

OK Boomer, Are You There?:

The Erasure of Baby Boomers from the Cultural Psyche

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Media is one of the most powerful tools a society possesses. It has the power to shape history and even identity. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the major influencers of media to wield this power responsibly by respecting its stakeholders. As time progresses, baby boomers are handing the reins of society to the following generations. Unfortunately, the narrative of their generation is morphing into a disappointing story arc. Baby boomers are experiencing identity-defining media trends that diminish their perceived importance within a prosperous society.

To see this phenomenon in action, one should examine an interview conducted with author Jill Filipovic. This discussion juggles the complicated relationship between baby boomers and millennials and its implications. Filipovic wrote an intriguing book titled *OK Boomer, Let's Talk*, which criticizes how baby boomers selfishly led the past few decades (Eisenberg, 2020). Specifically, she feels that boomers have orchestrated conservative political schemes that accelerated their ascension into prosperity while halting the progress of the generations behind them (Eisenberg, 2020).

When asked what inspired her to write this book, Filipovic responded that she wanted to “go beyond the tension [between generations] and have a conversation” (Eisenberg, 2020). This indicates a goal to elicit constructive solutions to the intergenerational rift. She even specifies that baby boomers are unfairly labeled as “reactionary, right-wing conservatives”(Eisenberg, 2020). Instead, she explains, this generation is the most politically divided, half being liberal and half being conservative (Eisenberg, 2020). In her words, progressive boomers deserve praise for contributing to a fruitful society (Eisenberg, 2020).

However, this sentiment was not echoed throughout this conversation. Although she ironically accuses baby boomers of using millennials as scapegoats for the nation's problems, she does the same to her elders (Eisenberg, 2020). She generally places the blame for the woes of her young peers on the whole boomer generation, without specifying the particular sub-groups she has gripes with. Likewise, she does not identify exogenous factors that may influence adverse outcomes. Instead, she opts to create an identity for baby boomers characterized by resistance to progress.

This attitude was presented when the interviewer asked Filipovic, "What do you blame boomers most for?" (Eisenberg, 2020) She responds that the list is extensive but hones in on the fact that social programs were plentiful while baby boomers were young but seemed to evaporate as millennials came of age (Eisenberg, 2020). Filipovic attributes this unfortunate trend to the entitlement of boomers (Eisenberg, 2020). Although there may be some truth to this, this conversation is more nuanced.

Decades-old investment in infrastructure, education, and other social programs equipped the older generation with the tools to climb to the middle class (Eisenberg, 2020). However, this is not universally true as large pockets of this demographic were ignored. Furthermore, if conservatism is to blame for decreased social programs for millennials, it is unfair to automatically put full blame on baby boomers. This generation was not the sole voter cohort that ushered in conservative policies. Plus, decreased social programs hurt financially struggling boomers as well as millennials. Perhaps ballooning national debt or expensive wars were a major contributing factor to reduced infrastructure and educational spending. A mere acknowledgment of these facts would have more accurately reflected reality instead of villainizing and

diminishing the contribution of an entire generation.

An added layer to this interview that can not be overlooked is that the interviewer, Richard Eisenberg, is a baby boomer. As previously mentioned, Jill Filipovic, the interviewee, is a millennial. Media researchers have the added benefit of observing this interaction to witness intentional or unintentional cues. Filipovic was not reluctant to expound upon her gripes with boomers. However, for a portion of the interview, Eisenberg brought up problems that baby boomers face. Yet, they were often dismissed and, at times, undermined by Filipovic. For example, Eisenberg posited that decent health care is a mutual struggle across generations (Eisenberg, 2020). According to him, boomers unable to apply for Medicare face daunting health insurance premiums (Eisenberg, 2020). Instead of sympathizing or discussing mutual solutions to this possible life-or-death problem, Filipovic simply states health care issues are more “pronounced for millennials” (Eisenberg, 2020). When asked about how the pandemic altered how the two generations look at each other, Filipovic declared she hoped that it garnered solidarity, not for the lives lost, but because boomers can feel the “insecurity and hyperconnectiveness” that millennials deal with (Eisenberg, 2020). This is astonishingly flippant considering the substantial hardships endured by boomers during COVID-19.

