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Looking to the Stars: Millennials and Astrology

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ABSTRACT This essay presents an argument on millennial interest in New Age spirituality, in particular astrology. This project culminated from an assignment of the Drawing II course in the spring 2018 semester, which included a short paper on a research topic of interest, and a drawing.

Keywords: millennials, astrology, spirituality, drawing

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Looking to the Stars: Millennials and Astrology

Each American generation has been generalized by their attitudes and values. Baby boomers are considered optimistic and individualistic, while millennials are considered pragmatic and full of entrepreneur spirit. As millennials are often labeled through the lens of the older generation, the stereotypes associated with this group are often negative in nature; millennials are seen as lazy, narcissistic, and materialistic. By definition, a millennial in the United States is someone who was born between the early 1980s to the early 2000s. Putting negative stereotypes aside, a decade of research shows that this generation is more likely to be open to other viewpoints, technologically savvy, concerned with reproductive rights, and supportive of equal rights for minorities and the LGBTQ+ community. Millennials are also considered to be the least religious in comparison to earlier generations – a whopping 29 percent are not affiliated with religion (Lundin, 2019). However, there has been a facet of millennial culture that seems to contradict this statistic.

Millennials show an increased interest in spirituality not necessarily tied to organized religion. In a discussion on millennial allegiance to astrology, Keri Paul (2017) cites a study finding from IBIS World that the psychic grew 2 percent between 2011 and 2016 and is worth \$2 billion annually. Astrology appears to be the most widespread and visible form of occult practice within mainstream culture today. In an interview with *The Atlantic*, Chani Nicholas, an astrologer based in Los Angeles, claims that “there’s something that’s happened in the last five years that’s given it an edginess, a relevance for this time and place, that it hasn’t had for a good 35 years. Millennials have taken it and run with it” (Beck, 2018). Why are millennials leaning towards these non-empirical methods of answering questions, those of which can be undeniably called pseudoscience in today’s world? This essay will discuss why millennials are so drawn to these “psychic services,” and to astrology in particular. The visual representation portion of this research project will display astrological imagery and ideas within the context of the modern world using each of the twelve zodiac signs of Western Astrology.

Astrology dates back to the 2nd millennium BCE and has been used by many cultures such as the Indians, Chinese, and the Maya. However, the type of astrology concerned in this paper, which is popular in American culture today, is Western Astrology. Western Astrology can base its roots back to 19th-17th century BCE Mesopotamia. Occult imagery carries a mystic and symbolic quality; the archaic style background in which the signs are typically illustrated will be avoided and instead will be displayed in a variety of settings found in modern reality. This juxtaposition of

aesthetics should “visually disenchant” the viewer while attempting to create a visual for how such a disenchantment would look. Avoiding aesthetics that would indicate other-worldliness and instead trapping each zodiac sign in a modern environment points to a more holistic and honest representation of the millennial generation and its relation to astrology.

Before explaining why the millennial generation is drawn to astrology, a wider, more philosophical approach concerning Western society’s changing relationship with religion will be discussed first. Religion is a subject of concern in this research because the “loss” of it in modern society has left a gap in issues of morals that science and philosophy cannot fill. Modern philosophers and thinkers have written extensively on the “loss” religion has left on modern society. The concept of disenchantment, first theorized by social theorist Max Weber (1963), describes the opposed roles of religion and science in today’s increasingly secular world. Science is now more highly valued than belief, but this shift has left a sense of loss. *Entzauberung*, the German translation of this concept, literally means “removing the magic.” Because the world is increasingly perceived in a more rational matter, there is no “rose-colored glasses” way of thinking.

