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The Impact Of Social Media On Cohort Perceptions In The Workplace

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Advisor: Syd Havelly, Ph.D.

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The Impact Of Social Media On Cohort Perceptions In The Workplace

Abstract

The purpose of this capstone is to ask and explore if and how generational cohorts' perceptions of each other are influenced by social media and how such interactions in the workplace are affected. By reviewing and synthesizing the current literature on the topic and surveying individuals from my organization who fall into several generational labels I hope to understand how these perceptions are evidenced and articulated. I want to measure what the cohorts think of each other, where they believe these biases originate concluding with possible suggestions on effectively breaking down generational bias barriers. A survey consisting of 15 questions in total with 7 short answer questions and 8 multiple choice was distributed. Short answer questions were designed to yield a simple yes/no response by asking "do you feel?" with a request to elaborate on the given response with no character limit imposed. Survey results revealed a clear link was between social media and intergenerational biases. Additionally, the data indicates that many respondents are aware of this link, feel it can affect their perceptions, and can possibly influence how they work together.

Keywords

generational biases, intergenerational biases, social media

Comments

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THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON
COHORT PERCEPTIONS IN THE WORKPLACE

by

John C. Noga

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in the School of Arts and Sciences
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Master of Science in Organizational Dynamics at the
University of Pennsylvania

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

2021

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

We live in a unique time in human history; we as a species are living longer than ever, with the trend only looking to continue. As cures for diseases, vaccines, and better nutrition spread globally, individuals are extending their time in the workforce as well. According to the Pew Research Center, U.S. adults born from 1946 to 1964 are still in the workforce, with the oldest among them staying at the highest annual rate for people their age in more than half a century (Fry, 2020). The composition of the labor force is changing, and with individuals working longer, a new phenomenon has emerged in the organizational landscape. For the first time in recorded history, there are five distinct generational groups in the workplace.

In addition to increases in longevity, technology has revolutionized how we work, play, and live. The advent of the internet transformed how we live our daily lives, smartphones revolutionized how we communicate, and social media platforms change how we interact and share information. These innovations can unite as well as divide generations. A strong case can be made, in my opinion, is that social media is a major dynamic in this development. It is the hypothesis of this capstone that social media, including traditional media, can significantly influence how generational groups perceive each other, affecting workplace interactions and driving further generational division.

Accordingly, this capstone intends to uncover research that underscores where and how generational cohorts' perceptions of each other originate and how these views influence intergenerational interactions in the workplace. Today's workplace is only

becoming more generationally diverse, and a better understanding of how we are perceived and how we perceive others will provide greater insight into the complexities of the workplace and with that a wider glimpse into how workplace systems can be understood in order to offer solutions to better communication and decision-making, including but not limited to ethnographically informed discussions of work politics and practice.

Furthermore, this capstone will explore where individuals derive these feelings and how they affect organizational communication. Bearing in mind that no individual, regardless of the generational cohort, can be analyzed entirely from this singular aspect of their identity, valuable information can be obtained from existing literature and by examining working professional's experiences. By this research, I hope that I, and others, can become increasingly aware of generational biases and effectively offer insight as to how to cross these barriers, ultimately becoming more successful in their organizations and personal lives.

