

# Cultural Values and Career Goals of the Millennial Generation: An Integrated Conceptual Framework

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper aims to develop a conceptual framework of the influence of cultural values on career goals of Millennial generation in Malaysian workforce. The millennial generation refers to individuals who were born in 1980 to 1995. This study is based on reviews of past researches on career goals of employees specifically the millennial generation. To conduct the literature reviews, several keywords were identified. Several electronic databases available at the university's library such as Proquest, SAGE, Emerald, EBSCOHost, Springer, Science Direct, Social Science Citation Index, and Blackwell Synergy were used to search for supporting materials and resources. In the reviews, the authors adopted six dimension of Hofstede's cultural values namely, power distance, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity, uncertainty avoidance, long-term versus short term orientation, and indulgence versus restraint, and their influence on career goals of the millennial generation. This paper yields an integrated conceptual framework that outlines the predictive potential of the six cultural values in explaining career goals of the Millennial generation in the country's workforce, hence would suggest practical interventions for HRD professionals in managing the dynamic younger workforce from the perspective of career development.*

**Keywords:** *Power distance, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity, uncertainty avoidance, long-term versus short term orientation, and indulgence versus restraint, career goal, Millennial generation.*

## INTRODUCTION

### Millennial generation as a Dynamic Workforce

Based on generation theory, the Millennial generation refers to those who were born in 1980 to 1995, which has been variously labeled "Generation Y", the "Net Generation", "Nexters" and "Generation Me" (Twenge, 2010). The term emerged to differentiate them from the earlier generations of "Veteran" (1925-1945), "Baby Boomers" (1946-1964), and "Generation X" (1965-1979), which in each generation individuals are believed to have different personalities, values and worldviews including reactions to work and careers (Ng, Lyons & Schweitzer, 2012; Sheahan, 2005).

The construct of generation has a long theoretical tradition in describing the socio-cultural identities of a society. This new breed generation who entered the workforce at the turn of the century is purportedly tech-savvy, entitled, and self-confident workers. This generation is looking for companies that provide defined career development paths and relevant training opportunities. With a greater focus on career mobility and a faster pace of career development than other generations, Millennials want to quickly progress up the career ladder, either within their own company or with an organisation offering this opportunity (Sheahan, 2005; Twenge, 2010).

What appear to be most fascinating about the millennial generation are the widespread values that pervade national borders, believed to be influenced by the social media technology (Ng et al., 2012). As workers from the earlier generations move towards retirement, Millennials graduated from college indicating that they are in the new generation who will be entering the workforce in various sectors (Juliano, 2004; Twenge, 2010). They are becoming a dominant segment of the workforce in the future 10 to 20 years. For instance, Millennials will make up 75% of the global workforce by 2030, 50% of American workforce by 2020, and 45.5% of the Malaysian workforce by 2020 (Lowyat.net, 2013), increased from 34% (PricewaterhouseCoppers or PwC, 2012) in 2012. At that time, they are holding important positions and being the leaders in the organizations to compete with others in both local and global markets. Millennials, particularly in the US, experienced traumatic event of September 11, 2011. They are now entering the workforce and assumed to bring with them new challenges, values, and attitudes at work and life style. They seem to have weaker work ethic, a greater desire for leisure and less work centrality. They constantly seek approval, praise, validation and entertainment in the workplace (Twenge, 2010). They are tech-savvy and conformable working in sophisticated technology environment with instant accessibility and social networking (Juliano, 2004; Twenge & Campbell, 2012). Due to the prominent roles that Millennials play in future workforce, greater effort should be placed into understanding the uniqueness of this particular group as compared to other senior groups in order to recruit and retain them as well as provide suitable on-the-job-training for the long-term organizational performance and productivity.

