

Hustle Culture: The Perceptions & Reactions of Young Singaporean Millennials

· Tang Sze Yin & Koa Wei Xuan ·

Introduction

Hustle culture is a phenomenon where “talent is secondary and your success depends on the hours you’re willing to put in and the sacrifices you’re willing to take” (Rozentals, 2022). While the movement has garnered support, it has similarly amassed its fair share of detractors who view the movement as a lifestyle where individuals work relentlessly, even at the expense of one’s rest and health. Accordingly, these two factions have found their respective supporters in the Singaporean workforce. Thus, given that millennials “are currently the largest generation in the Singapore workforce” (Aon Hewitt, 2016, as cited in Lim, 2018), it is prudent to examine the attitudes of Singaporean millennials towards hustle culture.

Literature Review

Existing research identifies factors which contribute to the promotion and maintenance of the movement. In some Asian countries like China, “a Confucian culture of hierarchy and obedience [has contributed to the creation of] a form of modern slavery” (Wang, 2020). This points towards the utilization of a pre-existing social structure, in which citizens are brought up not to resist directives from superiors, which enhances the grip hustle culture

maintains over these individuals. Besides such socio-cultural factors, scholars such as Yuningsih and Prasetya (2021) have pointed to technological factors such as increased digitalisation due to Covid 19 accelerating the blurring of boundaries between office and rest hours, as work is no longer confined to the perimeters of a physical office, making it easier to overwork and forgo rest.

In response, further literature has also examined the negative impacts of hustle culture in general. Pujarama (2021) states that hustle culture has led to poorer mental health in students due to their “pressurised effort to hustle and rely more on the self” (Pujarama, 2021). In the workforce, Balkeran (2020) asserts that “some employees may not be equipped with the physical or emotional bandwidth to sustain the pressures resulting from a hustle culture, which then leads to employee burnout” (Balkeran, 2020). Overall, the need for constant productivity along with the villainizing of rest has led to chronic burnout, anxiety and insecurity (Bregman, 2019).

While existing literature covers hustle culture’s maintenance, promotion, as well as its negative repercussions, currently there exists a lack of studies examining hustle culture and its impact across different generations in Singapore,

particularly young millennials. This demographic is key to understanding attitudes towards the movement, given that young millennials (defined to be between the ages of 26 to 35 (Singal, 2017) will eventually form the bulk of the workforce. Accordingly, this paper thus aims to build on current literature by taking on a new perspective on the issue—examining attitudes towards hustle culture with a specific focus on young Singaporean millennials, namely working adults. This study thus calls into question: how are young Singaporean millennials responding to hustle culture, and why?

Methodology

A mixed-method approach was adopted to answer our research question. An online survey with a mixture of open and close-ended questions (Likert scale and checkbox) was used to investigate the attitudes towards hustle culture and the underlying reasons for these reactions¹. A thematic analysis was conducted to identify common themes in the qualitative data collected in support of the quantitative data. A total of 39 participants were recruited through the use of purposive snowball sampling. Only Singaporean millennials aged 26–35 were surveyed to account for internal reliability.

Results

In this section, a mixture of both quantitative and qualitative data on survey respondents' perceptions of hustle culture will be presented. Quantitative data is presented through tables and graphs, providing clear insight into respondents' general sentiments about the subject. Qualitative data gleaned from the survey's open-ended questions, through an

inductive thematic approach, provides a comparative analysis of participants' responses and imparts a deeper understanding of certain rationales on their attitude towards hustle culture.

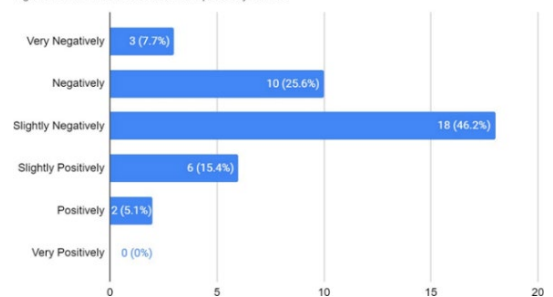
Qualitative Data

There are two overarching sections in the survey: attitudes towards hustle culture and their reactions to it, if any. Responses to these sections are then categorized into the specific themes in each section. These themes are further elaborated below.

1. Attitudes Towards Hustle Culture

As seen from Figure 1, the majority of respondents (N=31) responded negatively to hustle culture. Responses of very negatively, negatively or slightly negatively computed to an average of 79.5% across responses.

Figure 1: How has hustle culture impacted your life?

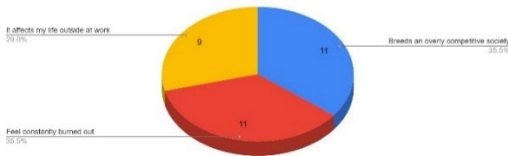


1.1. Reasons for Negative Attitudes

In Figure 2, reasons for respondents' (N=31) negative attitudes towards hustle culture are presented. Hustle culture was seen to affect life outside of work, cause burnout and breed an overly competitive society; these three reasons were split relatively evenly among respondents.

