The Quest for Identity: Millennials' Dreams and Aspirations Through the Lens of Superhero Stories

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Abstract

A recent PwC study, *A Crisis of Legitimacy (2019)*, states that current economic asymmetry makes middle class feel vulnerable and anxious as well as losing their hope (2019). In such a climate, it is no surprise that the search for a new hero or new mythology as a form of moral guidance and support has already started. In their book, *The Fourth Turning*, Howe and Strauss (1998) identified our millennial generation (i.e. people born between 1981 and 2000), as the next hero generation that possesses the values and the work ethic to transform the situation. In this study, using the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach, involving semi-structured interviews of 14 individuals, we delve into millennials' inner theaters and engage in a psychodynamic exploration of their aspirations and identities using the superhero lens. The findings of this study illustrate that the millennial interviewees readily rose to the occasion as heroes in their narratives of their work lives. Another significant finding was that despite spending the majority of their time in the digital world, the millennial interviewees' most desired superpowers were notably human-related. They wanted to better understand other people (especially given everyone's unique and diverse background), connect to other people's minds and manage emotions (both their own and those of others). Exploring an individual's dreams and experiences through superhero stories can be a useful technique for coaching and developmental conversations in organizations as well as useful reflection tool about one's values and purpose.

Key words: millennials, superheroes, hero, mythology, identity, possible self, aspirations, identity play, inner theatre

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Chapter 1: Introduction

I have been seeing heroes everywhere. Ironman asks me to wear my badge on INSEAD campus, Avengers team look at me from movie screens and advertising billboards, and even on the job website I come across organizations looking for a *code sensei* or *Customer Service Hero*. Recently, their images popped into my head when I was working on a presentation for my team's workshop, which made me insert a slide with this question "Which superhero are you?" I witness organizations creating heroic-sounding purpose statements and updating their corporate values. Just think of PwC's "Make a Difference" and "Re-imagine the Possible", Facebook's "Be Bold", and McCann's "Champion Bravery".

It got me thinking about why our society is so desperately looking for a hero? Why are we searching for myths and stories that can take our minds away from everyday troubles and transport us back to our childhood days — a time when we had felt like anything was possible and any problem could be solved with a touch of a magic wand that, in reality, was nothing more than a tree branch.

According to a very recent study by PwC *A Crisis of Legitimacy* (2019), "economic asymmetry makes the middle class more vulnerable to other threats". With job automation, extreme weather conditions that threaten people's homes, and unstable political situations, people are at risk of losing their savings. They become more vulnerable and anxious, and when they see decline in their quality of life, they respond to this change by losing hope (PwC, 2019).

As we can observe, any human crisis demands a hero – whether it is a singleton or small group of individuals "who are not only aware of impending chaos, but in the vernacular are, "ready, willing, and able" to act decisively" (Franco, 2016, p.10). Old heroes or myths are no longer relevant – they don't "serve their function of making sense of existence" (May, 1993, p.16) and new ones haven't been formed yet. In his book, *The Power of Myth*, Joseph Campbell (1993), a famous American mythologist, captured the fluid and chaotic dynamics of such a transitional situation: "There is no time for anything to constellate itself before it's thrown over again… there are no boundaries. The only mythology that is valid… is the mythology of the planet - and we don't have such a mythology" (p. 28).

In such a climate, there is a feeling of an approaching Armageddon; thus, it is no surprise that the search for a new hero or new mythology as a form of moral guidance and support has already started. One can see this trend reflected in the more-than-doubling of Hollywood superhero movies over the last 10 years (according to IMDB website). For example, the total number of superhero movies released in Hollywood between 2000 and 2010 was 21, whereas total number of movies released between 2011 and 2019 increased to 43 (with 24 movies released only in the last four years). While one may say that this is all because of the huge marketing campaigns, but would there be such a big increase if there were no demand at all?

Writing in their book, *The Fourth Turning*, Howe and Strauss (1998) identified our millennial generation (i.e. people born between 1981 and 2000), as the next hero generation that possesses the values and the work ethic to transform the situation. Similarly, Tulgan (2001) described them as "the most socially conscious generation since the 60s" (p.11), while millennials openly call themselves "orthodox, driven, a little boring, and with a deep desire to save the precarious world that we are about to inherit" (Penny, 2010).

While it may seem to be a real stretch to conceptualize any generation as being heroic, the chaotic world realities and the fact that millennials constitute the leaders of the future means that the realization of their "heroic" potential has tremendous significance at organizational and societal levels. According to MRI Network Research (2017), millennials are projected by 2020 to make up 50 percent of the workforce.

Not everyone offers a flattering view of this generation. In fact, they have been labeled as "entitled" or "narcissistic" who tend to float from job to job (Baker, Rosa, & Hastings). There is extensive literature to highlight the generational differences at the workplace and the organization's struggles to engage millennials in the workforce due to the tensions between workers with divergences in values, aspirations, and work expectations (Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 2013)

However, if one were to step back far enough to address these seemingly irreconcilable perspectives of millennials with an objective eye, one would recognize that the criticisms directed at millennials reflect the tensions of having four generations operating at the workplace due to longevity and delayed retirement (Zemke et al., 2013). Since such a trend is unlikely to change for

quite a while, it is important for organizations to achieve a stronger understanding of the millennials beyond the stereotypical perspective based on the frames of reference of previous generations. Essentially, they need to understand the millennials from the inside.

This study constituted an attempt to address these irreconcilable differences by exploring the millennials' aspirations and fantasies through a language that would be engaging and familiar to them, i.e. superhero stories. Superheroes are relatable: they evoke our dreams and fantasies to be the best versions of ourselves and, at the same time, they enable us to discuss and accept our vulnerabilities (Kets de Vries, 2014). Playing with our inner hero identities would allow us to connect with our dreams and values, and create emotional insights that could touch us at a deep level (Kets de Vries, 2014). Through this process, we could discover unconscious patterns and influences on our identities and motivations, as well as become more self-aware.

Within the organizational context, understanding millennials' unique motivations and dreams would be important for enhancing their engagement. Based on Tulgan's argument that millennials' career choices are primarily driven by their desire to play meaningful roles and do work that matters and helps others (as cited in Tulgan & Martin, 2001), it will be essential to determine the impact that millennials are seeking to make. Only then can their talents be harnessed and channeled in job roles that could result in better engagement and job satisfaction.

As a talent management professional responsible for the development of employee engagement and Diversity & Inclusion strategies in organizations, I spend a significant amount of time engaging in development conversations with the employees. What I have realized over time is how diverse our current workforce has become and how unique the stories of each of these professionals are. Going through the Executive Master in Coaching and Consulting for Change program at INSEAD has helped me to develop a deeper understanding of individuals' motivations and the correlation between their dreams and values and job satisfaction. By applying active listening, I enjoy tuning in to their stories and encouraging employees to be playful with their identities, to be open to explore their dreams, and to create their own meaning.

Thus, the superhero stories tool potentially represents an extension of my continuous endeavors to find ways to connect with employees. I believe that myths have the capacity to remind us of a more complete version of ourselves and dream about possible heroic/ideal self, our ought self, reflect about our shadow self, etc.

Perhaps, best of all, in pursuing this research topic, I got to evoke my childhood. As a child, I had always been fascinated by stories and heroes. My favorite heroes were adventurers and explorers — like characters from books of Jules Verne or Daniel Defoe. For a child who grew up in Soviet Russia with very limited opportunity to travel, I saw them as expressions of my desire to travel and explore the world and different cultures. Later, I felt in love with Indiana Jones. To me, this theme of exploration and looking for a treasure are a metaphor for my career choices and my drive for helping people in their journeys to find their own inner treasures.

Research Aim and Objectives

This study sought to explore the dreams, aspirations and identities of millennial professionals through superhero stories. Using the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach involving semi-structured interviews of 14 individuals, I delved into their inner theaters and engaged in a psychodynamic exploration of their aspirations and identities using the superhero lens. Within the context of this thesis, based on popular media resources, superheroes are defined as fictional characters possessing extraordinary or superhuman powers.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Key themes and concepts that would be relevant for this paper are the following:

- Millennials – The Hero Generation?
- Embarking on a Hero's journey
- Identity play and possible selves
- Inner theatre: Where Underlying Drivers of Behavior Reside

Millennials – The Hero Generation?

