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Communication Barriers Faced by Female College Students (18-24) Within the Business

Industry

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Honors Thesis

Western Michigan University

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to gain insight on the young, female intern experience specifically within the business industry. In order to be interviewed, all participants had to identify as female and have had a business internship while they were between the ages of 18 and 24. Potential participants were invited to be interviewed for this project via word of mouth or social media. Once they agreed to the terms of the study, they took part in a 30 to 45 minute interview and were asked to share experiences about their internship and how their coworkers shaped their intern experience. The results include that young, female interns felt they had been treated differently due to their age and gender in one instance or another. But they also described the importance of internships being educational experiences as well as coworkers providing interpersonal support to their interns. These two things contributed to intern satisfaction and the what they felt was gained by their experience. The implications of this study are that while young women who are interns in business might face challenges due to their age and gender, if they have a supportive coworkers where the education of the internship is equally important as the work, they will still perceive their internship experience as a positive one.

Introduction

Throughout my college experience, the importance of having an internship has been stressed from the very beginning. My friends and peers also felt that pressure to get an internship that related to their major, especially if they were in the business college. It was common for them to start looking in October for internships that would take place over the summer, reinforcing how important it was that they got a good intern position to help propel them forward in their future career and endeavors. However, the way some of my friends talked about their internship made the whole experience seem not worth the time and energy. While they were often paid well, they would complain about the work or they did not feel like they were making connections or doing anything useful at their internship company. This appeared apparent especially when I would talk to my female friends who were going into business. Their internship experience sometimes made them question their choice in major, because they did not enjoy their internship very much at all. In my personal internship experiences in healthcare and education, there would be good days and bad days, but I would not question my career path due to that position. It was conversations with those individuals which increased my curiosity on what factors were impacted the internship experiences for my friends in business.

This study focuses on young (ages 18-24) female interns experience specifically within the business industry. Throughout this study, I complete a qualitative analysis of four traditionally aged college women to gain insight into communication problems they might have faced during their internship and how they navigated their work environment. In completing this project, I hope to see the positive and negative features of the participants internships and how certain attributes impacted their overall experience.

Literature Review

Finding literature which encompassed the all three elements of this thesis project-- gender, age, and business internships focus-- was a challenge and showed that not a lot of research has been completed on this specific demographic. In order to complete the literature review, I decided to find articles and theories that discussed at least one of the elements I was researching. By finding literature on gender, age, and business internships separately, I was still able to obtain a well-rounded understanding of my chosen topic.

Gender and Communication

There were many different theories and articles which specifically looked at gender communication, and how women navigate communication differently than their male peers. A few of them are summarized below

Standpoint Theory by Sandra Harding and Julia T. Wood discusses how the “social location” of different individuals impacts the way they view the world around them. According to this theory, “everyone only sees a partial view of the world from their own perspective” which creates a subconscious bias. There is no such thing as an unbiased perspective (Griffin, Ledbette, Sparks, 2018), since we all view the world around us from our own personal social location.

In the description of this theory, Harding argues that the perspectives of subordinate groups are more complete and thus, better than those of privileged groups in society (Griffin et al, 2018) because privileged groups are often unaware of the struggles that other groups may face, since they do not have personal encounters with those struggles are barriers.

This theory is applicable to this study of gender and age impacting the business intern’s experience because we can see how the social location of coworkers or supervisors, with their personal bias, impacts those of subordinate groups. Since “the people at the top of the social

hierarchy are the ones who are privileged to define what it means to be male [and] female” (Griffin et al, p. 401) they can impose their biases on other individuals.

The Genderlect Theory by Deborah Tannen looks more specifically at the differences in communication styles between men and women. Specifically, she discusses the differences between report talk (the traditional style of men) and rapport talk (the traditional style of women). Report talk “seeks to command attention, convey information, and win arguments” (Griffin et al, p. 386) while rapport talk “seeks to establish connection with others” (Griffin et al, p. 386). With the differences in sought outcomes for these two styles of communication, there is more potential for tension and potential conflict between people who utilize different styles.

Cheris Kramarae, the creator for Muted Group Theory, defined a muted group as “people belonging to low-power groups who must change their language when communicating publicly- thus, their ideas are often overlooked” (Griffin et al, p. 410). This theory examines the power discrepancies between men and women, and while men might not actively exclude women voices, they do not always make conscious efforts to make sure women voices and opinions are accounted for in decision making. Since the “men’s system of perception is [still] dominant,” (Griffin et al, p. 2018) the women’s perception is easily stifled, forgotten, and/or devalued.

In order to communicate more effectively with men, women often have to be mindful and purposeful about how the communication techniques they use, often assimilating to traditional male speech patterns, like speaking slower or using sports analogies (Griffin et al, 2018). They must balance their femininity and assertiveness, (Griffin et al, 2018) because more of one side or the other can bring about different problems for women who have trouble juggling those attributes.