In the Malaysian context, the Millennial generation is significant from the perspective of New Economic Model (NEM) of Malaysia because of their diversity in skills and leadership contributions are expected by employers in the next decade and beyond 2020 (Lowyat.net, 2013). This means that employers must understand what this generation values in an organization and strives to make those expectations. Likewise employees must also consider what careers will be most fulfilling and how to best position themselves in the job markets.

Other than exposure to technology sophistication the Millennial generation lives and works in the era of wider opportunities to education and training as well as multiple organizational and occupational settings, and wider geographical mobility. They certainly have peculiar cultural values resulting from the changes in the environments. At the same time, there have been significant shifts in career conceptualization in which constructs such as boundaryless career, self-directed career, intelligent career, and protean career are the dominant features of careers (Briscoe & Hall, 2006; Taylor, 2012) are exposed to them, which are different from the earlier traditional and linear careers.

Cultural influences shaped the beliefs and values of a generation which is significant to workforce or organizational development. Typically, cultural influences were vastly studied by researchers in relation to the career perceptions of employees (for example career success, career achievement, career expectations, career advancement, and career attainment (Chun, Organista, & Marin, 2003). Notably, those studies were similar in a sense that they directed to the examination of positive career outcomes. However, researchers have overlooked the instrumental processes and elements that lead to positive career outcome, proposed “career goals” of the Millennials. Knowing the career goals of Millennials is important for employers as it determines the Millennials’ work preferences throughout their careers (Colakoglu & Caliguirri, 2012) as they still have a long way to go in their careers. An important question arises: What are the influences of cultural values on career goals of the Millennials?

For these reasons, this study aims to develop an integrated conceptual framework that describes the influence of cultural values on career goals of the millennial generation in Malaysian workforce in an

effort to fill this knowledge gap and to guide for future study. The significance of this study can be viewed in terms of its contributions to both theory and practice. Theoretically, the present study offers a refinement and expansion to theories such as Hofstede's cultural value theory, SCCT, and goal setting theory. In terms of practice, the results of this study add to the body of knowledge on the influence of the cultural values on career goals of an important and dynamic workforce of the Malaysian Millennials and HRD practices. The significance of knowing Millennials' career goals are: i) it helps employers to know Millennials' desire in terms of what and where about careers; ii) it relates to the desired characteristics of employers or their employers of choice of the Millennials; and iii) it explains about career preferences and paths that Millennials may aim for, as affected by the cultural values.

We continue with the rest of the paper by reviewing the constructs and implications of career goals. Second, we describe Hofstede's cultural value theory, SCCT, and goal setting theory as the theoretical foundations from which we derived the framework of predictors of career goals. Third, we explain the associations between the six key predictors of cultural values and career goals including the hypotheses. Finally, we conclude by formulating a theoretical framework of career goals of the millennial generation. The methods of reviews are based on extensive career goal literatures specifically among this younger workforce published as widely as possible, including Malaysia. We first identified the key words such as "career goals", "the six cultural values", "Malaysian workforce including the public, private and MNCs", "Hofstede's cultural value theory, SCCT, and goal setting theory". Several electronic databases available at the university's library such as Emerald, EBSCOHost, Science Direct, Springer, Proquest, SAGE, and Blackwell Synergy were used to search for supporting materials. We found many studies worldwide but most come from the UK, the US and other European countries with a limited number of literature come from Asia particularly Malaysia.

