of students demanding – and receiving – higher grades than previous generations. This is read as a 'dumbing-down' of degree courses and a decline in intellectual standards. The impact of this 'moral panic' around degree outcomes and supposed 'grade inflation' has evidently been felt by the UK's governing body, Universities UK, whose response appears to simultaneously reject and validate claims of

'dumbing down' as 'truth'' by demanding transparency from institutions in order to ward off external 'perceptions' rather than address poor practices internally.

A review of academic research reveals that this image of students – as entitled passive consumers of education – axiomatically provides the basis for the formulation of research questions. At one level, it has been argued that framing HE students as hard-working consumers is reflective of a broader culture of competitive individualism (Brooks, 2018). Going further however, Nixon, Scullion and Hearn (2018) maintain that 'intensifying marketisation heightens the potential for consumer satisfactions and frustrations in HE that are profoundly narcissistic in character' (p. 928). Drawing on interviews with students at an English university, they claim that the SAC model results in students '[s]eeing the only valid purpose of a degree as the personal (largely economic) benefits' (p. 935) it can bring. The image of the SAC is evidently understood as problematic, and the explicit mobilisation of 'narcissism' as a term to characterise student behaviours and values plays into the discourse of the 'ME, ME, ME Generation' outlined earlier. Narcissism is defined as 'self-enjoyment, image-obsession, new forms of media reinforcing self-centeredness and entitlement characteristic of consumer societies' leading to 'a deep sense of emptiness and inferiority which vacillates with a grandiose self-image' (Nixon, Scullion & Hearn, 2018 p. 930-31). It is clear, then, that the new condition or disposition amongst students is considered to be harmful to those who embody it. It does not seem to vary by gender, ethnicity or social class, but represents a more universal characteristic of a cohort growing up with social media and rapid consumerism.

A more critical reading of the passive, entitled consumer trope locates this as a response to students' inability to see or plan for a future which then leads to particular (economic) orientations to the 'here and now'. For example, Harrison and colleagues (2015) reflect on the binary representations of young students as, on the one hand, leading hedonistic, alcohol –fuelled lifestyles while spending little time studying, and on the other as impoverished and struggling. As with broader debates about Millennials, Harrison et al. reveal how these dichotomous images merely distort the debate to the extent that 'the diverse lived experiences of actual students are in danger of getting lost' (Harrison et al. 2015 p. 100). Indeed, within debates about generational thinking, there is already a backlash that illuminates how images of Millennials are figured largely as white, able bodied, urban and privileged (Allen, 2019; Clark, 2019). In UK HE research, there have been attempts to

show that whilst some may have a 'devil may care' attitude toward debt and spiralling costs of study, BAME students, women and those from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to simply resign themselves to the structural imposition of indebtedness and adopt 'a "hit and hope" approach to financial planning and decision making' (Clark, Hordósy & Vickers, 2019, 718). Rather than passivity or entitlement then, this research imagines students as participating in HE as a 'perfunctory process' (Essn & Ertl, 2016) as they *insure* themselves against an uncertain future, rather than actively investing in it (Harrison, 2019).

Whilst there is considerable academic research which complicates and challenges the image of students as overly-entitled and passive in their consumption of education (Tomlinson, 2017; Abrahams & Brooks 2019; Komljenovic, Ashwin, McArthur & Rosewell, 2018), the questions that the HE community are asking nevertheless proceeds from – or are at least haunted by - toxic images and discourses of students as disengaged, utilitarian, and outcomes oriented. Whilst some studies work hard to challenge negative constructions of the SAC model, such orientations apparently run counter to proper, engaged learner identities (Bunce, Baird & Jones, 2017; Nixon, Scullion & Hearn 2018). Thus, even where there is nuance, and where research has complicated the notion of students as passive consumers and entitled learners (Tomlinson, 2017), the false dichotomy of the consumer vs learner is necessarily bolstered. Thus, active learner engagement is read as an antidote to, or antonym for, consumer orientations. It is unclear to us how, in an era of unprecedented student fees and graduate debt, a consumerist approach can be avoided amongst the contemporary cohort. As with the discourse around Millennials, it is perhaps more useful to understand how and in what ways consumer-oriented and mediated living are reshaping aspects of social, educational, political and working lives, rather than operating within what we see as an unhelpful and false binary between consuming and learning.