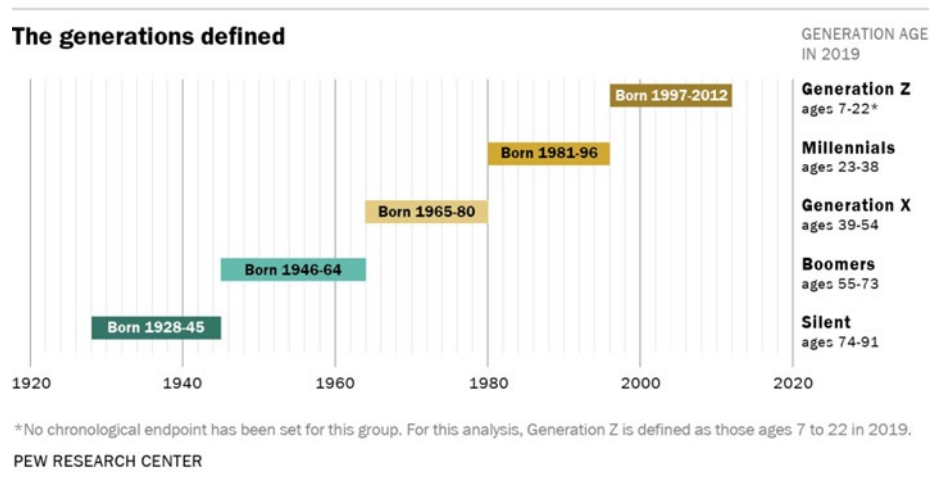
Background

The concept of generational differences that includes both boundaries and borders in the social anthropological sense, and the labels assigned to them in western society has always fascinated me. Baby Boomers, Millennials, Gen Z; these are terms that have become difficult to avoid in all forms of media and everyday conversation. They are rife with stereotypes, special memes, coded language, and lifestyle habits that almost defy description, yet endure as seemingly self-defining descriptions.

Starting in the workforce at a young age in an exceptionally generationally diverse workplace further prompted my awareness of the concept. In the Fall of 2018, I started in the Organizational Dynamics Program at the University of Pennsylvania. One of the first courses I enrolled in was Everyday Intergenerational Conversations: Baby Boomers & Millennials. I once again found myself fascinated by the further exploration of intergenerational preconceptions and relations. Additionally, I found the unique stories and experiences shared by my classmates fascinating. This is something I desired to explore further.

However, what exactly is a Baby Boomer or a Gen Z, for that matter? What exactly are the generational labels that surround us? While there is some variation between sources, Michael Dimock (2020) of Pew Research Center defines them below in Figure 1.

Figure 1. The Generations Defined



As Dimock explains, "Generational cutoff points are not an exact science. They should be viewed primarily as tools. But their boundaries are not arbitrary. Generations

are often considered by their life span, but again there is no agreed-upon formula for how long that span should be." (Dimock, 2020). Baby Boomers are the only generational group to be officially defined by the U.S. Census Bureau as "The cohort born during the post-World War II baby boom in the United States" (Colby & Ortman, 2017). We now find ourselves more generationally diverse in the workplace than at any time in modern history, with just recently Millennials overtaking Baby Boomers as the largest generational group in the United States workplace (Fry, 2020).

Besides the labels and differences in the year of birth, how different are the generations from each other? According to the *Harvard Business Review*, not that much. At the end of the day, most people, regardless of the generational cohort, all yearn for the same things. They explain, "Most of the evidence for generational differences in preferences and values suggests that differences between these groups are quite small. In fact, there is a considerable variety of preferences and values within any of these groups. For example, a thorough analysis of 20 different studies with nearly 20,000 people revealed small and inconsistent differences in job attitudes when comparing generational groups. It found that, although individual people may experience changes in their needs, interests, preferences, and strengths over the course of their careers, sweeping group differences depending on age or generation alone don't seem to be supported (King et al., 2019)".

Personal career experience seems to authenticate these findings. Working in various organizations with countless colleagues in different cohorts has shown me that we are not that different. However, while generational cohorts may have similar work-related attitudes and even a gravitational pull toward their own cohort, there is evidence

to believe how they perceive each other to have a much more dramatic effect on workplaces and interaction than a label alone would suggest. Pamela Druckerman, the author and journalist, upon turning 44, reflected that “More about you is universal than not universal. My unscientific assessment is that we are 95 percent cohort, 5 percent unique. Knowing this is a bit of a disappointment, and a bit of a relief (Druckerman, 2014).

As an example, I am a millennial. Like it or not, part of me can be defined by this demographic cohort. The term itself and additional corresponding generational labels surround us so regularly that it almost seems impossible not to be aware of their existence. In other words, labels can come baggage as well as perception and stereotype, i.e., Millennials are unmotivated; Baby Boomers are tech-phobic workaholics; Gen Z is addicted to their phones. Generalizations like these are at the forefront whenever these groups are discussed, but can stereotypes affect how we interact in the workplace? In an experiment published in the *Journal of Business and Psychology*, undergraduate students were tasked to train another person on a computer task. The experiment's findings found that when the students were under the impression they were training an older person, they had lower expectations and thus provided a worse training experience than if training a younger person (McCausland et al., 2015). I believe that this experience is a perfect example of how generational stereotypes can negatively affect workplace interactions. Similar experiments uncovered implicit racial bias.