## **Career Goals**

Career is one of the central parts in human lives. It refers to a series of occupations, jobs, and positions engaged in or occupied throughout the lifetime of a person, involving the enhancement of working experience, role played and continuous learning over a long period of time (Super, 1990; Ismail & Ramly, 2011). The concept of career will be emphasized at the beginning of this section as it evolved changes in terms of the meaning of careers advocated by researchers from previous studies. It is followed by a brief description of career goals and its importance in the new generation workforce for organizational success. From the past literature, the changing nature of careers has evolved from traditional, linear careers within the few organizations to "boundaryless career" and "protean career" (Parry, Unite, Chuddzikowski Briscoe & Shen, 2012). Boundaryless career and protean career are the new career concepts suggested in the 21<sup>st</sup> century where people shaped their career concept based on values and goals rather than organizational needs (Lynons, Ng, & Schweitzer, 2012). It is said to be self-directed and value-driven in which the person takes both responsibilities and has the power to shape the form of career the person takes (Arnold & Yue, 2012). Career goals is defined as "the primary ends toward which an individual's effort is directed within a chosen profession or an occupation" (Colakoglu & Caliguiri, 2012, p. 264). In other words, career goals drive an employee to persist necessary effort to achieve his or her desired outcome. It relates to the formation of a career identity based on one self-perceived talents, abilities, motives, needs and values, which is "career anchor" (Feldman & Bolino, 1996).

The above changes might mean that the concept of career goals and the factors influencing career goals might have also changed. Career goals can be defined as the primary ends toward which an

individual's effort is directed within a chosen profession (Colakoglu & Caligiuri, 2012; p. 264). Career goals are related to the formation of a career identity based on self-perceived talents, desires and values. Relating to the traditional phases of careers (Super, 1990) Millennials are considered closely located in the phase of career establishment, a stage where the young employees crystallize or even materialize their career goals. This study focuses on seven distinct career goals based on previous studies (Schein, 1985; Suutari & Taka, 2004). It is expected that the Millennials, like the other generation groups, strive to have similar or dissimilar careers goals but with different intensity. The career goals are reaching a managerial level, working with increasingly challenging tasks, becoming a specialist, contributing to society, building a sound financial base, working internationally, and balancing personal life and career.

## **THEORIZING CULTURAL DIMENSIONS AND CAREER GOALS OF THE MILLENNIALS**

### **Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory**

Cultural values in this study adopt the four cultural dimensions of power distance, individualism-collectivism, uncertainty avoidance and masculinity-femininity (Hofstede, 2004). These cultural values have been added with another two recent dimensions, long-term versus short term orientation and indulgence versus restraint (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010; Hofstede, 2011). Cross-cultural studies provide evidences that cultures affect the way people behave and react towards careers (Hofstede, 2001; Hofstede, 2004; Early, 2006; Chun et al., 2003).

Power distance is defined as the degree to which members of society accept that power should be stratified and concentrated at higher levels in the society. Power distance is important as it signals the inequality and power dynamics between social groups (Ramaswani, Huang & Dreher, 2013). While individualism-collectivism reflects the degree to which individuals in a society are integrated into groups (Hofstede, 1997), individualistic society emphasizes personal and immediate family. Everyone is expected to look after himself/herself for the benefit of others. Collectivistic societies emphasize bonding between individuals and are integrated into strong, cohesive groups. In highly individualistic societies, people focus on the individual initiative, achievement and autonomy whereas in collectivistic societies, people emphasized belonging to groups and harmonious relationship. Uncertainty avoidance refers to threat that must be constantly fought against. Members in the society tend to have an inner urge to work hard to control uncertainty as they are greatly concerned with security in life including careers. Masculinity-femininity is a value that refers both to the gender roles and the qualities ascribed to different genders. Societies high in masculinity tend to favour qualities such as aggressiveness and competition over traditional feminine qualities of caring and solidarity (Hofstede et al., 2010; Hofstede, 2011).

Long-term versus short term orientation refers to two types of opposite values in which long-term pole corresponds to perseverance, thrift, ordering relationships by status and having a sense of shame. While values on the other pole are reciprocating social obligations, respect for tradition, protecting one's face and personal steadiness and stability. Indulgence versus restraint simply refers to 'happiness values'. Indulgence stands for a society that allows relatively free gratification of basic and natural human desires related to enjoying life and having fun. Restraint refers to a society that controls gratification of needs and regulates it by means of strict social norms. Indulgence tends to prevail in South and North America, in Western Europe and in parts of Sub-Sahara Africa. Restraint prevails in Eastern Europe, in Asia and in Muslim world (Hofstede et al., 2010; Hofstede, 2011).