¹ Detailed information about the participants and the responses are provided in the appendix.

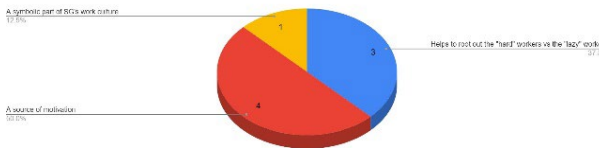
Figure 2: Reasons for negative attitudes



1.2. Reasons for Positive Attitudes

Figure 3 shows several factors which respondents (N=8) cited as reasons for their positive attitudes towards hustle culture. In sum, the two most impactful factors—hustle culture serving as a source of motivation and being used as a benchmark to identify hard workers—were agreed upon by 87.5% of respondents (N=7).

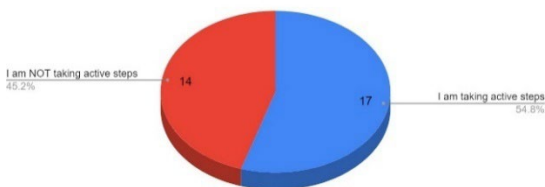
Figure 3: Reasons for positive attitudes



2. Factors affecting Action Being Taken (if any) in Response to Hustle Culture

Figure 4 shows that slightly more than half of the respondents (N=17) are actively taking steps to resist hustle culture, computing to an average of 51.6% across responses².

Figure 4: Are you taking active steps to resist against hustle culture?



2.1. Taking Active Steps

Two main sub-themes³ were identified from the respondents' decision to actively take

action to resist hustle culture, namely through increasing the focus on their wellbeing and immaterial wealth.

2.1.1. Health and Wellbeing

10 respondents attributed the desire to prioritize their health and well-being as a reason for actively resisting hustle culture.

2.1.2. Treasuring Immaterial Wealth

7 respondents stated that they found immaterial wealth (relationships and health) to be more important to them than the material wealth hustle culture might reward them with.

2.2. Not Taking Active Steps

Likewise, the ease of following the predominant culture and a desire for recognition and progression were identified to be two themes explaining why respondents were not actively taking steps against hustle culture.

2.2.1. Easier to follow predominant culture

9 respondents mentioned that they continued to indulge in the predominant culture as they lacked the required effort and capacity needed to draw boundaries between being hardworking and overworking and felt guilty when they deviated from this norm.

² This question was only directed to recipients with negative perceptions of hustle culture.

³ Specific respondent responses are provided in table 1.

2.2.2. Desire for recognition and progression.

5 respondents felt that the desire for recognition and progression kept them playing by the rules, given society still defines success in terms of material wealth.

Section	Example of Respondent Response
Section 2.1.1: Prioritizing health and wellbeing	"The company can replace you once you're out, but once you[r] health is out it cannot be replaced."
Section 2.1.2: Treasuring immaterial wealth	"[I] don't believe that I need to buy into my culture's axiom of getting better by hustling, [I] would rather focus on immaterial wealth i.e. relationships, etc."
Section 2.2.1: Easier to follow predominant culture	"It's more tiring to go against than to follow suit."
Section 2.2.2: Desire for recognition and progression	"I [,] too have a desire for applause."

Discussion

This study aimed to discern the responses young Singaporean millennials had towards hustle culture, and their rationales. The results reveal that respondents have a largely negative stance towards hustle culture - accordingly, most are taking active steps to counter the movement. The results will be explained in the context of existing literature with a brief mention of the implications of this study's findings.

Perceptions of Hustle Culture

Hustle culture resonated negatively with a majority of the respondents, with issues of work-life balance, burnout and an overly-competitive culture forming the main reasons. Such sentiments might stem from the survivalist ideology Singapore embraces, where the "need to stay ahead has always been part of the social psyche" (Keating, 2018). This has bred the renowned "Kiasu"⁴ culture, which has encouraged an overly competitive work environment, thus explaining Singapore's high burnout rates globally (Skrybus, 2022). On the flip side, the belief in the meritocratic system may explain why some respondents view hustle culture positively. Despite growing recognition of meritocracy's flaws, it remains the "key principle for recognizing individuals in Singapore" (Heng, 2019), and is still largely seen as a system that rewards efforts. Hustle culture is one such way to attain results, and possibly achieve the rewards that meritocracy promises.

⁴ Kiasu - defined as "the notion of 'being afraid to lose out' and 'winning at all costs" (Ellis, 2014).