Fragile Snowflake, PC Warriors

The other side of the millennial discourse is their apparent fragility and hyper-sensitivity. In a piece for the *New Republic*, Allen (2019, para. 9) asserts,

> Perhaps no generation has been so gleefully maligned in the press, which has produced a zillion think pieces casting Millennials as entitled, lazy, mayonnaise-hating, over-educated pampered whiners who, in their blinkered narcissism, are selling out

> the human race. That caricature has slowly given way to a more nuanced picture of a generation profoundly shaped by the events of its time—9/11, the Iraq War, the Great Recession, climate change—and baleful socioeconomic trends: growing income inequality, staggering levels of student debt, stagnant wages.

Evidently, studenthood is a key aspect of the ways Millennial experiences are characterised, and, under the shadow of the Millennial discourse, contemporary students are defined as much by their vulnerability as their rampant narcissism. They are imagined as taking offence (too) easily and as lacking the resilience of earlier generations of students, as being without humour and demanding apparently absurd levels of political correctness (PC) (Fox, 2016). This construction of students as fragile is most clearly embodied in the term 'snowflake' that has become synonymous with young people and university students in particular (Finn, 2017). This term has become so ubiquitous that it entered the Oxford English Dictionary in 2018. In one newspaper article, 'Snowflake' is defined for the reader, and moves synonymously between conceptions of snowflakes as a generation, and examples of 'snowflakey' behaviour coming mainly from HE students. The piece claims that 'Generation Snowflake is a put-down used to describe the current generation of sensitive *millennials*' and defines snowflakes as those 'aged in their late teens and twenties' who 'embraced their snowflake ways while they were at university' (Harrison 2019, para. 23, our emphasis). The slippage here from the Millennial cohort to younger groups (Zoomers) is revealing of the ways in which supposed Millennial dispositions and values are transposed onto images of the contemporary young student. This view of students as overly-sensitive and too easily 'triggered' has emerged with particular veracity in recent debates around 'free-speech' and no platforming on campus, and 'safe spaces' within universities. In these imaginings, the contemporary student is constructed as intolerant of alternative views and hostile to free speech:

> Today, many of these unis [sic] are hostile to free speech and determined to shield students from any ideas they don't like. Students unions demand "safe spaces" - areas where people cannot disagree with or challenge your ideas. Meanwhile, other ways Generation Snowflake is leaving its mark on the world is by introducing "trigger warnings" and "no platforming" speakers whose opinions they may not agree with.

(Harrison 2019, para. 25)

Constructions of students as overly sensitive and a threat to free speech are promulgated by national newspapers and authorised in the UK by academics such as Professor Frank Furedi (2017) and other prominent figures within HE including University vice chancellors (Crouch, 2017). These ideas also have roots in US academic research, mainly from the field of psychology (e.g. Twenge & Foster, 2010), which has suggested that Millennials lack resilience and 'grit', and face problems in education due to overly protective parenting and a wider culture of infantalisation. The 'therapeutic turn' as it is labelled by UK academics (Ecclestone & Hayes, 2019) has apparently led to a 'sense of emotional fragility' amongst undergraduates (Furedi, 2017). In instances of students campaigning for no-platforming of controversial figures, or the removal of statues that represent historical figures with links to the slave trade for example, we see how the HE student is imagined as a politicised subject but in ways that are deemed problematic. Instead of being recognised as legitimate political actors with strong considered views on important historical and contemporary social issues, they figure as censorious and intolerant, whereby their own fragility shuts down debate and threatens democracy. Thus, whereas one might interpret such practices of engaged critique of the university as counterbalancing notions of passivity or entitlement, the discourse around Millennials as PC Warriors undermines students' agency, their calls for different knowledge communities to a type of silliness and hyper-sensitivity (Fox, 2016).

