

Generational Differences at Work: Pomp or Circumstance?

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Introduction

Popular press, consultative white papers, and trade publications frequently highlight unique generational differences in the workforce that are important to accommodate if organizations hope to achieve a wide range of valuable organizational outcomes (see, for example, the presentations of Forbes, 2018; PWC, 2011).

Perceptions of generational differences may be more strongly attributed to popular culture rather than proper social science, and may be less influential on organizational behaviors than is suggested within the broader popular culture (Becton and colleagues, 2014).

Here, we use the lens of a cohort effect to consider how groups of individuals from different generations are influenced by shared major events, including social, political, and cultural occurrences of their time. We aimed to explore how employees of different generational cohorts distribute their time for work and work-oriented activities. The boundary definitions of generational cohorts used in this study are the PEW research group's categorization of generations as shown in Table 1.

RQ: Are there generational differences in the amount of time employees spend on work and work-relevant activities?

Methods

Data from two publicly available archival sources were used. First, the Current Population Survey (CSP) which samples 60,000 households annually, either in person or by phone. Participants answer questions regarding the prior week's activities. Second, the American Time Use Survey (ATUS) was used, which consists of stratified random subset of the CPS. During the interview, respondents are asked to share how they spent their time from 4:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. the previous day.

Variables

We examined 4 categories of work and work-related time use: 1) time spent at one's main job, 2) engaging in socializing related to work, 3) time spent on other income-generating activity, 4) time spent searching for a job and related activity. Additionally, a generational cohort variable was created from two variables: respondent birth date, and verification of their age in years.

Results

Generation Z was heavily under-represented and was therefore excluded from analyses.

Figure 1 shows the number of minutes spent on work-related activities by different generational members across all survey years. These distributions are largely identical with no differences emerging for average minutes spent working ($F(2, 68404) = 0.54, p > .05$) or socializing ($F(2, 968) = 0.84, p > .05$).

There were small, statistically significant effects across cohorts for average amount of time spent on income-generating hobbies ($F(2, 1409) = 5.29, p < .01$) and job-searching ($F(2, 2009) = 7.30, p < .001$), with Millennials spending fewer average minutes per day on income-generating hobbies (157 minutes) than Baby Boomers (188 minutes; Tukey's HSD $p_{adj} < .05$) or Generation Xers (191 minutes; Tukey's HSD $p_{adj} < .05$).

Millennials spent fewer minutes (123) in job-searching activities when compared to Baby Boomers (148 minutes, Tukey's HSD $p_{adj} < .001$). Age is considered a confound across cohorts – within any given year the cohorts differ in age. Figure 2 attempts to account for age within these comparisons.

Table 1

Generational Boundaries (Pew Research Center Definitions)

Generation	Birth Years	Years when cohort member reaches age 18
Baby Boomers	1946-1964	1964-1982
Generation X	1965-1980	1983-1998
Millennials	1981-1996	1999-2017
Generation Z	1997-current	2015-

Figure 1

Number of Minutes Per Day Spent Engaging in Work-related Activities by Generation