Born between 1980 and 1996, millennials or Generation Y-ers, are perhaps, the most discussed and the most studied generation to date (Baker, Hastings, 2018, Cattermole, 2018, Tulgan, Martin, 2001). As of 2016, they constituted the largest proportion of the labor force in the US (Pew Research Centre, 2018). It is thus little wonder that there are myriads of articles and discussions on social platforms like LinkedIn in which journalists and Organizational Development specialists discuss ways to engage the millennial workforce and explore their motivations.

Yet there are many conflicting perspectives about the millennials. On the positive side, Tulgan and Martin (2001) described Generation Y in terms of the four following characteristics:

1. Brimming with self-confidence, optimism, and high self-esteem
2. Yearning for education — the most education-minded generation in history
3. Paving the way to a more open, tolerant society
4. Leading a new wave of voluntarism

These characteristics are also mirrored in Kultalahti and Viitala's (2014) description of the distinctive features of this generation, which include ease with technology, change, acquisition of new skills, and new challenges at work, as well as social activism. For this generation, work-life balance, a closely-knit working community (with equally motivated and engaged people), challenging assignments (but not overly), along with the opportunity to learn and develop are important (Kultalahti & Viitala, 2014).

Furthermore, according to Cattermole (2018), millennials need to know that they are doing meaningful work. More than just having a job, they want to make an impact. It is important for them to do good for society. As such, they will tend to be more attracted to work for organizations that have a strong culture and values and provide a great experience for them than organizations purely focused on numbers.

Yet millennials also have a fair share of criticisms. A famous video of a talk with Simon Sinek, in which he described millennials as "entitled, narcissistic, unfocused and lazy", became viral overnight (Simon Sinek, 2016). In his view, poor parenting, instant gratification, and a technology-driven culture had contributed to various issues (such as poor retention, constant need for feedback, etc.) organizations have had with millennial employees. According to some researchers, the negative view on millennials "noted in the literature far outweigh the positives" (Baker & Hastings, 2018, p. 920). Some labels include "entitled" or "narcissistic" though they are not really confirmed by any empirical research, but rather based on perceptions coming out of popular social media sources (Baker & Hastings, 2018). There is a lot of pushback from millennials themselves who remind previous generations that majority of problems they face now were the fruits of their own actions. "Like everyone in my generation, I am finding it increasingly difficult not to be scared about the future and angry about the past", writes millennial journalist Michael Hobbs in his award-winning article *FML* in Huffington Post (2017). His view is that what defines millennials is not helicopter parenting or Pokémon Go but *uncertainty*.

Another millennial Laurie Penny wrote an article for the *Guardian* newspaper entitled "My Generation Needs to be Heroes". In this article, Penny (2010) spoke of the aspirations of her peer group:

> Godless though we are, the millennial generation is far from degenerate: we are driven by an urgent impulse to stabilize society. Given the opportunity, we may yet save the world – and like the war generation before us, we are also destined to be the next great generation of squares, the solid, conventional adults who future generations will grow up to rebel against.

Hobbs agrees with her:

> We can let our economic infrastructure keep disintegrating and wait to see if the rising seas get us before our social contract dies. Or we can build an equitable future that reflects our values and our demographics and all the chances we wish we'd had. Maybe that sounds naïve, and maybe it is. But I think we're entitled to it. (2017)

In her article Penny refers to Strauss and Howe generational theory. Writing in their book, *The Fourth Turning*, William Strauss and Neil Howe (2000) put forth their theory of the millennials as next Hero generation that comes into its own in a time of social crisis. In the words of Howe and Strauss (2000),

> [this hero generation is] beginning to manifest a wide array of positive social habits that older Americans no longer associate with youth, including a new focus on teamwork, achievement, modesty and good conduct. Only a few years from now, this can-do youth revolution will overwhelm cynics and pessimists. (p. 4)

Embarking on a Hero's journey

"The myth, or story, carries the values of society: by the myth the individual finds his sense of identity. (…) The myth unites the antinomies of life: conscious and unconscious, historical and present, individual and social".
Rollo May. The Cry for Myth

As millennials are striving to be a heroic generation, I started to explore what constitutes the hero figure, and realized there was a lot of cultural discussions on this topic.

The discourse on the hero mythology highlights several key characteristics of a hero. Essentially, heroes are individuals who strive to make a change by seeking out independence and searching for something new (Seif, 1984; Campbell & Moyes, 2011). They tend to be creative individuals who want to express who they are. In doing so, they have to leave behind all that is familiar to them and embark on a quest to find something new (Seif, 1984; Campbell & Moyes, 2011).

Hero's journey is "adventure of being alive" (Campbell & Moyes, 2011). In his book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Campbell (1993) described the stages of the typical hero's journey. Essentially, every hero's journey has three main phases: "Departure", "Initiation" and "Return". In the "Departure" stage, a hero would receive a "call to adventure", and (if accepted), some

additional help from a mentor to go through a transition. The "Initiation" stage is about passing the "first threshold" and going through various trials or tasks. After overcoming a major crisis, the hero would experience transformation and rebirth to "return" to the ordinary world with the "treasure". The whole journey is meant to culminate in the transformation of the hero.

To support a hero on their journey, a mentor will appear. It is a protective figure who provides the hero with an amulet against the evil forces, in our context we could call it psychological support and reassurance (Campbell, 1993). Given the importance of mentor figure for millennials, in this study I suggest that mentors would play a role of transitional-objects.

Donald Woods Winnicott, an English pediatrician and psychoanalyst, introduced the term "transitional-object" (1953) as an item that could be used as a psychological support. An object such as a corner of the blanket becomes vitally important when an infant goes to sleep as a defense against anxiety and stress (Winnicott, 2005). Such objects "permit a transition from infantile narcissism to object-love and from dependence to self-reliance" (Carr et al., 2004, p. 353).

Even more importantly, the need for a transitional-object is not confined solely to infancy or childhood. According to Winnicott (1971), "throughout life, [the transitional-object] is retained in the intense experiencing that belongs to the arts and to religion and to imaginative living, and to creative scientific work" (p. 24). He argued that a person needs to have a bridge between subjective and objective reality, with the transitional space providing relief "from the strain of relating inner and outer reality (...) that no human is free from" (Winnicott, 1971, p. 24). This transitional play space is linked by Winnicott to the formation of the culture, religion or art, and "allows the child to consistently work on the boundary between illusory omnipotence and helplessness and this has at its essence the quest for mastery over the inner and outer chaotic aspects of its experience" (Tuber, 2008, p. 123). The concept of transitional-objects will play an important part in exploring how mentors can potentially become a psychological bridge or support system for millennials going through their own transformation or embarking on exploratory quests in search for their own identities or meanings.

The Hero fantasy has also found its place in the organizational and leadership development context through Moxnes' (2013) work: "heroic narratives about ambition, learning achievement and charisma are possibly the best mythological dream needed when personal and corporate success is at stake" (p. 645). His previous studies on what supported the hypothesis that learning through heroic narratives could help one to internalize the knowledge that would impact a participant's leadership aspirations. Modern leaders as heroes who receive the "call to adventure" have to embrace the journey that will be accompanied with a huge amount of anxiety in order to be able to be transformed (Moxnes, 2013). The Hero Fantasy is thus "useful" in enabling the leader "at least to imagine himself as a hero and draws on the archetype's transformative potential" (Moxnes, 2013, p. 645).

What makes the employment of a Hero Fantasy so effective is explained by Manfred Kets de Vries (2015) who considered fairytales to be effective tools within the context of leadership development: "as a device, fairy tales are more likely to stimulate our imagination, clarify emotions, and suggest solutions to problems and anxieties…" (p. 12). Upon closer examination, one will realize that "fairy tales always have human transformation at their core" (Kets de Vries, 2015, p. 12), thus making it a strong catalyst for leadership development.