Free speech on campus is a fiercely contested issue and continues to garner much energy and attention. However, the notion that it is under threat has been strongly refuted by large swathes of the student population and some sector representatives, and by the government's own inquiries. Indeed, the British parliament's joint committee on human rights found limited evidence of censorship occurring on campuses, nor evidence that students are unwilling to hear or engage in perspectives that are different to their own. The report concluded that 'the narrative that "censorious students" have created a "free speech crisis" in universities has been exaggerated' (2018, p. 20). This view is further compounded by a recent study conducted by the Policy Institute at King's College London, which found that over 80 percent of students believe that freedom of expression is 'more important than ever' and that universities actually offer a more productive space for this compared to other contexts in the UK (Grant, Hewlett, Nir and Duffy, 2019). As O'Keefe (2016) asserts, freedom

of expression and of protest, and also freedom from hate, means that 'students and academic and non-academic staff should collectively decide who to welcome on campus' (p. 89). From this perspective, students are imagined as active participants *and* active consumers, having a hand in shaping campus cultures and transforming the curriculum through practices such as 'no-platforming' and the 'safe spaces' movement. Notwithstanding, Hill (2020) illuminates how for critics of safe spaces and no-platforming, 'debate' is regarded as the only mode of legitimate expression with ideas in the university, and any suggestion that this is being curtailed or closed down is explained by notions of entitlement and deficient scholarly identities. Rather than understand how contemporary students prefer to engage with and challenge difficult ideas, 'Generation Snowflake' (Fox, 2016) is invoked to argue that students no longer regard universities as space of knowledge but instead, as spaces of comfort (Fox, 2016).

The battle for representation is hard fought and at the same time as populist and academic critiques of the contemporary HE student grab headlines in the UK, more nuanced research about student activism continues apace, albeit quietly. By way of example, research by the 1752 Group, a UK-based research and lobby organisation working to end sexual misconduct in HE, reveals that it is institutions rather than students who prefer to close down debate and create a culture of silence around staff sexual misconduct in universities, mainly through the use of Non-Disclosure Agreements (NDAs) and other forms of institutionalised suppression and silencing. As Page, Bull and Chapman (2019) outline, it is student unions and self-organised feminist groups that have worked to make gender-based and sexual violence in HE visible, via campaigns, discussions, and talks. There is, indeed, a contradiction between how students are imagined as vulnerable, censorious subjects, closed off to new knowledge and 'real learning' and the growth of campus activism in various spheres from campaigns against sexual misconduct, the movement to decolonise the curriculum, and protests against rising fees and costs of university living. Reflecting on this tension, Danvers (2019) argues that at the same time as critics of contemporary HE and its students decry the creeping anti-intellectual and anti-democratic cultures which supposedly undermine critical thinking 'the academy is simultaneously and inseparably alive with more recognisably 'deconstructive' criticality' (p. 3). Citing high-profile student-led movements in the UK, Danvers illuminates the contradiction between everyday critical