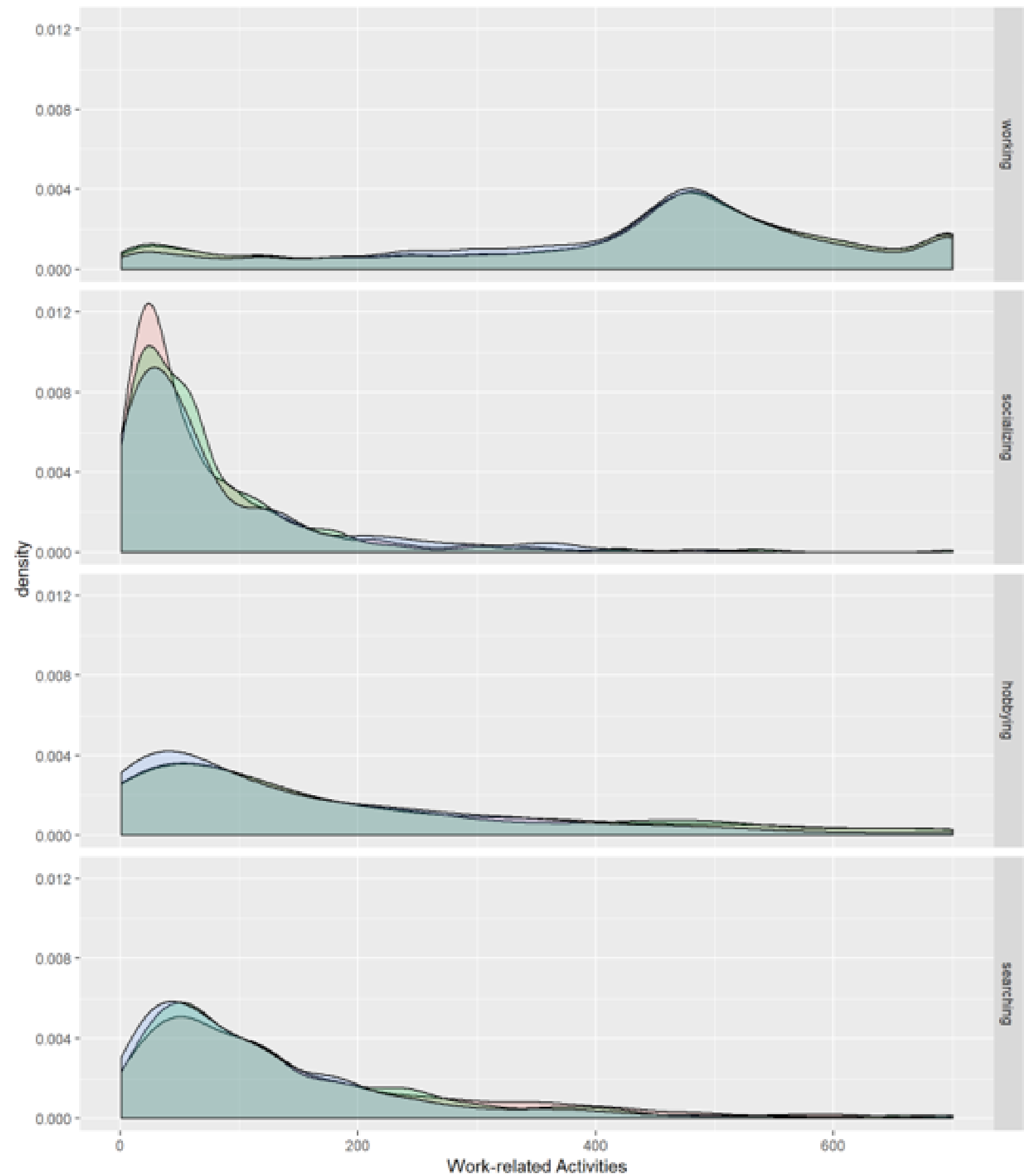
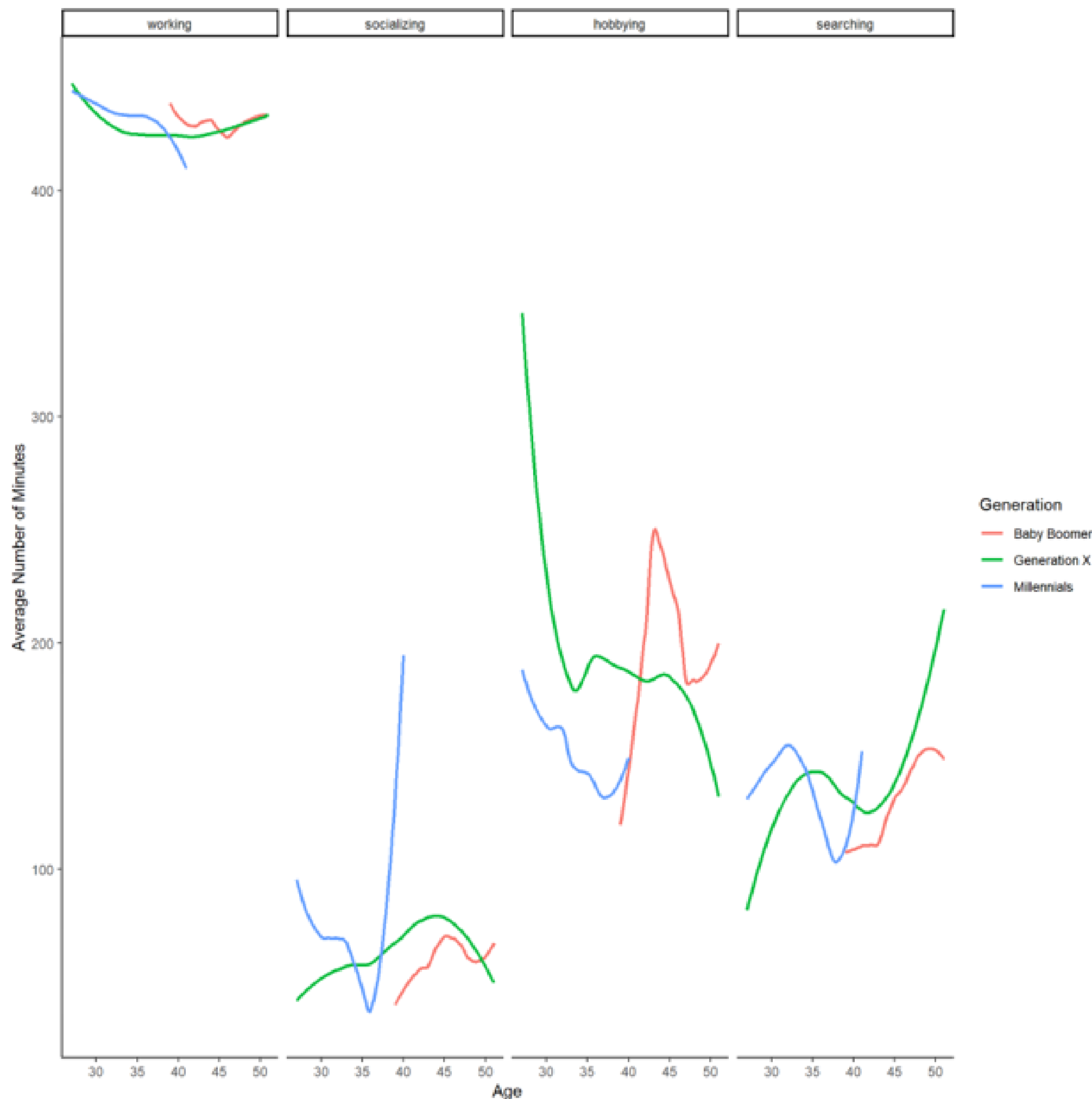