Identity play and possible selves
One can say that playing out the Hero Fantasy in leadership development can be considered to be a version of exploring possible selves. According to Hazel Markus, Stanford cognitive psychologist, who first described the concept in 1986, possible selves refer to ideal selves — someone whom we dream of becoming:

> …an individual's repertoire of possible selves can be viewed as the cognitive manifestation of enduring goals, aspirations, motives, fears, and threats. Possible selves provide the specific self-relevant form, meaning, organization, and direction to these dynamics. As such, they provide the essential link between the self-concept and motivation (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 954)

In order to explore our possible selves, one needs to engage in a provisional, but active, trial called "Identity Play" (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010). Playing various selves is very important because it gives us the opportunity to pretend that they are real and possible and lets us behave in a way that would suit our new identities. Engaging in exploratory behavior could potentially help improve individual performance (Ibarra et al., 2010).

This exploration of possible selves is a critical part of enabling us to become more self-aware. As Markus and Nurius (1986) explained, while we are free to create as many selves as we want, the pool of possible selves would most likely be associated with our sociocultural contexts and impacted by images and symbols coming out of our social experiences and media.

We can also have ideas of ourselves that are not connected to their social realities, i.e., they may be images of our potential or our anxieties and fears, and this self-knowledge should not be ignored. It is important for us to discuss possible selves because "they function as incentives for future behavior (i.e. they are selves to be approached or avoided), and second, because they provide an evaluative and interpretive context for the current view of self" (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 955). The "ideal self" that is a "core mechanism for self-regulations and intrinsic motivation", once activated, can "play an executive or motivational function within the self" (Boyatzis & Akrivou, 2006, p. 625). And therefore, exploring and playing with our ideal selves could help us on our personal transformational journey.

Inner theatre: Where Underlying Drivers of Behavior Reside
The objective of this research study was to go beneath the surface to dive into the inner theaters of Generation Y in order to explore their motivations, aspirations and drivers, and playing with superhero identity offered safe environment to do that.

The inner theater, one of the core concepts of the psychodynamic approach (Kets de Vries & Cheak, 2014), is unique to everyone. For it is made up of a combination of relationships with our caregivers and other people who have influenced us in life, as well as our past experiences. There are certain relationship themes within our inner theaters that develop over time, which then become relationship patterns that we keep using in our lives with different people (Kets de Vries & Cheak,

2014). This is why the inner theater influences what happens to us in the external world (McDougall, 1985).

This concept has become highly relevant to organizations with its incorporation into the context of leadership development as a self-awareness tool. In particular, Kets de Vries' (2004) Inner Theatre Inventory instrument helps individuals on their journey to self-discovery and enables them to explore their values, beliefs and attitudes that drive their behaviors and everyday actions. As Kets de Vries pointed out (2004), exploring the inner theater of executives could help to "illuminate the major themes that drive behavior" (p. 477). Awareness about the underlying drivers of one's behavior will thus be pivotal in enabling one to begin to take ownership of our inner "productions":

> ...our inner characters are constantly seeking a stage on which to play out their tragedies and comedies. Although we rarely assume responsibility for our secret theatre productions, the producer is seated in our own minds. (McDougall, 1985, p. 4)

There were very limited discussions about 'inner theatre' of millennial generation and therefore I hope that this study will provide with new insights on this topic.

Chapter 3: Methodology

For this research study, I used the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) methodology as a primary framework to explore and capture the aspirations and identities of professional millennials through the superhero lens.

Phenomenological approaches focus on the exploration and analysis of the meanings of individual experience (Marshall & Rossman, 2011) — "how they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others" (Patton, 2002, p.104). This approach typically uses in-depth interviews with individuals to delve into individual cases and explore the unique context of each experience. The researcher then studies each story separately and derives main themes through the analyses of individual narratives. The research analysis assumes that there is an essence to an experience, which is shared with other interviewees who have a similar experience. Each unique experience is then analyzed and compared to identify that essence (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Thus, the process involves the analysis of both the interpretations of the interviewees and the researcher to create a combined depiction of the phenomenon (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

The IPA methodology suited my research aim of delving into the aspirations and identities of the millennials through superhero stories and fantasies. My objective was to listen actively, keep an open mind towards the interviewee's experiences and reflections, and document my observations. By eliciting their unique narratives and their interpretations, as well as noting my own, I sought to create a composite image of the inner theaters of these millennials. This would then provide invaluable insights for employers dealing with a workforce that will be increasingly dominated by millennials.

Selection of Interviewees

As the IPA methodology requires in-depth research into individual cases, the recommended number of interviewees is between six to eight. This figure ensures rich qualitative data for

identifying patterns, without generating an overwhelming amount that would make it difficult to do an in-depth analysis (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). However, some IPA studies had also been conducted with a larger number, though this was a less common approach (Pietkiewicz, Smith, 2014). Reading through previous thesis works available at INSEAD library, I've noticed that some students interviewed 10-14 people so I decided to speak with as many millennials as feasible since I felt genuinely curious about my research topic.

The following selection criteria were used to identify potential interviewees for this research study:

- Born between 1981 and 1996;
- Considered to be high potential, top talent, a good candidate for a multinational organization, and highly-regarded; this was important for my research from the talent management angle as I was reflecting how my findings could be applied for engaging with key talents in organizations I work in;
- Well-educated with a minimum of a Bachelor's degree;
- Diverse group in terms of gender and nationality to elicit rich and complex perspectives;
- Available for a 45-to-60 min interview, preferably face-to-face or via Skype.

Demographics

Potential interviewees were sourced through various channels. Six individuals were identified through my personal network: I had either worked with them at PwC or met them at INSEAD networking events. Other names came through referrals from the cohort group of INSEAD's Executive Master in the Coaching and Consulting for Change program I was enrolled in. Potential candidates who were INSEAD MBA graduates or recent students were found via the LinkedIn platform. They could easily be identified as "attractive job candidates" by any recruitment agencies due to their strong educational background and global work experience, which would enable me to have a diverse group.

All potential interviewees were contacted by email and asked to participate in a 45–60-minute interview. They were not given the exact topic of the study; the research study was described as "exploring dreams, aspirations and motivations of millennial generation". My message contained assurance of anonymity and confidentiality of data. Ultimately, a total of 14

interviewees agreed to participate in the interviews – my personal network was supportive, request to my EMCCC peers to help to identify additional candidates brought me even more interviewees than I needed, and two potential candidates contacted through LinkedIn didn't respond.

The interviewees' ages varied from 24 to 36 years old, thus almost covering the entire age spectrum of millennials. This also means that all of them have already spent a few years as working professionals and therefore they were able to reflect on their professional experience so far.

In terms of career level, the majority of interviewees were occupying junior- to mid-management roles, with just one interviewee in a senior management position.

Six of them had a Bachelor's degree, while the other eight had completed a Master's degree or an MBA/EMBA. Ten interviewees currently worked at professional services/consulting firms. The other four worked in a variety of industries — sustainable energy, aviation, athletic wear and consumer products.

In terms of cultural backgrounds and ethnicities, nine interviewees had ethnic origins in Asia (Malaysia, India, Japan, Singapore, China, Philippines, Taiwan) with five Westerners coming from France / Canada, Italy and Denmark. At the same time, some of these interviewees had more complex ethnic origins due to their families' nomadic lifestyle, which led to them being born and raised in countries that were not of their birth parents. Being exposed to different cultures and their nomadic lifestyles meant that they perhaps had already questioned their identities and it could probably influence their inner theatres and how they relate to the world around them.

Designing Interview Flow

When I reflected about the flow and structure of the interview, I had an idea of a transition from *real* to *imaginary*, from *specific* to *thematic,* from the *external* to *internal* (world)*.* My objective was to warm up the interviewees and ease them into a reflective space. First, they were asked to think about their happiest time at work when they felt the most engaged and motivated. Then they were invited to share about their intrinsic motivations, strengths, and things they loved doing. Then the conversation moved to the discussion about modern-day heroes and their role models. As part of the transition into the imaginary part of the interview, the interviewees were prompted to

transport themselves to a world with no limits or constraints and imagine how their desired future could look like — who they wanted or didn't want to become or be.