## **Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT)**

One way to study the influences of cultural values on career goals is based on the advanced model of SCCT (Lent & Brown, 2006) originated from its earlier model (Lent, Brown & Hackett, 1994). The theory postulates that the development of positive career development such as career goals depends on an individual's experiences which result from interactions between environmental and personal factors. Cultural values are among the crucial environmental factors considered in this analysis.

In relation to this, there have been changes in female to male employment ratios in the Millennial generation (Antecol & Cobb-Clark, 2013) due to improved educational attainment of men and women compared to the earlier generations. There have also been shifts in the occupational mix in which men move towards traditionally female-dominated jobs and the entry of women into traditionally male-dominated jobs among the individuals in the Millennial generation, which have reduced the extent of occupational segregation by gender over time (Dolado, Felgueroso & Jimeno, 2002).

Career goal is one of the prominent elements in career development process that drives an individual to achieve positive career outcome. Bandura's triadic reciprocal determinism in social cognitive theory suggests that personal attributes, external environmental factors and overt behavior are all affecting each other reciprocally (Bandura, 1978). In essence, a person inputs (e.g. gender, race) interact with contextual factors (e.g. culture, geography) and learning experiences to influence self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations (e.g. career success). Self-efficacy beliefs and career outcome expectations in turn shape people's interests, goals, actions, and eventually their attainments. Therefore, this theory is adopted to conceptualize the elements involved in career development process, typically cultural influences and career goals.

## **Goal Setting Theory**

Goal setting theory relates to approaches individuals go about formulating goals and act accordingly to achieve desired result, which is essentially related to task performance. This theory states that goals are the immediate regulators of behavior and setting specific and challenging goals with feedback contribute to the higher task performance than general or easy goals (Locke & Latham, 2002). Thus, goals indicate and give direction to an individual about what has to be done and the amount of efforts required in achieving desired outcome. There are four important conditions for goal setting theory, *viz.* goal acceptance/goal commitment, goal specificity, goal difficulty, and feedback on progress toward the goal (Locke & Latham, 2002).

Over the last decade, studies in this area have increased dramatically where researchers are looking at goals in different contextual levels, such as individual, group, and organizational goals. Besides, they also examine the influence of national culture on goal behavior. Fey (2005) examined that both goal-setting and feedback fill the function of uncertainty reduction. People fears of uncertainties want to frequently prove that their actions are being compliance to the law. This can be attained either by receiving detailed goals or by receiving frequent and detailed feedback. It is then summarized that non-participative goal setting is less effective in cultures characterized by collectivistic values and low power distance (Kim & Kamalanabhan, 2009). They also stated that greater power distance seems to cause lower acceptance of the feedback information.

Locke and Latham (2002) further asserted that the concept of self-efficacy is prominent in goal setting theory in several ways. People with high self-efficacy tend to set higher goals than those with lower self-efficacy. In terms of goal commitment, people with high self-efficacy tend to commit to assigned goal and find ways to attain the goals. In addition, people with high self-efficacy tend to respond negative feedback positively as compared to people with low self-efficacy (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1: Relationships among Assigned Goals, Self-Set Goals, Self-Efficacy, and Performance (Locke & Latham, 2002, p. 709).**

## INFLUENCE OF CULTURAL VALUES ON MILLENNIALS' CAREER GOALS

### Power distance and career goals

Power distance refers to the extent to which people in a society agree to accept unequal power distribution. Evidence shows that hierarchical culture such as in Taiwan, in which mentored women with high power distance reported higher career returns than did mentored women with low power distance. Conversely, in egalitarian cultures such as in the USA, it was found that mentored women with low power distance reported higher career return than did mentored women with high power distance (Ramaswami, Huang & Dreher, 2013). The study suggests that power distance is the moderator in the relationship between mentoring and career attainment in the different cultures (for example Taiwan and the USA).