Brad A. Meisner recently published a paper detailing the specific pressures baby boomers have faced amid the pandemic. It is well known that the elderly face unique risks when encountering the disease. As a result, people tend to group all baby boomers into an increasingly vulnerable group while ignoring the individual health of members in this demographic (Meisner, 2020). Other risk factors, regardless of age, put people at particular risk, yet the outlook for boomers is oversimplified (Meisner, 2020). Here, the communicative predicament of aging

model arises where younger people accommodate to the stereotypes of feeble, vulnerable boomers (Harwood et al., 2009). In turn, boomers then feel more feeble and helpless than they may, in fact, be (Harwood et al., 2009). This is a cyclical phenomenon, as the feeling of feebleness spurs others to treat them as more feeble, making boomers believe they are even more feeble (Harwood et al., 2009). Meisner thinks this is causing adverse biopsychological health outcomes (Meisner, 2020).

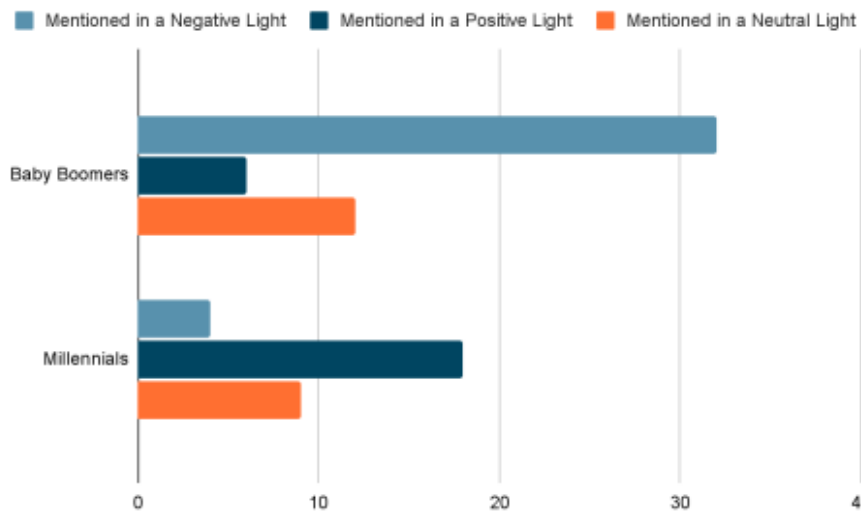
Furthermore, before the pandemic's onset, the phrase "OK, Boomer" caught wind (Meisner, 2020). This dismissive remark was initiated by millennials who felt boomers operated on outdated belief systems and lacked constructive contributions to today's climate change and inequality (Meisner, 2020). During the pandemic, this morphed into calling COVID-19 the "Boomer Doomer," "Senior Deleter," and "Boomer Remover" (Meisner, 2020). One can only imagine the effects this has on baby boomers following the communicative predicament of aging model.

Nonetheless, Filipovic advises millennials to remember that baby boomers bring a wealth of wisdom for solving the problems they face (Eisenberg, 2020). Perhaps our qualitative analysis of her conversation with Eisenberg up to this point is biased. A quantitative analysis of her interview may help identify her sentiment toward baby boomers more objectively. To conduct this analysis, I record each time baby boomers are mentioned in a positive, neutral, or negative light. These figures are compared to an identical study of millennials. A look at the data is below:

Table 1 *Sentiment Counter*

	Sentiment Number of Times
Baby Boomers	Mentioned in a Positive Light 6
	Mentioned in a Neutral Light 12
	Mentioned in a Negative Light 32
Millennials	Mentioned in a Positive Light 18
	Mentioned in a Neutral Light 9
	Mentioned in a Negative Light 4

Note. Data from (Eisenberg, 2020)

Figure 1 *Sentiment Counter*

Note. Data from (Eisenberg, 2020)

Once again, it is evident that the importance of baby boomers for a prosperous society is being diminished. If the goal of this work is to promote constructive conversation between generations to arrive at solutions to the problems they face, it does not make much sense to attack one party disproportionately. This is especially true considering many of her attacks do not holistically look at the issues mentioned. I would argue this may be yet another example of the communicative predicament of aging model at work. Even in intellectual discussions about baby boomers, they are trivialized and villainized (Eisenberg, 2020). As a result, boomers may further remove themselves from solution-based action and embrace the label of irrelevance they are assigned.

The two sources presented are a snapshot of the vast array of character-damaging media occupying the cultural psyche. Slowly, the generation that acted as the muscle of the civil rights movement, voice of anti-war initiatives, and economic backbone of the latter part of the 20th century is seen as inconvenient baggage weighing down progress. Think-pieces and social media trends have encouraged an “OK, Boomer” reaction to this generation’s opinions. As evident through labeling since the pandemic (unrelated to the actual virus), they face biopsychological health consequences to this dismissal. Society must grapple with the consequences of this destructive communication.

References

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