For the second part of the interview, interviewees were requested to conjure up a superhero version of themselves. To flesh out the superhero, I asked more specific questions such as the superhero's mission, superpowers, appearance. In giving them space to explore their fantasies, get creative, and spontaneous, I wanted to draw forth responses that could illuminate their inner theaters by surfacing perceptions and feelings that might be surprising for them.

Formulating Interview Questions

When designing the questionnaire, the following elements were taken into consideration:

- Questions were framed in an open-ended format at the beginning to encourage a free and open conversation.
- Questions were "positively charged", with themes centered around dreams, strengths, happiest times, etc. For example, one of the questions was to imagine their desired/ideal future and describe it to me. As I found that people tend to put up a lot of barriers and think of limitations, I created a question for the interviewees to dream about something they could do if there were no constraints or social pressures. I was keen to give them an opportunity to think exclusively about themselves, dreams and phantasies, and reveal their "inner theatre", without any kind of "censorship" from outside world and the realities of life. Overall, the intent was to help create a motivating and inviting space for a conversation.
- Some questions were defined as mandatory (such as the question about the superhero version of themselves), while some were optional depending on the conversational flow and contextual relevance. For example, the question about a major career transition was not relevant for some recent graduates, but was significant for the exploration of a career transition from being a marketing professional to a yoga teacher.

Part 1

Q1. Tell me about time during your career when you felt the happiest and most engaged?

Q2. In your opinion, what motivates and keeps you engaged the most?

Q3. Which modern-day heroes resonate the most with you the most? Why?

Q4. What are your greatest strengths? (optional)

Q5. I would like you to think about your desired future, your dreams, aspirations and fantasies. What does your desired future look like? Who would you want to become?

Q6. What kind of context would support your achievement of your desired future? (optional)

Q7. Who or what wouldn't you want to become? (optional)

Q8. Did you have any major transitions in your career? Could you tell me a story about it? (optional)

Part 2

Q9. I would like to ask you to design a superhero version of yourself: how does he/she look like? What are the superpowers? What is the mission? What is he/she fighting against? What are their vulnerabilities or weaknesses?

Q10. Did you learn anything new about yourself during this interview?

Q11. Anything you would like to share or add?

Research Setting and Data Gathering

Implementation of the Interview

Twelve individual face to face, semi-structured interviews were conducted at various locations: INSEAD meeting room, cafes, restaurants, as well as our offices. These interviews were audio-recorded using the Otter app with the exception of two cases. In one instance, the recording app failed to record; however, I took notes and wrote them up as soon as the interview was over. In another instance, the call was conducted via WeChat; thus, recording wasn't possible. Notes were taken during this interview. All recordings were made with the interviewees' consent. They were later transcribed for further analysis.

Prior to the start of the interview, I emphasized two things: a) guarantee of the interviewees' anonymity and the confidentiality of the data they provided; and b) their focus on themselves by responding from the position of "I", rather than thinking about their families, specific context, etc. I wanted the interviewees to conceptualize their "ideal self" identity as the core mechanism for intrinsic motivation and narrating their personal vision (Boyatzis, 2006).

At the beginning of each interview, I shared with the interviewees my desire to go beneath the many superficial discussions about millennials by giving voice to the millennials themselves. The superhero lens enabled me to explore this topic with them in a creative way.

Through active listening and observations, I would decide whether to ask additional questions during the interview to explore some themes in more detail. Therefore, such questions would differ from one interview to another. Even though questions were generally structured around their professional life, responses could reveal details about their personal lives, especially relationships with their families or partners. In such cases, I might probe further and ask additional questions to explore the train of thought.

Data Analysis

Data analysis using the IPA methodology could be analogized to a treasure hunt, as it would lead to something new, unknown, complex, and gut-led (as we have to be active listeners and recognize what has not been said). Moreover, it involved a methodical and data-driven process to put together

pieces of the puzzle. Channeling my own childhood hero, Indiana Jones, I took the following steps to complete the data analysis (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014):

1. Listening to the recordings, transcribing them and making notes — paying attention not only to the words, but also to the emotional tone;
2. Going line by line with initial coding based on my interpretations to determine connections and identify emerging themes;
3. Clustering emerging themes based on their relationships with one another in order to create a final set of themes that depict the phenomenon in a way that best reflected the data.

I also applied the "night vision" — reflecting on what I was sensing and feeling during these conversations, what images were emerging in my mind, and how I was making sense of this experience to give it a wider meaning.

Chapter 4: Findings and Discussion

In Chapter Four, the following key themes and findings will be presented and discussed:

1. Desire to Craft "Heroic" Identity in a Complex New World
2. Escape to Fantasy: Desire for 'Superpowers'
3. The Hero's Journey: Convention vs Risk

Desire to Craft Heroic Identity in a Complex New World

As part of Generation Y, the interviewees reached young adulthood and began their career in an increasingly complex world full of uncertainty, turbulence, disruption and constant change. On top of this, they came of age, like many fellow millennials, in an era characterized by global cosmopolitanism — a trend in which people live in different cultures for prolonged periods (Brimm, 2010). Therefore, millennials constitute one of the most diverse generations in history (Deloitte University, 2015). According to Keeter and Taylor (2009), as much as 27% of the millennial workforce in the US had an immigrant background.

Thus, the perspectives and influences of millennials would be shaped by a confluence of multiple diverse forces, which means they cannot simply look to the previous generations to help them in their quest to discover their identities and find meaning in their lives. As a result, millennials, including the interviewees, feel compelled to craft their own identities in response to their unique experiences and individual life stories for them to find their place in this world.

At one level, nine interviewees demonstrated a natural confidence and willingness to "move out of the safety and confidence of the couch", as Shalit (2008, p.26) put it, and go against the conventional and routine existence of adult life. For instance, when asked about their happiest time at work, eleven millennials invariably spoke about overcoming challenging situations, dealing with circumstances that were 'above their grade' and experience level, saving the team by stepping into the leadership role, or fixing a major problem. In a nutshell, they embraced the challenge of being the "heroes of the day".

Tamara spoke about preparing a very challenging presentation in the absence of any senior team members, while Chloe shared her experience of teaching a major client team when she was just a graduate trainee herself. When Vincent realized that there was a major issue with the computer hardware, he spent all Sunday fixing it so that his team could continue working on Monday.

Even more adventurous were Kevin and Thomas who took significant risks in their work. Despite his upbringing in a traditional Chinese family, Kevin spent a few years in Africa, at the age of 22, living in a desert camp, while leading a team of local workers and managing multi-million-dollar contract. At the age of 23, Thomas started his own company and raised US$140K for the research he was passionate about.

These self-narratives demonstrated how the interviewees had been willing to undergo a hero's journey of transformation to transition from recent scholars to working professionals (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). The stories about their new roles and responsibilities carry some elements of the heroic fairy tales — the call of adventure (a major problem); the road of trials (series of challenges or tests along the way); and crossing the threshold (clear separation from an old world and welcome into a new world) followed by return to a 'normal' world with appreciation of the efforts (Campbell, 1993).

However, these one-off examples only form a partial picture of the interviewees' identities and their continuous endeavor to reconcile where they were at and where they wished they could be at. Thus, it is important to delve deeper into their individual inner theaters to discover the forces that had been influencing their efforts to shape their identities and reveal more complexity.

Majority of the interviewees spoke about deriving their identities from their personal stories and unique diverse backgrounds. Families played an enormous role in shaping their diverse identities, with their childhood memories emerging when they described their desired future — who they wanted or didn't want to become, and how it was connected to their aspirations or fears. For Jerome, who was born in the Philippines, but spent his adolescence in Canada, his frustration at working in a very large multinational company where Western colleagues were offered better packages as expatriates made him acutely aware of his ethnicity as a Filipino. Confronted with a

"certain level of discrimination against Asian talent working in Asia", he realized that he could no longer look up to conventional business figures who thus lost their relevance and attraction to him as role models. As such, he had had to return to his roots to discover that what made his story and leadership style unique had been shaped by his parents, childhood, and leaders he had met along the way:

> We write our stories — your obituary, your CV, writing everything. Being aware of my roots, where I came from, who influenced me, how do I make a unique story that is uniquely me. I stopped looking at big business leaders because you get star-struck and you don't get to see real meat actually… So, it shifted to what I can learn from this person and build my own style.