In his book *Cultures and organizations, software of the mind*, Hofstede et al. (2010) defined power distance as the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally. In high power distance society, inequalities among people are both expected and desired where less powerful people should be dependent on more powerful people. Conversely, low power distance society prefers an egalitarian nature of engagement in social interaction and less receptive to power inequalities.

Power distance can also be partially explained by objective career success in relation to the implication of employees' occupational self-efficacy and career goal. Abele and Spurk (2008) reported that occupational self-efficacy and career advancement goal measured at career entry had a positive impact on objective career success (i.e., salary and hierarchical status) after three years of employment. Nevertheless, Millennials in high power distance society are more likely to be attracted to status and pursuit for career advancement. They are most likely to set career goal as being at the upper level in the hierarchy of organization. Colakoglu and Caligiuri (2012) revealed that MBA students in high power distance societies attach more importance to the career goal of reaching a managerial level as they are more concerned with money, prestige and promotional opportunity compared to individuals in low power distance societies. From the review, we notice that there is an association between level of power distance and the likelihood of Millennials will attain to the career goal in reaching a managerial level in the society. Besides, we also notice that power distance is also related to Millennials' aspiration for financial stability. Thus, we propose:

**PI:** *Power distance culture will influence Millennials to attach to different career goals.*

### Individualism versus collectivism

Individualism versus collectivism refers to the extent to which the bonding between individuals in the society. Stajkovic, Carpenter, and Graffin (2005) revealed that culture posits an indirect association with the career goal of senior managers in which individualism-collectivism type of culture is the

moderator of the relationship between charismatic leadership and social network extensiveness. In relation to this, the researchers also show that certain individuals who exhibited a greater tendency to develop extensive social networks were much more likely to set challenging personal career goals. However, in the Millennials context, Colakoglu and Caligiuri (2012) found a direct association between culture and career goal of MBA students across 23 countries. They revealed that Millennials from individualistic society tend to attract to career goal of working with increasingly challenging task.

Individualism refers to societies in a loosely tied relationship where people are expected to look after their immediate family. Meanwhile, collectivistic societies emphasize bonding between individuals where “people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in groups, which throughout people’s lifetime continues to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty” (Hofstede, 1997, p. 51). In highly individualistic societies, people focus on the individual initiative, achievement and autonomy whereas in collectivistic societies, people emphasized belonging to groups and harmonious relationship. Therefore, we believe that the extent to which individuals’ interaction within the society (individualism or collectivism) is related to how likely they will pursuit to challenging task.

As stated previously, collectivistic culture emphasized bonding between individuals, belongingness to groups and harmonious relationship; we expect these peoples tend to make meaningful contributions to the society in return for the engagement of strong bonding. In essence, meaningful contributions may refer to voluntary works. Pew Research Center’s (2010) survey found that 57% of Millennials had volunteered in the previous year. Therefore, we suggest that Millennials in collectivistic culture are more likely to attract to career goal of contributing to society. Therefore, we propose:

***P2:** Individualistic versus collectivistic culture will influence Millennials to attach to different career goals.*

### **Uncertainty avoidance and career goals**

Hofstede (1980) defined uncertainty avoidance as “the extent to which a society feels threatened by uncertain and ambiguous situations and tries to avoid these situations by providing greater career stability, establishing more formal rules, not tolerating deviant ideas and behaviors, and believing in absolute truths and the attainment of expertise” (cited in Kirkman, Lowe, & Gibson, 2006, p. 286). In high uncertainty societies, people tend to work hard to control their anxiety of life insecurity. Conversely, in low uncertainty avoidance society, people do not feel stressed and threatened when faced with change and uncertain circumstances. They are less rule-oriented, flexible, risk taking, and tolerance of differing behaviors and opinions.