In Gabriela Dumbravă's (2013) article titled, "Keying and Role Play in Business Communication: Gender, Age and Race Cues," she examines the how different interactions with others shapes one's perception of gender. Dumbravă describes these interactions as gender socialization, where "people become aware of society's expectations associated with their sex... from self-image to perceptions of and relations with other people" (p. 100). This includes expectations for others outside yourself, whether they are the same gender or not, which can lead to preconceived ideas and distorted expectations, especially with traditionally rigid gender roles. In an organization, these ideas and stereotypes can have "devastating consequences regarding organizational efficiency and equilibrium" (Dumbravă, p. 101).

In Howard Giles's Communication Accommodation Theory, he describes three main ways in which a person could interact in a group setting where they have one or more aspect of their identity which is different from the rest of the group. The first way is convergence or working to appear more like the rest of the group. Another way is through divergence or accentuating individual differences from the group. Finally, there is maintenance, where a person does not do anything different than normal; they do not make any conscious effort to adapt to the group through convergence or divergence (Griffin et al, 2018). This theory can be applied to both age and gender, especially in this study with referring to a subgroup of the young, female intern, and how they assimilate or work in a group which does not match their own identity markers.

Age and Communication

While I already mentioned Dumbravă's (2013) article above, she was one of two sources found that included both gender and age in her analysis. However, she focused on the discrimination older employees face in the workplace. This socio-cultural group are subject to

common misperceptions due to their age, including “hard-to-break habits, lack of flexibility, technological ignorance, and distrust of young authority” (Dumbravă, 2013, p. 103). To combat those stereotypes, Dumbravă argues that employees must suspend any “assumptions and judgments, and [engage] in dialogues across generations” (p. 103).

There is a lot of research being done on different generations, and Mary Donohue has summarized the way different generations prefer to communicate and process information in her work. She argues that by better understanding each generation and “shifting and responding to the needs of each workplace generation” it helps improve satisfaction at work. Donohue (2016) focused specifically on the Boomers (born before 1960), GenX (born between 1960 and 1980) and Millennials (born between 1980 and 2000). The Boomers are primarily auditory learners, and are most satisfied in workplace communication when people use auditory sentence patterning, for example, “So what I’m hearing is...” and when their coworkers allow them to talk things out. GenX is the visual generation, who prefer to engage in visual sentence patterning, such as “I’m not clear on what you’re saying, can you provide more detail?” Finally, the Millennials are mostly kinesthetic and focus on action. They like it when people ask for their opinions, and provide structure and details on projects, as well as transparency. Understanding these preferences can help coworkers from different generations have more mutually beneficial communication in the workplace, according to Donohue.

Business Communication

Organizational communication, and more specifically business communication, can be very complicated and informally follow specific rules based on a company or department. These communication norms can be described as keying or “primary frames of communication [that] are ‘transcribed’ with variations required by different contexts” (Dumbravă, 2013, p. 99).

Keying influences a scripting process within organizations, influencing and reinforcing communication expectations for its members. Often the scripting process of an organization is not apparent until there is a deviation from that script, often caused by “misunderstandings, conflict, [or] discrimination” (Dumbravă, 2013, p. 99).

When joining an organization, there is a membership negotiation process for new members as they learn their role and become familiar with the scripting process within their new organization. New members must “engage in sensemaking” which includes communication methods and behaviors to increase understanding and reduce ambiguity. (McPhee, 2018, p. 249). It is through these interactions that new members become socialized in their new organization and learn what is expected of them.

Studies have also shown the importance of authentic leadership within organizations and how it can play a large role on the fulfillment of its members and their feelings on their work environment (Jiang & Men, 2017, p. 228). Jiang and Men (2017) summarized authentic leaders as being well-versed in the following four categories: self-awareness, relational transparency, balancing processing information, and internalized moral perspectives, which includes elements such as honesty, kindness, fairness, and optimism (p. 228).

Internship Benefits

Most students find internships to be effective for learning meaningful skills they can use in other areas (Moghaddam, 2011). There is also research that believes that the effectiveness of an internship can be perceived differently based on the personality traits of the intern (Moghaddam, 2011). For example, individuals who are more extroverted and have more general openness to new experiences will enjoy their internship more than someone who is typically introverted and does not like new experiences. There is also literature which shows that

effectiveness of internships is more based on the work done by the intern and how meaningful it is to the company. An intern should do work that makes a difference in the company or department, it should not just be projects that kill time, in order to feel valued throughout their intern. As such, interns will be more satisfied if they are able to take a project from the beginning to the end, where their coworkers care about the results they create (Krapels, 1997).

From an employer standpoint, “internships are a great low risk way [for students] to learn about the work world, [there] is much for students to gain and little to lose when they engage in high impact, experiential activities such as internships” (Ortiz & MacDermott, 2018, p. 123). Taking on internships allows individuals to proactively self-manage their career management process, often beginning with career exploration, followed with preparation and experience that can be utilized in other roles and positions.