Therefore, Jerome's conception of his superhero was not one who was "tall or well-built". Rather, he was "someone who came from a multi-racial background and it [was] all about his brain, intellect and ability to adapt to different things". His superhero was thus a projection of himself, which reflected his desire to be respected and valued fairly for his contribution, regardless of his skin tone or ethnicity. Perhaps, Jerome may have experienced stereotype threat which could impact his sense of identity and self-worth, with his family and his past providing him with a holding environment to re-invent his own story which was no longer based on conventional myths – "leadership style that I want to drive based on my history because then my story becomes very unique".

While the interviewees expressed appreciation for their families and where they had come from, they were also disenchanted by their parents' values and lifestyles, which showed a lack of reflection on the meaning and purpose of life. Thomas shared his frustration about his father's lifestyle and the incongruence between the latter's words and actions:

> If I look at my father's career, I don't envy it at all, though some find it successful. He is in defense industry and it is destructive. He was in the Green Party when he was young, he was protesting, but then professionally, he never followed through this. And I never

understood this because what we do professionally has probably the most impact that will ever have in the world.

In his critique of his father, it appears that Thomas had a very solid sense of what he considered to be a "heroic" identity. Perhaps, as a child, he could fantasize about his father becoming a hero of the Green Party. It was akin to the superhero he came up with, who has the superpower to 'make everyone happy' by helping them to connect with what is important for them:

> My superhero would fight against everything that stands in the way of people understanding themselves and what is key to their happiness rather than being driven by others like societies or family's perception of what they should be doing. So, they can be independent and fulfilled. That would touch a lot of Western world where people don't really know what they want. Then they get driven into mortgages, car leases etc.

Similarly, when Tamara spoke about her father, I could sense her disappointment. Even though she was impressed with him for building his career without having had any formal education, he was never at home. As a result, their parents divorced, and from her standpoint, her father had misplaced his life priorities:

> He was always travelling, always on the phone, it was his priority. This is why I am very conscious that, while career is important, I don't make the same mistakes... Five years ago, my father had a heart attack and had a surgery. But his job is still stressful and he talks that he doesn't want to die in the office. In the companies, you can always get replaced. You give a lot of yourself, but do you get it back in the way you want?

Tamara also had a very precise idea of what her ideal self should be – a hero who is able to balance a great career and family.

For Anna who grew up in a very traditional Indian family, her "separation" from her family came in the form of her decision to break out of the conventional roles assigned to women:

My family is very matriarchal. My grandma and then my mother would run the family, but their job is still to be a mother and not anything else. That's why I want to see women doing big things, why can't we be more than having children or be a housewife?

Before quitting her stable office job, Anna used to be unhappy with her own weight, engaged in unhealthy eating habits, and perceived herself very negatively. In choosing to explore another "possible self" by becoming a freelance yoga teacher, she found meaning and purpose in her life. Anna felt empowered by helping other women to feel better about themselves, even though it meant defying her family's expectations to settle down. And even though she still lived with her family, she was very proud of conquering her fears and building her new self-confidence. Anna went on her own hero's journey and came back as a transformed person.

However, the interviewees' disillusionment was not confined to the previous generation. They found that the social media platforms that were populated by their peers also tended to promote superficial representations of individuals:

...We are all over social media, but we only show one side of our lives and who we are or want to be. There is more than what meets the eye and we don't talk about it. People are complex and what they are going through and what drives them. And perhaps we would be a better world if we could do that. (Tamara)

There are two sides of social media — it makes you more connected, but there are a lot of studies on how it makes you insecure because you have people putting their best versions of themselves on a social platform and that's all you see. (Jerome)

Furthermore, Jerome also pointed out that the millennials' interaction with the social media, particularly their focus on material goods and status, was just as skin-deep: "What a lot of people, especially millennials, see is about "oh what he has or what is his rank or his title?"

In this void of forces that could serve as true inspiration for their journeys of growth, every interviewee in this research study expressed a wish to be either mentored or be a mentor that they

didn't have. Within the hero's mythology, the figure of the mentor represents a support system, a mother's womb, a safe place, and guidance on the journey of transformation (Campbell, 1993). For these interviewees, mentors act as "transitional objects" (Winnicott, 1953) to help them to manage their anxieties, make sense of the complexities of the world, and/or provide comfort and support in their quest for their identities and purpose in life.

With Anna, her mentors came in the form of inspiring figures who have managed to break out of the limitations of their traditional roles, thus fostering her self-confidence and self-belief in her personal journey to independence:

> I tend to look at groups of women: they are in their forties, they have families and they start business. They are real people in a society that tells you to start a family and have kids.

These women provided the validation that Anna needed to believe that her "heroic" quest was worth pursuing and possible to achieve. Their existence served as psychological reassurance before she embarked on her personal journey to explore possible selves.

In the same way, the affirmation Estelle received from her former colleagues in Luxembourg when she moved to Singapore — their revelation that replacing her was a struggle — provided an invaluable boost to her self-belief as she confronted the anxiety of starting a new life. Thus, the mentors' action served as a "transitional object" to fulfil her need for appreciation and positive reinforcement in a period of uncertainty: "What I like is that I needed to feel that I was special and my specific skill set was recognized, it makes me feel good".

Those millennials who haven't met their mentors yet were in the process of searching for one. They had very clear conceptions of what they were looking for, i.e., the individuals who could help them to become the ideal self they wished to be. For instance, Tamara stated that she was looking for someone who could help her to learn how to balance her career ambitions and desire to have four kids:

I like to look for mentors — right now, my mentor is a male partner who may not understand my idea of balancing my work and family life. I'd like to have someone to look up to and who can help me to figure out how to manage my time.

Kevin, who was working in a top consulting firm, was in search of someone who could help him to learn about himself, be open and honest, without any hidden agenda. At the time of the interview, his mentor was a manager whom he felt just filled the role as a formality, rather than helped him to define himself and find his purpose:

People talk about learning and development, but at the end of the day, nobody in my organization is ready to openly discuss what kind of learning I need. Interest of my manager and my personal [interest] are not aligned. Ideally, there should be someone like a mentor or coach whom you don't report to and who you can openly discuss your personal aspirations.

The interviewees featured in this section were definitely expressing a yearning for role models who could help them to achieve a "heroic" identity — what they wished they could be. In this process, they were also seeking a transitional space, whether it was in the form of people or an environment (real or virtual), where they could feel safe to break out of real-life limitations such as conventional social roles (professional or family) and society's obsession with wealth and status. Ultimately, they seemed to be seeking for their purpose.

Escape to Fantasy: Desire for 'Superpowers'

Based on the interviewees' aspirations to craft new "hero" identities with unique features, I wanted to know the superpowers they wish to possess for them to find their place in this highly diverse VUCA world. Therefore, the "superhero" lens was utilized as a creative tool to tap into their imagination and draw forth their aspirations without limits. This would in turn reveal their self-perceptions and relationships with the world and events around them.

In the key part of the interview, millennials were asked to imagine a superhero version of themselves and describe their superpowers and missions. The objective of this exercise was to

explore the skillset and qualities millennials aspire to possess if they had no constraints and limitations and the relationships they had with their image of the world and self.

What was most noticeable about the interviewees' conceptualizations of their superheroes and the accompanying superpowers was the extent to which they were influenced by their childhood experiences, thus illuminating the unconscious impact of the past on who they had become as adults. One of the most frequently cited powers by the interviewees was the ability to connect to other human minds in order to understand people's emotions and thoughts. Their objectives for wanting this power differ.