Colakoglu and Caligiuri (2012) found an opposite direction of their predictions where MBA students from lower uncertainty avoidance societies, who should be more compatible with risk, are more concerned with career goal of reaching financial stability and security. The researchers interpret this phenomenon as a result of widespread economic trend that affect Millennials to experience greater insecurity from their environments. Subsequently, the study also found that Millennials from low uncertainty avoidance societies are less likely to select career goal of working internationally. Nevertheless, this finding contradicted with the survey of PwC (2012) where 88% of Millennials in low uncertainty avoidance country (i.e., Malaysia) have strong inspiration of working abroad. Hence, the influences of uncertainty avoidance culture on Millennials’ career goals remain ambiguous. However, we expect that the extent to which a society feels threatened by uncertainties will differently influence the attraction of Millennials’ career goals.

***P3:** Uncertainty avoidance culture will influence Millennials to attach different career goals.*

### **Masculinity versus femininity and career goals**

Masculinity versus femininity is about the gender role of a person, which differently influences their attraction of career goals. Gender differences also indicate different personal input possessed in male and female. Wendy, Dee, and Peter's (2004) study suggests that the stable person inputs of optimism and self-esteem would predict career planning and career exploration through the variables of career expectations and career goals differentially for young males and females. In femininity culture which perceives social gender roles as modest and concern with quality life and psychological well being tend to desire a career which can balance their personal and work lives. High masculinity societies are less likely to choose personal life and career balance as they value status and achievement (Colakoglu & Caligiuri, 2012). Meanwhile, Bentley University's (2012) study on professional aspirations and values of Millennials revealed that female Millennials have career goals of being flexible to fulfill their personal aspirations.

Masculinity refers to societies in which social gender roles are clearly distinct (i.e. men are supposed to be assertive, tough and focus on material success whereas women are supposed to be more modest, tender and concern with the quality of life); femininity refers to societies in which social gender roles overlap i.e., both men and women are supposed to be modest, tender and concerned with the quality of life. In addition, study also shows that gender plays a part in influencing individual's career goals. A survey conducted by Bentley University (2012) on professional aspirations and values of Millennials revealed that female Millennials have career goals of being flexible to fulfill their personal aspirations. Thus we propose:

*P4: Masculinity versus femininity culture will influence Millennials to attach different career goals.*

### **Long-term versus short term orientation and career goals**

Long term orientation (Confucian dynamism) refers to future-oriented values such as persistence and thrift where people in this society emphasize stable income. This cultural trait has possible influence on members in the society in terms of career goal of building strong financial base for their future. As defined in the previous section where career is related to an individual's continuous learning over a long period of time, career can be seen as a practice in delay gratification. The importance of competence and skills development over time is likely to be more important than immediate rewards in long-term orientated cultures (Zhang, Song, Hackett & Byci, 2006). On the other hand, a survey shows that education is important to Millennials as they express a desire to further their learning and half of the Millennials surveyed hold a master or post-graduate degree (Deloitte, 2011). This indicates that Millennials are willing to spend more time in learning or gaining specific qualifications for future success (i.e., delay gratification). In light to this, they are more likely to set goal of becoming experts in related field. We suggest that delay gratification may lead Millennials to set career goal of becoming a specialist.

*P5: Long term versus short term orientation culture will influence Millennials to attach different career goals.*