Nevertheless, where do these stereotypes originate? Individuals can draw their biases from various sources but I believe that correlation exists based on generational cohort. Personally, as a millennial, I feel that some my perceptions of generational

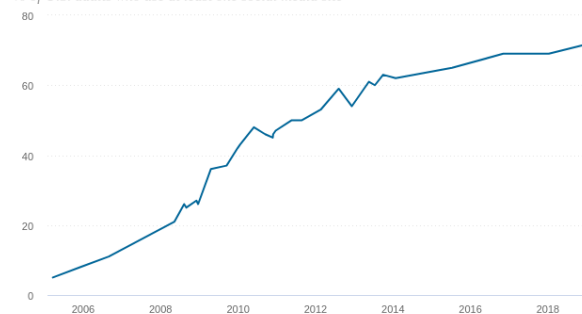
groups, including my own, are heavily influenced by social media. I find it impossible to scroll through Twitter or TikTok without seeing a meme about how Boomers destroyed the economy or how Millennials cannot afford homes. In fact, I am even guilty of referring to co-workers as “Boomers” depending on how they act in certain workplace situations. I feel this can be an example of what I consume on social media influencing my workplace interactions.

Regardless of cohort, I believe that social media will be the largest source of this stereotype reinforcement. It shows no signs of retreat as its impact only grows. In fact, social media usage continues to increase across every group. As shown below in Figure 2 the Pew Research Center social media usage only continues to increase year over year.

Figure 2. Social Use Media Over Time

Social media use

% of U.S. adults who use at least one social media site



Source: Surveys conducted 2005-2019.

While there are other factors such as cable news, past interactions, or family members that can influence this, I intend to focus on the effect of social media the newest and most comprehensively impactful force in modern mass communication history. Considering scholarly research on intergenerational stereotypes on social media is still in its infancy I feel that this topic is extremely relevant and under researched.

My capstone research question, therefore, will ask and explore if and how generational cohorts' perceptions of each other are influenced by social media and how such interactions in the workplace are affected. I will review and synthesize the current literature on the topic to paint a current picture of how organizations and professionals are currently adapting to generational stereotypes in the workplace. Next, I will survey individuals from my organization who fall into several generational labels in order to tease out how these perceptions are evidenced and articulated. I want to measure what the cohorts think of each other, where they believe these biases originate, and what social media they use. Lastly, I will reflect on the data I collected and the literature I explored to conclude with possible suggestions on effectively breaking down generational bias barriers.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The majority of current literature on intergenerational relations focuses heavily on the conflict between Baby Boomers and Millennials. This fact is unsurprising since these two cohorts now account for the majority of individuals in the workforce. In this literature review, I will explore the topics of generational stereotypes affecting workplace relations and how intergenerational biases and conflict can originate and expand from social media into the public consciousness.

Do generational stereotypes affect workplace relations? Sarah Moore and Alan Krause of the University of Puget Sound sought to answer this question in their study, *Working With Generationally Similar or Different Colleagues: Impacts on Perceptions of Generational Stereotypes and Work-Related Attitudes*. Moore and Krause's study focused on the Gen Y (Millennial) cohort, the largest cohort in the workforce at 30% (Fry, 2018). Moore & Krause (2021) examined the relationship between exposure to colleagues believed to be from different generational cohorts on generational stereotypes toward Gen Y. They also studied work-related attitudes and behaviors in relation to this. Of central importance is the authors' observation that popular media regularly reports on Gen Y's shortcomings which can create the potential for employees to hold a negative bias against colleagues from Gen Y (Moore & Krause, 2021). This concept is a fundamental part of this capstone's research question.

Moore & Krause (2021) administered an online survey to 515 participants consisting of individuals of various genders, education, and generational cohorts.

Participants were categorized as belonging to Gen Z (6.1% of sample), Gen Y (66.4% of sample), Gen X (18.8% of sample), or Baby Boomer (8.8% of sample) (Moore & Krause, 2021). The survey was conducted through Mechanical Turk (MTurk) and an online survey collection platform operated by Amazon Web Services. The participants were asked to estimate the percentage of time they work with the following age groups in a typical month Gen Z, Gen Y, Gen X, and Baby Boomers. The birth year range was also included with each cohort option. To measure the Generation Y stereotypes, respondents were asked to rank characteristics they believed Gen Y possessed, with 1 being untrue and 5 being true. These characteristics included options such as being a team player and constantly needing praise.