In Chloe's case, she grew up in China in a household led by her grandmother who was notorious for her emotional outbursts. Chloe wanted this power to connect to the human mind to "heal broken hearts" so that they can better cope with their negative emotions in times of distress or uncertainty:

> My hero can heal the broken hearts because so many people suffer, people go through emotional rollercoaster. I want to help them to have a strong heart. We help people to build strong hearts and then they can have a more positive outlook on the world and can solve problems for themselves.

Nonetheless, Chloe was very surprised that she had come up with this superpower. Without being fully conscious of it, she discovered that she had also been very troubled by her bosses who couldn't manage their emotions well and made people around them miserable. This connection helped her to reflect about *transference* relationships that was impacting her perception of the workplace.

Rienne's conceptualization of her superhero was also heavily influenced by her childhood experience as well as her diverse environment. She came from a traditional Japanese family, but grew up in Latin America. Rienne shared about some of her challenges that she went through a few years ago: crippled with self-doubt, she had tended to subsume her perspectives and desires under others' in order to please them. Her desire to be able to connect with human minds sounded almost like a wish that she could just "blend in" with others and become one of them:

[my superhero] would like to have an element of understanding all cultures in the world, massive memory. Whenever they speak with a person they are able to draw from a person's culture as if they were from that country and pull out similarities so that person can resonate with them more.

She conceptualized her superhero to be a stylish female with the capacity to morph her looks and skin tone in accordance with the person she was speaking with, and this would help her aspiration to become a real influencer, speak anyone's language and be heard by others.

Dheeraj demonstrated a desire to hide his "vulnerable" self by wanting the superpower capacity of containing his own emotions to the point that he had none:

I wish I could be a robot. (…) Technology is about zero and one, it's very binary and I love those situations without grey areas. I don't want to be anyone in a soap opera. I don't want to be anyone who is overly emotional. Having no emotions is when you reach nirvana.

Earlier, Dheeraj had shared that he had a very rough time when his father had lost his business, which led to the loss of the family's home and the need for them to move from place to another. He had to sell phones on the street to earn some money to pay for his tuition. Thus, his adolescent years were really hard for him and his parents. Since then, he had come to dislike anything related to emotions, especially people who couldn't control their own emotions. To Dheeraj, emotions were a terrible thing, as he had witnessed how people turned to drugs or alcohol because they were not able to deal with adversity.

Dheeraj childhood story was a heroic narrative – he left his comfortable world, went through ten years of trials and came out strong and successful. But during this journey he subconsciously left out a part of his identity. Perhaps, that was his trade off to be able to come back home alive, and one day he will be ready again to face his wholeness.

The ability to pause time was yet another superpower that the interviewees sought, which was heavily influenced by their upbringing. Viren who came from a rather traditional Indian background, but grew up in Malaysia, described his superhero as someone who never sleeps. For Viren, the ability to pause time and not needing to sleep would allow him to be a good professional, a better parent, and work on the projects he loved. When probed further about his desire for this superpower, he recognized how it could be connected to his relationship with his parents:

> Growing up as a middle child between two sisters, nothing was good enough to get the attention of the parents. Being in this world, finding [my] identity in schooling, with friends, wanting to belong and recognized, feeling that they [superheroes] are part of something significant. Often these superheroes are on the front page, but you are only as good as that [today's] page, the next moment, you are nobody.

This competitiveness that had become deeply rooted since his childhood still drove his daily actions and behaviors. A part of the pressure also came from the fact that he wanted to be a better parent for his daughters. He wanted to be a good father to his children, and he hoped that he could be there for them any time they needed him.

Essentially, his superpower represented his fantasy to transcend the stress that he experienced when he strived to meet his own high expectations. In reality, without his superpower, Viren had had to create a support network around him (his wife and close friends) to do a sanity check and act as a sounding board because "there are always those pieces, small bursts. Is it good enough? Am I good enough?"

Vincent, a Singaporean consultant who aspired to become a minister, also picked the ability to pause time as his superpower. His choice initially mirrored that of Viren, in his desire to improve his ability to do his work — having the time to read up on what he needed to learn, as well as to deal with the stress of the fast-paced life in consulting:

> I can't work in time pressure environment; I think my superhero initially is afraid to work under time pressure. But since he can pause time now, this problem is solved.

However, for Vincent, such a superpower also illuminated the possibility of limitless opportunities to misuse his power and do whatever he wanted:

> … well, if I can pause time, I can literally walk into the store and take what I want. I feel I am the biggest in the world. I can do whatever I want. If you pause time, in that time space, you are alone, so whatever you think is right is determined by you. If I think it is right, it is right.

The fact that he saw the tempting shadow side of his superpower — i.e., he would not have anyone to condemn or judge him, which would allow him to get away with all transgressions — revealed his honest inner dialogue about his own values and different roads he may follow on his journey. Vincent grew up in a humble family and worked hard for good education and job experience. He was taught by his parents that if he worked hard, he would get what he deserved. I could sense that he was not convinced that "working hard" was still a valid value in the modern world. "I realized that it's not about what you do or what you know, it's about how you act being in the right place in the right time". I imagined him standing at the crossroad still figuring out for himself if he follows father's words or create his own path with his own values in mind.

Based on these stories, we can see strong influence of childhood experiences combined with complex realities of the current world to millennials' superpowers. Majority of interviewees came up with superheroes that illuminated their internal struggles with their identities.

The Hero's Journey: Convention vs Risk

"Most of the really exciting things we do in our lives scare us to death".
Roald Dahl, Danny the Champion of the World.

> It's impressive how many people at INSEAD are afraid to be poor. You are probably 0.001% of all people who will become poor. Yet they will sacrifice their values over salary or position. (Thomas)

Thomas, Kevin and Jerome were among the interviewees who seemed to be guided by strong sense of purpose about how the world could be a better place. Kevin shared a touching story about learning English by listening to a famous Stanford Commencement address by Steve Jobs about "finding what you love" and not settling in. According to Kevin, listening to this speech over and over again was the most important thing he did at university. Without this speech, he wouldn't have gone to Africa or joined the INSEAD MBA program. Although he felt the pressure of "not settling in", he insisted:

> I don't want to be a middle-class family man travelling to family vacation twice a year, sitting at the desk answering the calls and gathering a group of people working for you, knowing that they work for you only because you pay them.

As with Kevin, Jerome also envisioned a life that extended beyond the conventional image, declaring that he would be very depressed, if at the end of his life, all he did was to have a family. Therefore, he felt the impetus to optimize his resources and opportunities to make a difference: "My hero is scared of not doing enough and not leave an impact". Furthermore, in his conception, superheroes should inspire others and set examples:

> Their mission would be to aspire to a certain level of behavior better than themselves. They should inspire a certain level of decency and teach about important things in a way that is memorable, especially in times when values are challenged.

However, not all the interviewees sought to make an impact on the world around them. In fact, five interviewees shared aspirations that followed a conventional path: Chloe would like to "climb the career ladder, be successful and have a better social-economic status"; Natalie wanted to get married and stay close to her family while running a small business; Vincent aspired to become a minister; Francesco envisioned himself as a CEO (though with intention of making impact) and Dheeraj sought to provide security for his parents and family. Clearly, financial security and rewards were still important for this generation. Perhaps, one could say that a hero's journey that entails undergoing trials to lead to self-transformation is not for everyone.

At the same time, if we were to adopt a more complex stance in evaluating the interviewees' stance, we could argue that the heroic narrative was applicable to many more interviewees. After all, every superhero has some form of vulnerability, every hero has a shadow. A human with no shadow becomes two-dimensional (Campbell, 1993). And while some of the interviewees were excited about exploring the possibilities for them to change the world, they still had to figure out how they could achieve their goals in the world that they were confronting.

For their first quest, the interviewees pointed out that they would need to make sense of how they could reconcile their personal values with the realities of the external world. This would mean having a strong understanding of oneself and the world at large. As Chloe, whose hero helps to heal broken hearts, pointed out, she would need to figure out "what the world [was] first" and what life was all about. If her hero were to help others, she would need to understand what directions to take to heal them. This made her hero feel anxious and stressed.

Thomas confessed that he wanted to be a great and kind human being but "I get in the way a lot of time, and not sure how to fix it. I am anxious to be totally useless".