thinking and political activism, and the kinds of critical learning and knowledge exchange that has come to characterise the values of universities and the value of university graduates. She concludes that critical thinking within HE curricula has been narrowly drawn to refocus criticality as an inward-looking disposition that, in turn, leads to the kinds of 'performative self' that others, like Nixon and colleagues (2018), understand as narcissistic subjectivities. Critical thinking has become 'an instrumentalised pedagogic performance indicator' and 'something to get "right" within a practice of impermeable boundaries, rather than a practice of questioning or re-writing boundaries' (p. 10). Indeed, when students participate in a more engaged political activism, when they campaign for an alternative vision for HE which has a moral duty to align its interests with those of its members, they are imagined as 'immature, needing authoritative guidance and enforced limitations on their political engagement' (Danvers and Gagnon 2014, p.11). The construction of students as snowflakes and PC warriors serves the function, then, of delegitimising their political voices through a reductionist discourse that services those in power by deflecting from the need for policy changes that are an inevitable conclusion to the issues that students are raising.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have outlined how the Millennial generation has grown up with the massification and marketisation of HE in the UK, to the extent that representations of the contemporary student are formed in the image of the young millennial; an entitled and passive figure, vulnerable and censorious, privileged yet highly precarious. In many ways, the imagined Millennial student emerges in contrast (and conflict) with their imagined Baby Boomer counterparts; a cohort that experienced HE in the UK at a significantly different social and economic moment. Participation was much lower, of course, but the 'graduate premium' was much more dependable. Whilst the generational label of the Millennial taps into the important material differences facing contemporary students in the UK, it also sends a contradictory message about who students are, how they engage with HE and wider society, and what they might expect from their studies and associated 'investments' in learning. This, we argue, has serious implications for the ways contemporary students enter public consciousness and how a diversity of experiences can be known and understood, particularly in terms of social class and ethnicity.

This chapter demonstrates how the dual and overlapping figures of the Millennial and the student lend themselves to derision and critique. Analysis lapses into individualistic discussions of values, dispositions and generational quirks rather than addressing structural transformations that have drastically altered the material realities for current students and graduates in the UK. We conclude, then, by highlighting how such an approach and attendant images of contemporary HE students in the UK further compound debates which position newer cohorts against an idealised and immortalised notion of the student of the past. As others have reflected, this imagined student is, more often than not, male, white, straight, cis-gendered, able-bodied, and unencumbered in his learning and engagement (Hill, 2020; Leathwood, 2013). When constructing the contemporary student, writers like Fox (2016) betray their lack of curiosity into how and under what kinds of circumstances the contemporary student body has changed. She writes that,

> the very excitement of undergraduate life was that it represented a completely different experience from school, precisely a break from home comforts. About standing on your own two feet.' 'get away from small-town preoccupations, the limits of spoon-fed lessons, in loco parentis teachers and being looked after. (p.179)

There is no consideration of the fact that many students, such as those who have left the care system (Bland, 2018), those with disabilities, caring commitments (Loveday, 2015) and those who already hail from challenging and diverse urban contexts might have already had to stand on their own two feet. Neither is there an acceptance that, far from an experiment in self-discovery, HE now carries life-long financial burdens to the extent that it has a responsibility to offer much more than a temporary playground or debating society. It is no coincidence that the contemporary critiques of HE students come at a time when the student body exhibits more diversity than it has in the past and, as Leathwood (2013) argues, the autonomous intellectual scholar, as a student or academic, has long been a subject position that only men could take up. Imagining students as entitled consumers or censorious PC Warriors devalues the emerging practices and priorities of newcomers to the sector and in doing so, allows the ideology of what 'real' students ought to be and do to pass without critique.

To conclude, we see these tropes as integral to the failure to acknowledge the rapid and caustic changes that have taken place in HE since the late 1990s and which shape the

material conditions of students and graduates in the UK. Imagining the student as the Millennial, and Millennials as the archetypal student, does little to dismantle the dichotomous 'consumer Vs learner' discourse or versions of the consumer that embody active and engaged participation, rather than passivity, entitlement and fragility. In maintaining these tropes, contemporary images of the student as Millennials shores up an idealised student body from an imaginary past, in which all Baby Boomers were benefitted from free education and were white, middle class, able-bodied, cis-gendered and male. Generational labels mask intragenerational diversity and intergenerational reproduction along class and ethnic lines. It is incumbent on HE scholars to recognise that consumerist dispositions to HE are logically engendered through the material structure of the system, and are not in opposition to active learner dispositions. Younger students are navigating this terrain with few points of reference; there is much to learn from their modes of engagement and activism.

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