From this literature review, we see gender, age, and organizational/business communication theories and perspectives, along with the effectiveness of internships, all analyzed separately. I want to see specifically how gender and age impact the internship and communication experience for young, female interns within the business industry.

Methodology

To investigate the communication barriers faced by young, female business interns, I chose to complete qualitative interviews to gain a detailed insight into the experiences of this demographic. Since I would be working with human participants, I had to obtain permission and clearance from the Human Subjects Internal Review Board (HSIRB). This topic and pertinent procedures were submitted to HSIRB on January 1, 2019. A request for revisions was sent back to me on January 11, and I completed said revisions and received HSIRB approval to host interviews on January 17. The criteria to participate in an interview for this thesis was that

individuals had to identify as a female and had a business internship when they were between 18-24 years old. To obtain interviewees, I reached out to those I knew via word of mouth and posted requests on my social media accounts to anyone who fit the criteria to message me privately if they were interested in participating in the study. Initially, ten people showed interest in participating in this study, but there were different factors which kept them from participating. Some people did not meet the criteria that I required, specifically potential participants worked in an office setting, but not within the business industry, so they could not participate. The remaining individuals who showed interest at the beginning either did not follow up with me after I sent them additional information about the study or said they did not have time to complete an interview. That left the final four individuals who I would ultimately interview to complete this thesis. Each participant had to sign a form saying they recognized I would take any information they told me into consideration for the thesis, and I would also keep any identifying information confidential. This ensured protection of their privacy and reputation should they share any information that would be considered unflattering about the company, department, or coworkers/supervisors they interned with.

Each participant was asked the same series of 15 questions (see Appendix A). The interviews lasted between 30 to 45 minutes for each of the participants and was completed either in person or over Skype. When completing interviews, I took notes and recorded the interviews with the person's permission. Once interviews were completed, the recordings were transcribed on my personal computer. I read and reread through the transcriptions and looked for common themes or experiences amongst the interviewees. I also picked out deviations in the data, where only one participant discussed a particular theme and tried to find factors or an explanation of why they were the sole person to have that particular experience during their internship.

Findings/Results

Each participant was given a pseudonym to distinguish them throughout this paper. They will be referred to as the alias given below with no other identifying markers, such as names of the company where they interned.

Below is a table which includes basic information collected to give a general overview about the different participants.

Participant Overview				
	Tina	Olivia	Victoria	Mariah
Major	Business: Finance Concentration	Chemistry and Biology	Business Sales	Human Resources Management
Minor	Applied Statistics	NA	Currently Undecided	Potentially International Business Marketing
Age when completing their internship	20	20	20	19
Company Description	Electronics Company	Recycling Plant	Auto-Dealership	Claims Industry
Title	Marketing Intern	Customer Service Representative/ Sales and Transportation Intern	Sales Intern	Human Resources Intern
Length of Internship	10 weeks	Summer	Continuous throughout the year	Continuous throughout the year
Paid/Unpaid	Paid	Paid	Paid	Paid
Company Location (All located in the Midwest)	Large City	Rural Town	Small City	Mid-sized City

Participant Summaries

Below, each participant's interview is summarized to give a general understanding of each person's internship experience and takeaways. The aspects included in each summary are the topics which they brought up the most throughout their interview as well as information that was most pertinent to the research topic.

Tina

Tina talked about her experience at the electronics company very positively overall. She described it as a great learning experience, where she obtained confidence, quantitative analysis experience, and public speaking skills; all of which helped her define her interests, including helping her declare her undergraduate minor of Applied Statistics.

Tina felt comfortable communicating with everyone in her office, especially with her direct supervisor. "He was always there and whenever I had the smallest questions" and they would meet every day to discuss her progress on her specific projects and how she felt the internship was going. However, Tina felt that it was a little harder to go to the senior executives with questions, due to the formal hierarchy within the company culture. There was an underlying attitude of the executive staff that they were too busy with important work to get done, so they did not have a lot of spare time to answer questions or take time out of their days for non-crucial conversations. Tina had utilized this experience to learn more about her coworker's different roles and how they got to where they are by asking to meet with individuals for "coffee chats." Due to the company culture of the senior members of the company, she did not feel comfortable attempting to set those up with them often.

Tina said she learned many transferrable skills throughout the ten weeks of her internship. She appreciated how her department helped push her out of her comfort zone in different areas, from working with qualitative data to preparing a presentation and speaking in

front of a small crowd of people. Another area which she described as gaining more experience in was communication, specifically the importance of communication for conflict management. There were a few instances where she described meetings she sat in with two different departments who were at odds with each other where it was very hard to reach a solution. Tina spoke highly of how her director would handle those situations, who “had more authority and [would] represent the team as a whole. He was able to deliver his opinion really well...” and she was able to observe how to handle work place conflicts in the most “efficient and effective way.” Tina recognized that she can take these skills and apply them in future internships and jobs that she will have in the future.