Estelle shared that her heroes would mainly fight against themselves, changing their own habits and challenging their way of everyday existence. Do they live according to their principles or get comfortable with having good salaries and having access to corporate benefits? She explained:

> I manage CR (corporate responsibility) activities and I went to the main philanthropy event. I have seen people talking about how great they are because they give so much back to the community and it's great. But my inner self tells me that these people have benefited from an unequal system that gave them this money, and I am part of this system. I still try to be a change agent as much as I can and help corporates to be better. I believe it's all about personal decisions and small steps... I do feel anxious about the state of the planet and ecology, and I am anxious [about] not being able to make it.

Even Kevin who was determined to lead an unconventional life also showed uncertainties over how to make the best of his life — to truly embrace a heroic identity. Being in his early thirties,

Kevin had begun to feel the pressure of time. He was feeling anxious that despite moving from one job to another, changing countries, and having a career transition, he was still not satisfied with his life:

> Deep down, I think we all feel insecure about careers. While I am jumping from one place to another, it is not because I can't handle things. I think I still find that ideal environment for me. I changed three jobs, did MBA and I am worried. (…) My friends are also struggling with the same thing. We switched the lines but we are still stuck in traffic jam.

He felt buffeted by the countervailing pressures of diverse groups of friends. The ones he had worked with in Africa had become travel bloggers or mountain climbers. The ones he had met while doing his MBA were very career-focused. When he went back home to China and met some of his childhood friends, he said he started feeling 'ok'. However, this acceptance did not last long: "That feeling was scary because I felt like I was settling. I feel I have the potential to do more. I feel like I am entering my midlife crisis."

Clearly, all these interviewees who were filled with uncertainty were on an inner journey of self-discovery to learn what they were all about and what truly mattered to them. What is important is that they realize the significance of going on this existential quest to increase their self-awareness and grow emotionally and spiritually. If they could overcome their fears and continue moving forward, there is a good chance that they could become more resilient people and realize their potential.

In his article, *Millennials Are Doomed to Face An Existential Crisis That Will Define The Rest Of Their Lives,* published in *Forbes*, John Mauldin (2016) predicted that millennials will have to face a huge crisis that will be existential in its nature and that will be followed by the collapse of social institutions. He referred to Strauss-Howe generational theory (2000) and reminded his readers that millennials were a new hero generation that would have to deal with that upcoming crisis. After listening to the interviewees' narratives, I wondered what would happen after a few years to this cohort of bright and smart people who were juggling societal and peer expectations to make an impact and their conscious/unconscious desire to be heroes. While some of them might accept the

calling, embark on a journey of self-discovery, and transform to become better leaders and reflective human beings, others might not have the courage or inner strengths to accept the challenge. Among them, some might even end up on the couch, disappointed in themselves and disillusioned with their ideals.

Based on these findings, one could definitely recognize the potential role that organizations could play in helping to coach and realize the leadership capabilities and aspirations of millennial talent. As shown by these interviewees, millennials possess the capacity to act "heroically"; however, they will need respectful and empathetic support and guidance they desperately seek to help them navigate through this journey of discovering their own identities and driving the change that this world needs.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The primary objective of my research study was to delve into the inner theater of millennials and engage in a psychodynamic exploration of their aspirations and identities using the superhero lens. Let's take a look at the key findings that this study produced and situate them within the current discourse:

1. Mirroring their counterparts who belong to the most diverse generation (Smith, Turner 2015), these millennial interviewees also came from diverse backgrounds and experienced nomadic lifestyles that deviated significantly from conventional upbringing. Living in such fluctuating circumstances, the family unit constituted the most stable element in their lives, and thus, it is little wonder that their relationships lay at the heart of their identity. Whether as positive or negative examples, close family members like parents were either figures to be emulated or rejected.

2. As a result of these circumstances, the millennial interviewees had come to develop a unique voice and a distinctive story, which would be important for individuals or organizations that want to engage with them to recognize. While many articles acknowledge the diversity of these backgrounds (Smith, Turner, 2015), there is generally not much of an emphasis on connecting with millennial employees at a more individualized level, especially for their career development.

3. One of the things that confirmed the literature on millennials was the interviewees' desire to make an impact on this world and make a difference (Cattermole, 2018). The interviews revealed that the millennial interviewees readily rose to the occasion as heroes in their narratives of their work lives. When asked to describe their happiest times at work or share about their ideal future, they invariably showed their willingness to step up to unforeseen challenges and save the day. Their quest for purpose and making an impact are a distinctive element of all their 'heroic' stories. Nonetheless, given their unique identities, organizations should not treat millennials in the same way. Rather, any meaningful conversations with them about their career development should be explored and clarified within the context of their upbringing.

4. Despite spending the majority of their time in the digital world and connecting through the social media, the millennial interviewees' most desired superpowers are notably human-related. They wanted to better understand other people (especially given everyone's unique background), connect to other people's minds and manage emotions (both their own and those of others). Furthermore, it is important to point out that for some millennials their desire for this superpower masked their inner vulnerabilities and showed an endeavor to escape from them with their superpower.

   This was a particularly interesting finding of this research study, as it had not come up in previous research. It also highlights the value of a creative tool like the superhero stories to elicit novel insights that can even surface suppressed tendencies that could undermine personal and professional development.

5. Despite the widespread perception that millennials are set on pursuing their path of making a positive impact on their world and differentiating themselves from the previous generations, they do feel conflicted. Some of the millennial interviewees had unconventional aspirations that went beyond having a good job and a family. Only time will tell if they would be able to live up to all their heroic desires to make an impact on this world and bring about change.

   For others, beneath their projected image of confidence, they possessed many anxieties and conflicting perceptions about what they should do. Should they follow a conventional pathway or embark on the journey of a hero? This is why an empathetic mentor figure is so important for millennials as they seek additional guidance and support to understand themselves and explore their inner worlds. These mentors act as "transitional objects" by serving as a psychological bridge between their old and new worlds.

Applications

Exploring an individual's dreams and experiences through superhero stories can be a useful technique for coaching and developmental conversations in organizations. Using myth and

superhero images as a metaphor could help professionals to discover some hidden motivations and drivers, and bring them from the unconscious to the conscious zone. Specifically, creating one's own superhero could be a useful reflection tool about one's values and purpose, which would provide some insights for sketching out possible selves. It could also enable one to explore more about one's leadership style and formulate one's leadership vision in a more playful manner.

Within the organizational context, it would also be important for leaders to engage in individual conversations with their top talent millennials and spend time getting to know them. They should learn about their backgrounds, hear their unique stories, and design a highly-tailored developmental plan for that specific employee. While many organizations already have mentorship programs in place, they should consider re-defining their objectives to move from the space of 'telling' to a more 'facilitative' space. This would empower millennial talents to actively participate in the process of exploring various career options while providing others with a psychologically safe environment. Such an exploration should also consider important personal priorities such as the millennials' desires to be better parents so that policies and processes can be set up or modified to better support them.

Limitations

This study has the following limitations:

- **Sample size.** Due to the small research sample of 14 interviewees, these findings could not considered to be representative of the millennial population. However, this in-depth exploratory study brought up important insights regarding the millennial workforce, which should be further studied.

- **Researcher and interviewee biases.** During my interviews, I was acutely conscious of the biases of both myself and the interviewees. As the IPA approach relies upon the interviewees' narratives and our subjective interpretations, the findings would necessarily be influenced by our backgrounds and other subjective preferences. Nonetheless, I paid close attention throughout the analytical process to make sure that

I was guided by the data, rather than my own preferences, so as to maintain a measure of researcher objectivity.

Suggestions for Further Research

There are some suggestions for further research related to my topic:

1. An IPA study can be conducted to explore the impact of individuals' superhero images on their leadership styles. Specifically, the research study will explore the relationships between the leader's imaginative superpowers and mission, their current environment and projected leadership styles.

2. A comparative study could be done to compare the values and work ethics of two different generations working at a single workplace by using the superhero stories tool to determine similarities and differences between them. The findings would be useful to understand and resolve tensions between them.