### **Indulgence versus restraint and career goals**

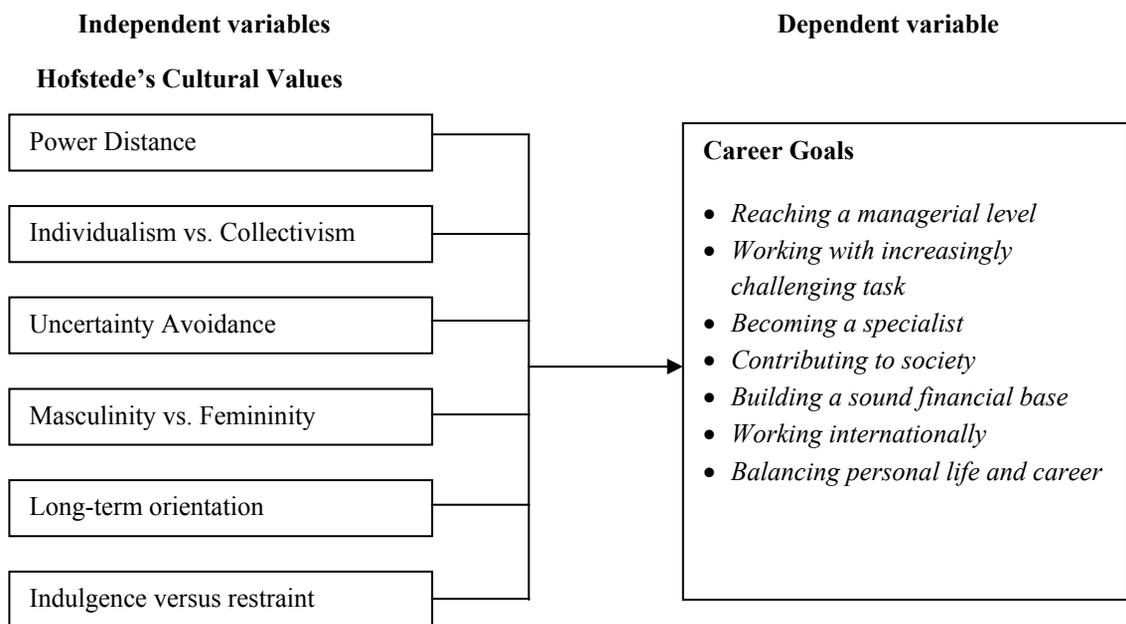
Indulgence refers to a society which allows relatively free gratification of some desires and feelings, especially those that have to do with leisure (Hofstede, 2011). People in indulgence society prefer happiness and tend to create a perception of freedom, health, and control over life. Its opposite pole, restraint culture refers to a society which controls the gratification of the above mentioned desires and feelings. They depress happiness and the perception that life events can be controlled and make people feel relatively unhealthy.

Initially, indulgence versus restraint was identified by Minkov (2009), and later incorporated into Hofstede's model (Hofstede, 2011). This is a new dimension of which studies about Millennials' career-related variables are limited. We noticed that indulgence is analogous to Schwartz's (1992) hedonism value. Lim's (2012) study about the life priorities and work preferences of Gen Y Emiratis and expatriates shows that hedonistic personal value measuring life priority construct is being successful in a high-paying career or profession. In relation to this, both constructs are similar to Millennials' career goals of achieving managerial level and building sound financial base that were identified earlier. The findings show that Emirati and expatriate Gen Y regarded seeking stability as the most important life priority and were most motivated by extrinsic rewards. Thus, we believe that indulgence versus restraint culture influences differently the attachment of Millennials' career goals.

**P6:** *Indulgence versus restraint culture will influence Millennials to attach different career goals.*

### **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF HOFSTEDE'S CULTURAL VALUES AS PREDICTORS OF MILLENNIALS' CAREER GOALS**

Based on the above reviews, an integrated conceptual framework is developed as illustrated in Figure 2. It proposes Hofstede's cultural values as predictors to career goals of Millennials in Malaysia.



**Figure 2: The conceptual framework.**

This framework suggests that future study of this realm is meaningful to be conducted as evidence on this relationship is still inconclusive in the Asian countries, typically Malaysia. As Malaysia is a multiracial country where different races possess their own cultures and values, and there are many types of organizations such as public, private and multinational corporations that absorbed a sizeable number of employees, thus, it would be interesting for future researchers to investigate how the cultural values influence career goals of the Millennials as this group will make up about half of the country's workforce by 2020 and beyond.

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