Tina also mentioned that her intern experience was not the universal experience for all the interns within the electronics company. She talked about the planning department intern, who had a drastically different experience from Tina. She said, “My supervisor worked really closely with me, so I had a really positive experience learning and working. The other intern I worked with was on the planning team and her supervisor was not as receptive or helpful to her,” and believes this played a part in the lack of satisfaction of the internship for the planning intern. She also had a great deal more work to complete, which meant she sometimes had to work twelve-hour days or more and she was also expected to figure out tasks on her own more often. This contrasted significantly from Tina’s experience, where questions were welcomed, all her coworkers/supervisors were happy to help her out, while recognizing that she was “learning as well as working.” This positive and supportive department culture allowed Tina to get the most out of her internship and have a positive experience with the electronics company.

Even though she enjoyed her internship experience, Tina said she is not considering working at that electronics company again. For starters, she wants to have an internship that is

related more to finance, to get more experience in her major. She also disliked the strict hierarchy and general male-dominance in the company. Tina said she never felt like her coworkers/supervisors treated her differently based on her age or gender and “they were really professional in treating [her] as an intern.” But, she personally wants to work somewhere where there is a more diverse work environment to learn from different people and backgrounds, and the electronics company was fairly homogenous in its demographics. Yet, she was still able to learn so much; Tina enjoyed her internship experiences, and feels better prepared for future internships and jobs in the future.

Olivia

Olivia had worked at the recycling plant for two consecutive summers, so she had lots of stories and experiences to share. Overall, she said enjoyed her internship and learned professional skills she would not have otherwise, but there were specific interactions and conversations that made a lasting impact on Olivia’s internship experience.

Olivia, in general, felt that she could communicate honestly with all her coworkers and supervisors, but she did not always feel comfortable asking questions or for clarification from her supervisors. She felt that people would sometimes “be annoyed with [her] for seeking clarification,” which would either stop her from asking or would delay when she would ask the questions. Olivia described feeling like her coworkers were rushing through their explanation to get back to their normal work or treating her questions too lightly. Often, this was hard for Olivia to navigate; she is someone who would rather “overcommunicate than under-communicate” because communication is so important to her. There were noticeable communication problems in her company, which led to miscommunication and mistakes, as well as workplace tension. The biggest problem was that no one would address problems to the

people who were causing them directly. Her coworkers would just complain to each other, except for the person they had a problem with, which only led to more stress and underlying strain on working relationships.

Olivia also talked about several instances where she felt treated differently or communication was impacted based on her age and gender. Some of these interactions took the form of off-handed comments from her coworkers, like when women she worked with would talk about different life experiences and starting them off with “When you’re older...” or a supervisor called her “kid.” There were other times where her coworkers would ask why she had gotten a heavy box herself instead of getting a man to do that, despite Olivia being a student athlete. Or when she brought in \$0.50 Frosties from Wendy’s as a treat for the office staff, which was not uncommon for her other coworkers to do. This time, however, one of the male coworkers tried to pay her back saying, “As a man, I feel like I have to.” These interactions stuck out in Olivia’s internship experience, especially the comments made about gender, which was a pretty common attitude in the company overall.

Olivia still learned a lot through this experience and did not speak very negatively about the experience as a whole. She still received a lot of transferable skills in her internship, including interpersonal communication skills when working with customers and communicating to multiple different departments. She says she grew professionally and was also able to get some hands-on experience with sampling jobs at the recycling plant which directly relates to her Chemistry major. This internship did show Olivia different aspects of company culture that she hopes to have in the future, specifically more open communication between coworkers, especially when problems or disagreements arise, and a more inclusive atmosphere. She shared

that she would still go back to this company another summer if she needed to, but she is pursuing other interests which will relate more to her majors and professional goals.

Victoria

Victoria had glowing things to say about her internship experience. She described her department as a high energy place where everyone is very encouraging, especially towards her. Despite being the one woman in the department, and that fact being a little intimidating at first, she had a wonderful experience at the auto dealership. She described it as, “It’s like having ten dads!” and could not be happier with her experience and relationship with her coworkers.

At the beginning, Victoria had a few issues with coworkers over explaining certain parts of her job or processes that she had to learn once she started her internship. She described it like her coworkers “overstepped” when it came to helping her understand certain aspects of a product or her role. But once she gained confidence in her ability as an intern, and a co-worker overexplained something to her, she felt comfortable letting them know she did not need as much help and they would stop ease off and let her continue with her work individually. Once she was more experienced in her work, she had no complaints about her coworkers. Victoria shared that the support and appreciation was amazing. During the interview she said, “They worship the ground I walk on!”

While her work environment was very supportive, the situations where her age and gender are the most prevalent occurred during interactions with customers. Particularly young men, between 20-30 years old, do not want to listen to her at all when she took them on test drives and showcased certain features to them. Even when her coworkers or supervisor would defend her, reiterating to the customer that “she is [the] specialist and she knows exactly what

she's talking about," customers frequently would still refuse to engage with her or take her seriously.