Figure 2

Number of Minutes Spent Engaging in Work, Work-related Socializing, Income-relevant

Hobbying, and Job Searching as a function of Generation and Age



Note. Only a constrained range of ages that have multi-generational overlap are presented here.

Discussion

Regarding general conclusions emerging from this investigation on generational cohort comparisons, we refer to Figure 1, which shows remarkably similar patterns of time spent working across cohorts. This finding runs somewhat counter to the suggestion that some generations work much more or value work much more than other groups – this perception may, in fact, be more pomp than circumstance.

We identified some small differences across cohorts in some work-related categories of interest. Both the Boomer and Generation X cohorts spent significantly more time/day on income-generating hobbies than Millennials. This finding aligns somewhat with the stereotypes and previously reported characteristics of the cohorts.

Millennials spent fewer minutes in job-search activities when compared to Baby Boomers, although Generation X did not spend a statistically significant greater amount of time in these activities than did Millennials. These findings potentially contradict popular beliefs about Baby Boomers being more loyal or committed to their companies as opposed to Millennials or Generation Xers. Overall, there seem to be slight differences in work related time use across generations but not as substantial as they might be commonly perceived.

Limitations & Future Research

The scope of this paper is limited due to the cross-sectional nature and retrospective floor of the survey(s). Future research would benefit from an in-depth exploration of the reasons behind time use choices across cohorts. We speculate that the way people use their time reflects their values and priorities. However, it's possible that there are additional drivers behind these choices.