3. Finally, a research study could adopt a case-study approach to evaluate the applicability of a researcher-designed mentoring program based on the desirable characteristics of a mentor, identified in this research study, at an organization.

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Appendix A

Interviewee (Pseudonym)	Nationality	Age Group & Gender	Happy times at work	Motivations	Modern heroes / role models	Desired future	Superhero image
P02 Anna	Singaporean	20-25 Female Single	Now - yoga/fitness teacher

She changed from marketing office job to a freelance career | Feeling returns

Helping women to look and feel better | Groups of 40+ women who achieved professional success | Own business

Enough money to live well

Travelling

Flexibility

Achieved on my own

Not a housewife | Female

Helping others to make them feel good about themselves

Help people to see how others see them |
| P07 Tamara | Danish | 25-30 Female Engaged | Doing something very challenging on her own with minimum supervision. Referred to her first project where she had to deliver important presentation on her own | Ideas

Feedback

Challenge

Mentorship | Her mother - working mom with three kids

Her father who was self-made and made impressive career | Travel

Have 4 kids

Flexibility to manage her time

Work in private companies because she wants to influence them from inside | Female

Can read minds

Find hidden truths that people don't want to see |
| P13 Robert | Taiwanese | 25-30 Male In relationships | Presented on his own, replaced an ill colleague, given accountability and challenged | Money

Development

People and teams - freedom to express, open and trusted environment | His university teacher - ex CEO, approachable and warm personality | Combining work with his hobbies - being able to do what he likes. Have no regrets at the end of his life

Doesn't want to be a middle manager who only works | Strong communicator and influencer

Ability to tele transport

Ability not to sleep |

P14 Chloe	Chinese	25-30 Female In relationships	Opportunity to teach clients though she was junior. Positive feedback and interactions	Money Achievement Success Solving problems	A hero from Chinese history who sacrificed himself for other people	Career success Business woman Better work-life balance High EQ Very elegant Treats everyone with respect	Female who can heal the broken hearts Anxious if she understands people well enough and what life is about
P11 Natalie	Lebanese	25-30 Female In relationships	Once she started feeling comfortable doing her work, feeling that she brought value and found the subject she liked.	Motivations changed - disappointed in her company, now she is focused on herself, her health, balance and relationships with family and her partner	Alexandria Ocasio – Cortez: she is passionate and can express and communicate in a strong but feminine way. She came from a modest background and is humble about it.	Living in a country similar to Lebanon, but not Lebanon. Be close with community and family, start a family and have her own business.	My hero can travel and fly, but also read minds. My mission would be to protect my family from people who don't wish them well.
P09 Vincent	Singaporean	25-30 Male Single	His first job, found out about an issue with hardware that would impact many people on Monday so he spent Sunday fixing it and he was told that he did the right thing.	People and working in a strong supportive team Challenges More materialistic impact on society	Teo Ser Luck - ex minister in Singapore. Came from a moderate background, but made a successful business career and then became a minister. Very humble, but excels in what he does.	Wants to become a partner in Consulting, dedicate time to teaching and then become a minister.	My hero has ability to pause time. I can read or take as much time as I need to learn about something. But then I will be the one creating rules.

P12 Thomas	French - Canadian - Greek	30-35 Male Married with kids	Responsibility, ownership. He had his own company at age of 23 - having an idea and building something in line with his values	Doing good for the community Challenge Building	Georges Duroy from Bel Ami who is very influential and moves up in the world using his political skills Elon Musk for making renewables sexy	Moving target - so it's no end game, I will never stop. The ideal is everyone is happy which is not realistic. I want to be a great person, kind person, but I get in a way of that	Make people happy Endless time to fix everything, and to take time to understand people. It's hard to guide people to what they are really looking for if you don't have patience to listen to them
P08 Jerome	Canadian, Filipino	30-35 Male Single	When he sees tangible results – for example, working on the local market running daily operations – speed of actions	Purpose-driven People leadership Impact he makes	Richard Branson during childhood, but not any more	I don't want to waste resource or opportunities I have. If all I do is to have a family, I would be depressed.	Hero with multi-racial background, it's about brain, intellect and adaptability. Ability to think and see 2–3 steps ahead, ability to see things that others don't see. Mission is to aspire to a certain level of behavior better than themselves.
P03 Estelle	French	25-30 Female In relationships	Working on the office renovation project – first large-size project and great team. Challenging and gave her ability to work in autonomy	Relationships Trust in people Mentorship Learning	Someone who walks the talk, for example, leader of Hummingbird movement in France. We should take responsibility and act ourselves.	It is aligned more with my inner beliefs and values, reducing environmental impact, fair trade, doing good for the community	Reading people's minds to be able to hear their conversations and influence them better. Mission would be to have more sustainable environment and way of living.

P01 Viren	Australian / Malaysian	31-35 Male Married with kids	His boss asked him to help, to step up and be a team leader, despite not having much experience. But he felt she recognized his potential and put her trust in him	Connecting passions with impact or purpose. Looking at the joy of his kids and healthy marriage relationships Competition	Margaret Thatcher – resilient and strong Jacinda Ardern – empathy, vulnerability, humility and ability to pull nation together and lead	Leading a cause or social enterprise where he can make an impact – environment, help improve youth unemployment, education for everyone	Parents are superheroes because they transform and put their needs aside. No sleeping and ability to control time to do all things that he wants.
P04 Francesco	Italian	31-35 Male Married	As a junior, he had opportunity to lead project and work directly with CEO and CFO. Full responsibility with some guidance. Another example of the project where he worked with different teams and managed to build relationships and trust with a client CEO.	Rationality Persistence Doing best for idea or project he believes in	Someone who surprises. Freddy Mercury – he did what was right for him. Former *Ferrari* chairman and CEO Sergio *Marchionne as* *a great leader, open-* *minded and wish to* *change the mindsets* *of people in Italy*	I don't want to be a person who spends al the time at work, but I am also ambitious and I can't be just a family man. I want to become CEO because ultimately, I realized that organizations are all about people and CEOs are the ones who can influence and impact them the most.	Speaking multiple languages because it would help me to establish connections and build relationships. I want to be able to change people's mindsets.
P05 Rienne	Japanese	25-30 Female Single	Problem solver – identified an issue in organization, came up with a business plan and agreed with the leadership on how to address it. She likes to fix issues, help people	Helping others Problem solving Creating ownership Adding value	Wonder Woman – strong but embrace their weaknesses, she cherishes the tradition Audrey Hepburn and Angelina Jolie – both have successful	Influencer – she wants to influence others and get other voices heard. She wants to be able to control her time – whether it's by being CEO of her own company or doing something else,	Female acute to the way people think and feel. Fighting against negative mindsets, understanding all cultures in the world Her hero can control the way she looks

					careers and use their voices to help UN. They are celebrities but they have stayed true to themselves.	related to the field of human development or culture.	
P06 Dheeraj	Indian	35-40 Male Married with kids	Senior leader asked him to lead reorganization of Asia Pacific office. Managing cultural change was the hardest of all. He is very proud of being able to adapt to different cultures. Great boss who mentored him.	Interactions Problem solving Financial security Developing people	Heroes are people around him like his father or his boss who works hard.	Surrounded by technology and white space. No emotions, just problem-solving and innovation	Straight-faced with electric zap on his head controlling all gadgets. Superpower is not be emotional, being a rational scientist, a robot. His mission would be to solve problems and save time for people.
P10 Kevin	Chinese	30-35 Male Married with kids	Worked a few years in Africa as a field engineer with lots of responsibilities at age of 22, leading a team and managing the project. Tough living conditions but great learning.	Ambition Learning Being challenged	Steve Jobs – Kevin learnt English by listening to his speech on YouTube and had inspired by his life journey ever since.	Doing something that creates visible impact – he wants to be on the frontline doing hands-on stuff. Wants to have influence and impact people's lives.	Hero will influence and motivate other people. This way problems can be solved without using weapons or money. This hero will be the leader of the world and fight against selfish people who put their benefits on top of others.