Despite those interactions with customers, Victoria has really enjoyed her time at this company. She says this opportunity helped her create a solid foundation for her to lean on in future roles in business. She learned more during this internship than she has in any of her classes so far, including helpful tips when it comes to sales. Her supervisor especially helped with her sales confidence, saying things like, "treat [the customer] like they're you're best friend" to keep her interaction with the customer as authentic as possible, which is something she "never learned in a textbook." Victoria credits this internship in helping land a very competitive sales internship for the summer in an area in which she hopes to have a career. Her coworkers/supervisors at the auto dealership were sad that she will not be interning with them over the summer, but hope she will come back during the next academic year and continue to work with them. Despite not wanting to work in the car industry forever, Victoria is strongly considering going back next year because of the encouraging and positive work environment and experience she has had so far.

Mariah

Mariah had no idea what to expect when going into her first Human Resources (HR) internship, but her time within the claims industry gave her a lot of hands on experience in her chosen field. She says there were a lot of benefits to her experience, but she often felt overwhelmed and eventually had to leave the position during the school year because it became too stressful for her to balance the internship along with her classes.

There were a lot of reasons why Mariah's internship experience was challenging. For starters, even though this company had been running for over a decade, the HR manager that was

Mariah's supervisor, had only been hired on for four months before her internship began. There was a lot of work to be done, including standardizing, organizing, and updating the department in order to serve its growing population of employees.

However, Mariah's biggest problem during her time with this company was the unrealistic expectations that she had to work towards. This was her first internship, she had not had any of her major classes yet and after only one hour of training on recruiting, she was told to start recruiting for the company. She ultimately became the person in charge of hiring, which was a cool experience to have, but it was often challenging for her. The unrealistic deadlines and bare-minimum training to her about her role were the biggest stress for her throughout her time with this company. She mentioned one specific example where she was told to hire 20 plus people by the upcoming Monday, on a Wednesday, otherwise the company was going to lose a million-dollar account. "There's just no way!" she said. With the multiple steps that go into hiring people and the amount of time it takes, it would be impossible for one person to achieve this goal. It was these kinds of situations and the dysfunctional culture of this company that caused her to experience burnout and ultimately decide to leave the company shortly into the school year.

Aside from the workload, Mariah was able to communicate honestly and effectively, especially with her direct supervisor. There was some miscommunication between departments about goals and needs from the other, particularly between the Midwest headquarters location and Great Plains call-center, which Mariah had to try and help handle because of the mediating nature of human resources departments. These miscommunications between departments and coworkers caused underlying tension in her work environment. Mariah used analogies to

describe it like coworkers being careful not to “poke the bear” and “walking on eggshells” when tensions were high.

She felt that her gender did not impact the way her coworkers and supervisors communicated with her. However, she did share that there were a few times when individuals would make comments about Millennials being lazy or other negative descriptors. They were always followed up with a statement like, “Oh, but not you,” yet these comments were still very frustrating for Mariah, who was working very hard in her role and thought those individuals were being unfair.

After a small break, Mariah has gotten another internship with a very different company culture. She is part of a small team of four and does not feel as overwhelmed as she did during her first internship. Her team is careful not to put too much on her plate, and make sure that this internship is also an educational experience, not just a job. Her direct supervisor has been especially encouraging, even telling Mariah that she wants to be her mentor throughout this internship experience. Even though this internship is still new, Mariah is optimistic for her time with this new company.

Analysis

While each participant had a unique internship experience, there were common themes that arose when comparing the four interviewees. Within this analysis section, I will describe five specific themes: communication, age, gender, education experience and interpersonal support.

Communication

Overall, each participant thought there was clear and honest communication between themselves and their coworkers/supervisors and they felt comfortable going to them with

questions as well. The primary medium was face-to-face communication, which they all appreciated and believe that helped their comfort levels when asking questions or for clarification. The other most common mediums for communication with coworkers was through email or over the phone, but each participant preferred face-to-face communication for the immediacy and clarity that comes with speaking in person.

However, Tina, Olivia, and Mariah mentioned that they felt more anxiety or less comfortable going to some of the higher executives if they had questions. Not because they felt like the executives would be angry with them, but for other reasons. Tina said that at her internship company, reaching out to the higher executives was more intimidating due to the weight and importance of the hierarchy enacted through the company culture. Olivia and Mariah said that the executives had more on their plate and they were worried about bothering them with their questions.

Tina, Olivia and Mariah also mentioned communication problems amongst departments at their internship company. Miscommunication was common between departments, and each intern could sense the company tension which arose from that. In Tina's case, a lot of it stemmed from different priorities between departments, for Olivia it came from employees not voicing their frustrations directly, and for Mariah it came from the dysfunctional culture of the company and unrealistic timelines. While these problems did not directly hinder each intern's experience, it was sometimes difficult for them to navigate those problems in their office. Since they did not feel like they had the authority to do anything about the tension or a place to speak up about it, they just dealt with those tense times as they came.