Reactions to Hustle Culture

A slight majority of respondents were found to be taking active steps to resist hustle culture, citing key reasons such as prioritizing their wellbeing and immaterial wealth (relationships). This changing mindset amongst the younger generation corroborates with existing research stating that millennials are becoming more “non-materialistic and care for [the] community” (Choo, 2019). This mindset can also be examined through Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. With their basic safety and survival needs largely met, some will turn to fulfil higher-order needs, such as the psychological need of intimacy via relationships. Additionally, there may be a greater realisation that self-actualisation—which falls under the highest level of need (self-fulfilment)—may be satisfied through activities outside of work. Some younger workers are thus prioritizing life outside of work; these findings thus imply that employees and employers alike need to work together to redefine the boundaries of an effective working relationship to ensure sustainable work-life balance.

Nonetheless, some chose to remain passive due to reasons such as the ease of following existing norms and the desire to succeed in the system that emphasizes material wealth. With regards to the former, social conformity theory may provide insights as it suggests that individuals are “often much more prone to conform than they believe they might be” (Cherry, 2022). Undeniably, it is naturally easier to follow along with the in-group rather than attempt to stand out. The latter reason is supported by a Straits Times survey revealing that Singaporean society is still “largely materialistic” (Sim, 2015). Indeed, hustle culture can bring about the materialistic success these individuals seek.

Conclusion

In summary, hustle culture’s message of hard work and a relentless work ethic taking priority over anything else has perpetuated the fabric of society, however we found that young millennials are overturning this mentality. This study finds that young Singaporean millennials are largely against hustle culture. The strain on one’s health and evolving priorities explains the dislike towards the movement—many young millennials are thus taking action to extricate themselves from its grasp. Moving forward, a greater onus might lie on the government to legislate more work-life balance policies to mitigate the harmful aspects of hustle culture.

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Appendix

A Active or Passive attitudes towards Hustle Culture

Respondents were asked the question, “Are you taking active steps to resist against hustle culture?” and were given two multiple choices to choose from. After which, they were asked to elaborate on their choice. All their responses are recorded as follows, categorised into two themes, “Yes, I am taking active steps” and “No, I am not taking active steps.”

Yes, I am taking active steps.

Theme	S/N	Responses
Prioritizing health and wellbeing	1.	Trying not to OT and doing other relaxing activities after work to maintain mental wellness.
	2.	Tired of feeling guilty by not doing anything.
	3.	Think it's unhealthy to keep working at the expense of rest, mind and body starts to be compromised health wise.
	4.	Resist from OT-ing where possible. Reminding myself there is always the next workday to continue work. This ensures that I do not burn out and is more sustainable in the longrun.
	5.	Burnout is real.
	6.	The company can replace you once you're out, but once you health is out it cannot be replaced.
	7.	I value work life balance.
	8.	I prioritize my well being and do find HC in a cynical lens.
	9.	Work life balance.
	10.	To achieve a balanced lifestyle.
Treasuring immaterial wealth	11.	Trying to have more autonomy in the choices I make in the workplace—being conscientious about saying no, rejecting excessive overtime, trying to feel less obliged to go above and beyond all the time as I have come to realize that there are more important things like my health than material wealth.
	12.	I realized in life there are more important things than just money or whatever I am trying to achieve.
	13.	I've come to realize that it's a scam. There is no guaranteed payoff—my hustling only guarantees success for the people who own my company. And if I “hustle” on my own terms when I'm not at work, I lose out on time and energy to do all the things that make me human/that I live for.

	14.	Don't believe that i need to buy into my culture's axiom of getting better by hustling, would rather focus on immaterial wealth i.e. relationships etc.
	15.	I fear losing myself and burning out. I treasure my time and do not wish to grow old missing out on what I consider the more important things in life.
	16.	I believe there is more to life than work and hustle culture is not sustainable in the long run.
	17.	Currently managing between the drive to push for better results and the relationship around me which I see as important as well.

No, I am not taking active steps.

Theme	S/N	Responses
Easier to follow predominant culture	1.	It's a bit hard to get out of it sometimes.
	2.	Lack of mindspace and time to do so.
	3.	Busy with family.
	4.	Too busy to actually be able to cut down on any work.
	5.	It's more tiring to go against then to follow suit.
	6.	Feels like I can't do anything to change this as an individual, I'll end up just losing out if I don't participate in it.
	7.	It's hard to let go sometimes and you want to just keep going to do more.
	8.	I have considered taking breaks and prioritizing rest during off-hours and during the weekends. But, I think spending too much time on anything non-work-related makes me feel guilty. Hence, no much action is taken to navigate the hustle culture in Singapore.
	9.	It is hard to draw the lines to being hardworking and overworking.
Desire for recognition and progression	10.	I too have a desire for applause.
	11.	It's not sustainable to be hustling all the time, and there are more important things in life. But my fomo and the fear of displeasing bosses keeps me working hard.
	12.	Expectations, society perception on success.
	13.	Sense of responsibility of work, others perception of self.
	14.	Progression essential to ease financial burden and grants me success as society defines it.

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