Religious institutions themselves have not been immune to this disenchantment, which may point to why Westerners are rejecting these institutions. Danish Philosopher Søren Kierkegaard describes the modern condition as a lack of “passion.” In his book, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, he compares the Christian who worships the “true” god to the pagan who worships an idol. The Christian takes great measures to worship with objectivity, while the pagan takes all means to worship with passion – the Christian prays with untruth and the pagan with truth. The Christian’s worship is a matter of what and who, while the pagan’s worship is a matter of how. Like Kierkegaard’s Christian, the modern world is more concerned with the rationality and “what” of it all. Philosopher Frederic Nietzsche’s concept of the “death of God” describes man’s loss of religion and man having to accept this loss. He states that this “death of God” results in the loss of traditional values, which he theorizes would lead to despair and nihilism, a lack of meaning for life. Nietzsche states in *The Gay Science* that “we have become cold, hard, and tough in the realization that the way of this world is anything but divine; even by human standards it is not rational, merciful, or just.” In understanding and acknowledging that a certain passion, trust in belief, and given meaning has been lost in modern times, one can begin to seek why millennials are searching for ways to regain these ideas. The increased popularity of a spiritual outlet such as astrology serves as a substitute for the space religion once filled.

With the concept of disenchantment serving as a basis of understanding for the modern condition, one can begin to dissect the societal conditions directly related to the millennials that would cause attraction to astrology. In addition to the aforementioned

loss of “magic” in modern society, there seems to be an extra layer of stress in today’s world added onto the already disenchanting modern condition. According to survey data from the American Psychological Association (2017), millennials are the most stressed generation since 2014, and are also the generation most likely to say their stress has increased since 2010. This stress stems from multiple factors. Politics is one – the political tumult within American society that increased tenfold since the 2016 election has increased stress levels not only in millennials but in every generation (American Psychological Association, 2017). Another factor is difficult economic circumstances. A study conducted after the 2007-2009 recession revealed that associations between economic stressors and symptoms of both depression and anxiety were significantly greater for millennials compared with baby boomers (Brown et al., 2017). This difference is explained by the older generation’s tendency to use active coping strategies in comparison to the younger generation (Brown, Richmand, & Rospenda, 2017).

The correlation between astrology’s increased popularity among millennials and their prevalent stress levels indicates that astrology could be serving as a coping mechanism. A small psychological study by Graham Tyson (1982) found that people who consulted astrologers often did so in response to stressors in their lives. Under conditions of high stress, individuals use astrology as a coping device, though they wouldn’t under low stress (Tyson, 1982). The study also found that those stressors were often stemmed from the results of a person’s lack of social skills. Social media use, which millennials are the most active participants of, can increase levels of depression and anxiety among its users, factors that could potentially lead to a lack of social skills in an individual (Cain, 2018).

Astrology functions as a suitable coping mechanism for a multitude of reasons. The barrier of entry is nearly non-existent and there is a wide expanse of knowledge on the subject online, making it perfect for the Google-fluent millennial. Furthermore, astrology is specific enough to have some credibility and to provide a sense of guidance, while also vague enough to allow each individual to cater to their own ideals and circumstances. This flexibility offers a refreshing release from the stringent guidelines a religion may impose on an individual. It also gives people a narrative to follow, providing a possible explanation into the scary unknown that is the future (Beck, 2018). It carries no strong racial or national ties, at least the brand of internet-age astrology one may see today; thus, it is capable of crossing demographic boundaries and reaching a wide audience.

For the visual portion of this research, the zodiac signs are represented on tarot cards. The tarot is similar in astrology in that it is an occult method of divination, which is the practice of seeking knowledge of the future. The zodiac and tarot card are known for having subsets of personality archetypes, a subject easily digestible by the more inward searching millennial generation. The significance of the environment in which the signs

are placed is explained in relation to the modern world.

Aries, represented by the ram, is shown in an anger management class. Anger management programs are based off the research of psychologists and is a form of psychotherapy. This is relevant to the modern world as psychology is a new science in comparison to other fields such as physics and chemistry.

Taurus is represented by the bull. Associated with decadence and love of food, Taurus is shown as a cow with a bolt to its head, the typical method of killing a cow for harvest in the factory farming industry (Safran Foer, 2009) The ethical debate on meat consumption has been around before modernity; however, in today's world, the debate is more focused on the ethics within the factory farming industry rather than the concept of eating meat itself (Safran Foer, 2009).

Gemini is represented as twins. They are shown receiving Botox shots to their foreheads – Gemini is a youth oriented sign and diminished energy tends to bother them. The world's obsession with staying young and beautiful is portrayed through this imagery.