For Tina, Olivia, and Mariah, their shared experiences resembled some of the four flows from Robert McPhee's theory of Communicative Constitution of Organizations (CCO) (Griffin

et al, 2018). While this theory was not originally included in my literature review, while Muted Group Theory by Cheris Kramarae was, CCO had more pertinence in my finding and will be discussed throughout my analysis.

Specifically, Tina and Olivia mentioned the impact of self-structuring, communication that shapes and reinforces workplace relationships (Griffin et al, 2018). The way executives would talk or interact with other members within their department or organization shaped the interns opinion that their small questions should not be brought to those executives or individuals higher up within the organization. Tina, Oliva, and Mariah also discussed the flow of institutional positioning and how their department worked with other departments within their company. Each participant touched on the fact of underlying tension and miscommunication between departments and how it impacted the company culture. While each intern was not directly affected by the strain between departments, they all shared they want to work somewhere that has more open communication in the future, because the departmental communication problems added an extra layer of pressure during their internship.

Age

Each participant except for Tina could recount a time where their age impacted their work experience. For Olivia and Mariah, age was brought up in comments made by their coworkers. Olivia was called often called “kid” by one of her coworkers. When she asked if he would stop, his response was along the lines of, “I call everyone kid, it’s just a habit” and continued to call her “kid” throughout the rest of her internship experience. Despite these comments being made by only one coworker, she felt disrespected, especially after asking him to stop. This example reflects Standpoint Theory (Griffin et al, 2018) and how a person who is at the top of a social hierarchy is privileged to make assumptions and processes for a whole

organization, but their social location unconsciously impacts or neglects those who are not within the majority. Oliva's coworker, from his own social location of being an middle-aged male who has a certain level of influence in the company, would not know the affects of his comments on a young, female intern who does not have that same level of power. By unconsciously neglecting these differences, people who are not in the same positions of power, like Olivia, can feel disrespected and like they are not valued within the organization.

Mariah was never called "kid" or anything like that due to her age, but she did recall several instances where her coworkers would make prejudiced comments about the younger generations, specifically Millennials and Generation Z in front of her. One example that her coworkers would say often, which always made Mariah very frustrated, was that these generations "are just so lazy and they never want to put time or energy into anything." If they realized she was there and could hear them, they would tell her, "Oh, but not you! You're amazing!" but Mariah still felt annoyed and like her work was being invalidated by those generalized comments. It is mentioned above that Mariah was often overwhelmed with the amount of work that she had to put in for this internship. Mariah was working 50+ hour weeks and was often the first person there and the last to leave. Even with the disclaimer, "But not you!" Mariah felt disrespected, for herself and her fellow generation. She discussed how hard she works and how hard her friends of the same age work, and that these comments in general were just inappropriate. Mariah would not be allowed to say things like that about her coworker's generation and felt that they should know not to make those generalizations either. However, she never spoke up when those comments were made. She felt like she had no place to share her annoyances with these comments and that her coworkers were not thinking about how her feelings on this subject.

Victoria said she did not feel her age affect how her coworkers interacted with her much, except for when she began her internship. She felt that sometimes her coworkers would overstep with helping her, they were helping more than they needed to. But once she gained confidence in her ability for her internship role, she let them know that she did not need as much help as they thought and then she had no more troubles with them. Aside from that, she had no other troubles with her age around her coworkers, instead she felt like her age (coupled with her gender) impacted the way that customers interacted with her. Like mentioned in her summary earlier, customers particularly young men, ages 20-30, rarely wanted Victoria's help with anything because they did not seem to trust her experience or knowledge. Even when her coworkers and supervisor would defend her to the customer, with phrases like, "she is our specialist and she knows exactly what she's talking about," the customer was either very standoffish or would be skeptical about Victoria throughout the sale/interaction. It was discouraging for Victoria to not be taken seriously due to her identity markers, but her coworkers were always very supportive, and making sure that she would not let those interactions get her down for too long. On the alternate side, Victoria said that older couples would be amazed with her knowledge and say that she was a genius. They always appreciated her help and trusted her ability in her role.

Gender

On the subject of gender, only Olivia and Victoria said that their internship experience was impacted by this aspect of their identity. Victoria said that it impacted the way customers treated her the most, but not how her coworkers interacted with her, despite being the only woman in the office.

Olivia felt that her gender impacted her internship site and experience a lot, just from how her coworkers talked and interacted with her. There were clear biases from her coworkers which she encountered often. The first one she mentioned was that anytime she went to grab something heavy, like a large box or something from the warehouse, she would get a lot of questions. The women in her department would ask why she had not asked one of the men in the office or the warehouse to grab that? Or if she ran into one of the men as she was carrying something, they would ask, "Why did you grab that? I could have gotten that for you." These were small comments, but they reinforced traditional gender roles in the office. The women stayed at their desk and got the men to do anything physical. Olivia is a student athlete at her university, so carrying things or moving them around were no problem for her, but getting so much attention for carrying a box made her feel weird. Since these types of comments were said frequently and discriminated against Olivia, these comments are considered microaggressions.

Olivia provided another example where she tried to do something nice for the office but was met with another comment based on gender. It was common at this company, particularly in the offices, where coworkers would occasionally bring in little snacks or treats at lunch. One day, Olivia brought in a bunch of fifty cent Frosties to the office. One of her male coworkers tried to pay her for them, and when she tried to refuse, since it was only fifty cents, he said, "As a man, I feel like I have to." Another small comment, but it stuck out to Olivia, because she was trying to do something nice for her coworkers, but felt her gender impacted the way her coworkers saw her efforts.

Finally, while it did not impact her directly, she remembered a conversation that she had with HR, where the female applicants for the warehouse were brought up. While it was not explicitly stated, Olivia was under the impression that that the HR manager would not hire

women warehouse workers because the conditions would be too hard for them. Again, Olivia believed that gender roles were being reinforced in the office, and it was not just herself that was affected by them.

Throughout Olivia's description of her internship experience, we see examples of Giles's Communication Accommodation Theory (Griffin et al, 2018). When she was taking initiative and moving boxes herself, maintaining her normal behavior, she was met with some resistance and confusion from her coworkers, because she deviated from the norm. When she tried to converge to what she believed was the common company culture, by bringing in Frosties, she realized that it was not common practice for her demographic to participate in that behavior, i.e. bringing in food or snacks for fellow workers. In reality, her actions caused her differences to stand out in some of her coworkers eyes, when all she wanted was to fit in. This feeling of dissonance continually impacted her internship experience throughout the summer Olivia worked at the recycling plant.

While Muted Group Theory was mentioned in the literature review, I found no connections in my research findings that reflected concepts from this theory.

Throughout my analysis of the impacts of gender and age on the intern experience, gender biases were less evident than age biases based on the results of the conducted interviews. Only one out of the four participants mentioned how gender impacted the way their coworkers communicated with them, supporting that age has a more dominating influence on internship experiences.

Education Experience

Each participant said they got a lot out of their internship experience and learned a lot of during their internship. Each person said they gained professional skills, public speaking and

interpersonal communication skills, and increased confidence in themselves as young professionals, which they can take to their future internships and first jobs.

An important piece of their internship, that each participant touched on, was how they appreciated that most of their coworkers understood they were “working as well as learning”, which is a direct quote from Tina. That aspect of the nature of their internships helped them feel more comfortable to ask questions or to go to a coworker/supervisor with clarification. Tina, Olivia, and Victoria all mentioned how important the educational experience was for them during their first internship. Tina utilized this experience to schedule coffee plans with her coworkers in order to learn more about their role in the company and how they got there. Olivia, while not a business major, still got hands on experience which related to her Chemistry major, by shadowing the person who runs tests on the recycled rubber samples to ensure the formula is correct for resale. Victoria stated that she learned more during her internship than she ever did in her classes. Her manager would give her tips and pointers on how to be a better salesperson and gave her the skills necessary for her to obtain a competitive internship for the summer.

On the other hand, Mariah realized the “learning while working” portion of her first internship was missing. She said her job title stated she would be “assisting, but instead [she] was doing everything.” While she did learn a lot about Human Resources during her internship at the claims company, she felt that was not the focus of her internship, she just had to get the job done. This led to her feeling burned out and she thinks this is more common than people first realize. Mariah said, “People can take advantage of the intern, because they are so eager and ready to learn” and they end up feeling exhausted at the end of their internship. Looking back at Tina’s fellow intern, who had a heavier work load, with less support and who was not as happy leaving the internship as Tina was, this seems to be a valid problem for some interns. Within

these examples, we again see the impact of the self-structuring flow from Communicative Constitution of Organizations (Griffin, et al, 2018). At each company, and within departments, there were certain assumptions about the role of intern and how they interact and work within their organization or department. These expectations can either create a positive and beneficial experience, like in Tina's case, or a more negative and stressful experience, like for planning intern who worked with Tina or Mariah's experience.

However, Mariah shared that at her new internship, which she just started, she is having a very different experience from her first. Her HR team understands how important it is for this experience to be educational, and make sure they do not overwhelm with her different projects. Mariah is greatly appreciative of this fact and already feels less stressed in this new setting, which helps show how important the focus of learning on an internship role is for the individuals in it.

Interpersonal Support

The participants who referenced how supportive and encouraging their coworkers were during their internship were the ones who appeared to feel the best once their internship was over. Specifically, Tina and Victoria talked about how their coworkers/supervisors made them feel valued and helped them through any particular problems. Especially Victoria, who was very nervous coming into her internship with no sales experience, but since her coworkers would "hype her up" and give her praise, even if she made a mistake, she was able to feel comfortable and confident through the consistently affirmation. This company culture made her feel valued and more at ease at her internship site.