Cancer the crab is shown crawling around a very disorganized room. Cancers are homebodies and like to keep this space organized. The image of a disorganized, messy room is a trope synonymous with symbolism in the modern world: it could signal to some kind of genius, as Albert Einstein and Steve Jobs were purported to have messy desks (James, 2017). The messy room is also associated with depression, the illness that often negatively affects motivation and energy.

Leo is shown as a lion performing for a circus. Leos are the most prideful type, and they dislike taking orders. They tend to carry themselves with dignity and nobility. The use of exotic animals for entertainment has been around since the ancient era – campaigns today by animal rights movements such as PETA attempt to bring awareness to the inhumane treatment of circus animals.

Virgo is represented by the Virgin Maiden. Associated with cautious types, Virgo is shown being bullied in a school setting. One note in a locker reads "VIRGIN LOSER," a play on the sign's virgin symbolization. Virgos dislike both impoliteness and invasion of privacy, and thus the bullying locker note is used as its portrayal. Although bullying is not a new development in human history, this imagery illustrates the heightened awareness of bullying and its repercussions in today's school systems.

Libra is shown as a scale. Instead of using the classical scale image, a modern scale like those found in today's households is displayed as a form of visual disenchantment. On it says "FAT." The Libra is a lover of the aesthete and beauty – an unhealthy fixation on this could result in eating disorders, another prevalent issue in modern society (McBain, 2018).

Scorpio is shown being stabbed in the back – they dislike disloyalty. The Scorpio is

stabbed in the back with a skewer, a play on the scorpion delicacy served in some Asian cuisines. Typically known as mysterious and enigmatic types, portraying Scorpio as a mere snack item functions to disrupt this notion with satire.

Sagittarius, represented by the Centaur, is known for its wanderlust personality. He is shown going through the ever so mind numbing process of TSA (Transportation Security Administration) at an airport. TSA is notorious for its increased security measures implemented since 9/11, an event that not every millennial remembers but have all experienced the aftermath of (Scott, Poulin, & Silver, 2013).

Capricorn, represented by the sea-goat, is shown in a room in which people are partaking in public love making. The Capricorn is the most traditional of the types. He dislikes public displays of passion. Millennials have been the most progressive generation when it comes to issues of sexuality (Lundin, 2019). This imagery twists and perverts this subject around in a negative portrayal.

Aquarius is shown in solitary confinement. They are a type who loves freedom and are ultimately humanitarians. Solitary confinement is a controversial topic concerning the ethics of imprisonment. Some argue that it is a cruel and unjust punishment (Reassessing Solitary Confinement, 2012).

Lastly, Pisces, represented as a pair of fish, is shown caught in a crowded net with other fish. The Pisces is one of the most introspective signs and treasure their alone time, so a very confined space with others would be a nightmare.



Figure 1: Illustration composed by the author with colored pencils.

The power and trendiness of certain mystical imagery cannot be discounted as influences on the popularity of astrology. Clothing stores such as Urban Outfitters, which are marketed towards millennials, have no qualms on commodifying third eyes, zodiac symbols, and even crosses. In an ironic turn, what millennials have chosen to seek as an outlet from stress has been twisted to be commodified and sold to them by the very system that led them to seek the outlet. However, to discount the interest in astrology by today's younger generation as merely a fad fueled by a desire to be trendy discredits the many factors of using astrology as a coping mechanism. On the surface level, millennials seeking answers through a subject that has never been scientifically proven may be seen as nothing but strange and nonsensical for an incredibly technologically advanced society. However, it is important to acknowledge and analyze the coping methods of this generation, whether or not they are seen as proven forms of coping. The clothing stores and marketing groups have already taken note of this trend; perhaps it is important for families of millennials and psychologists to note it as well. This generation is at a high risk of depression and anxiety (Cain, 2018), and to see what forms of release they are seeking is helpful for understanding and healing. Apart from this grim perspective, it is interesting, and one may say exciting, to see in the modern world that "magic" is something that mankind still seeks and puts faith into despite how irrational it may seem. Furthermore, to see astrology existing in modern culture is, like organized religion, a testament to mankind's unending quest to seek higher meaning.

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