From Mariah's first internship to her present one, she also feels more supported in her new role. Instead of working by herself, she works as part of a team and they communicate well

with her to ensure that she does not feel overwhelmed. The HR manager also told Mariah that she wants to be her mentor through the next few years, to make sure Mariah feels as prepared for the workforce once she graduates. This meant a lot to Mariah, and greatly appreciates her manager going the extra step to make sure she has all the support she needs to succeed.

It appears that interpersonal connections made through internships can have a large impact on an intern's experience with a company. If employees are making an effort to support and encourage interns throughout their process, the intern not only feels more comfortable, but they enjoy their experience more so than others who do not have that same sense of community at their internship. This idea is consistent with Tannen's Genderlect Styles (Griffin et al, 2018); women traditionally use and value rapport talk, which puts more emphasis on connection and building relationships with others. When coworkers focus on providing that sense of rapport with their female interns, they have a better experience throughout the duration of their internship.

Limitations and Future Suggestions

This study provides an in-depth look into the experiences of four young, female interns in the business industry. By analyzing the themes that came from these interviews, we get a basic understanding of what factors play positive and negative roles on the intern experience for young women. However, there are a couple areas in which I feel that this study could improve to include more information.

For starters, this thesis project was looking at business internships in general, so it is hard to encompass the full young, female internship experience in the business industry based on a few different interviews. Another tactic to get a more comprehensive understanding of specific would be to interview female interns who were all marketing interns for example, or who all

interned at the same company or department. This way, the data collected would be more specific, and give more precise information about that particular internship or company. However, if only one specific area of business is looked at, that will exclude other areas from being shown and talked about. Depending on the study, this could be a potential strength, if someone is interested in a particular company or area of business they would be able to provide specific insight. However, if a researcher was looking at business as a whole, this tactic would be limiting.

On a similar note, there were only four qualitative interviews for this study. While these interviews allow for substantial analysis of each participant's experience, this is representative of a microscopic portion of the population for young, female business interns. No intern's experience will be the same, so it is very limiting to make assumptions on the full intern experience based on four individual accounts. In the future, the researcher should attempt to conduct as many interviews as time and resources will allow.

Also, all the interview participants for this study were from the Midwest Region. While they were in different areas and cities during their internship, interns in New York City would probably have a different experience than someone interning in a smaller, rural town, like Olivia. To obtain more well-rounded data, future research should attempt to survey a wide variety of locations, especially ones in different regions of the country or world.

Finally, this study specifically looks at age and gender only. While these two aspects can be influential on a person's internship experience, there are other factors that can impact an individual's experience with a company or group of people, such as race. Based on demographics of the interview participants, only one out of the four is a woman of color. It should also be noted that the participant who is a woman of color was also interning at a

company which is predominantly comprised of people of her own race as well. So, throughout this study, there were no extra impacts of one of the subjects being a minority at her internship company, which would have added another layer to analyze while looking at internship experiences. While this study did not focus on race, or ability, sexuality, spirituality, etc. it is important to have a diverse participant pool when trying to summarize the experiences of a group as a whole, instead of just one or two sub-groups. Putting more emphasis on diversity of the interviewee pool will provide more accurate data, showcasing perspectives from multiple social locations.

Through internships, young women begin to navigate the business world and get their first taste of their future career. Based on this study, the company culture greatly impacts the internship experience of female interns. Specifically, supportive environments where the focus of the internship is to learn while working provides the best experience. Interns feel better prepared for future internships and jobs, whether they enjoyed their experience or not, but feel more excited about their future prospects if they were able to be part of a company where they could communicate honestly and effectively with their coworkers and supervisors. It may seem like common sense, but comments, like microaggressions, or attitudes that perpetuate stereotypes around gender and age hinder that atmosphere. Departments and individuals who do not acknowledge those stereotypes, but focus on the learning aspect of internships, have the greatest impact on future female professionals and set them up for future success.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Questions

General Info

Name:

Age:

Major/Minor:

University:

Internship Company Description:

Questions

1. Please describe the company you interned at and your role in that position.
2. Describe the demographics of the department you worked in.
3. What was the closest age to your own at the time?
4. Describe the environment/atmosphere of the department or company you worked in.
5. What kind of collaborations/projects were you a part of? What was your role for those collaborations?
6. Did you feel comfortable asking your coworkers/supervisors for help and clarification?
7. What was the most common medium you used to communicate with your coworkers and supervisors?
8. Did you feel that you could communicate honestly and effectively with your coworkers and supervisors?
9. Did you feel like there were any communication problems between yourself and your coworkers/supervisors?
10. Were there any interactions where you felt that your age or gender impacted the way your coworkers or supervisors communicated with you? If so, please describe the communication.
11. Did your internship experience meet your expectations coming into this position?
12. Did your supervisors provide opportunities for you to grow and learn as a future professional? If so, how did they do this? If not, why do you feel that way?
13. If you were not the only intern in your department, did you feel like all interns were treated the same? Please describe your supervisor's interactions and communication with the interns.
14. How did you feel at the end of your internship? Would you consider interning or working there in the future?
15. Do you feel more prepared to enter the workforce based on your internship experience? Why?