Moore & Krause (2021) found several significant differences in perceptions of Gen Y employees. Their research showed that Baby Boomers and Gen X held the highest negative Gen Y stereotypes while Gen Z and Gen Y had the most positive. I found these results to be exciting but unsurprising. While it was interesting that cohorts prefer to work within their ranks, the fact that the cohorts closest in age tended to stick together was unsurprising. I found this study to help clarify how generational cohorts' perceptions can affect their workplace relations. Although this study did not explore the origin of these perceptions, I feel the data obtained is valuable to my overall question. I will attempt to fill this research gap with this capstone.

Moore & Krause (2021) addressed some limitations of their study, such as the majority of respondents being from Gen Y and Z, primarily due to the platform from which the survey was conducted. This is something I will seek to avoid in my planned survey by attempting to make it as accessible as possible to all generations. Additionally,

Moore & Krause (2021) had concerns with individuals self-reporting their generational cohort incorrectly. To account for this, they included the generally agreed upon birth years along with generational labels. I hope to avoid this with my survey, but I can't entirely agree with listing the label alongside the birth year. In my experience, I have encountered individuals who incorrectly assume their cohort group, such as a Gen Xer labeling themselves a Gen Y. I intend to account for this misreporting by only listing birth year ranges.

On a final note, I found it fascinating that the authors reported that Gen Y can have negative perceptions of their generation. Millennials are not immune to their meta-stereotypes, and I should know. I have often found myself labeling members of my cohort based on stereotypes perpetuated by the media. Nevertheless, this study inspired ideas for the format and type of questions I would like to ask in my survey. I believe that Moore & Krause's study adds credence to the notion that negative perceptions or stereotypes based on the concepts of generational cohorts can affect workplace relations, which is a cornerstone of my research question.

How does social media play a part?

"Ok, Boomer." This phrase has become unavoidable since its inception on social media and eventual viral status on TikTok. In my opinion, "Ok, Boomer" further carried intergenerational stereotypes and conflict originating from social media into the workplace. Peter Hirsh, in his article, *Follow the dancing meme: intergenerational relations in the workplace*, exploring the power of this notorious phrase, states:

The many articles and debates praising and condemning the phrase since its eruption into public consciousness in 2019 strongly suggest that it speaks to a deep sensitivity about intergenerational conflict and cultural dislocation felt across the world (p. 67).

The phrase itself, originating from a social media meme, broke into the real world being shouted at by students protesting climate change at a college football game and even making its way to the New Zealand parliament being used by a millennial member of the legislature to mock an older parliamentarian (Heller, 2019 as cited by Hirsh 2020). The phrase represents Millennials and Gen Z's frustration towards the Baby Boomer generation on various subjects from the economy to climate change. It has become the poster child of intergenerational conflict on social media, reflecting an eye-rolling frustration if not exasperation with views not their own, much like the 60's saying, "Don't trust anyone over 30."

Hirsh (2020) also references the overwhelming number of media presenting inconsistent accusations. For example, Millennials are anxious and over-confident, lazy, and hyperactive. I believe the confluence of both influencer utterances and social media usage pushed such descriptions into the public consciousness where users and participants echoed the talking points they hear and see, thereby creating a negative stereotype, much as cable news does with activist reporting and tribalized reporting in seeking to shape civil dialogue and creating certain public perceptions of politicians and political viewpoints.

Pew Research found that 59 percent of Millennials describe their generation as self-absorbed, 49 percent as wasteful, and 39 percent as greedy, while 20 percent of Baby Boomers labeled their cohort the same way. (Guardian staff, 2015 as cited in Hirsh 2020). I found the stark difference between the Baby Boomers and Millennials view of their cohorts to be eye-opening, including the fact that social media plays a significant

factor in this phenomenon. The meta-stereotype factor is a subject I intend to discover more about with my research.

Importantly from these findings is the question, how do we overcome these stereotypes and, for that matter, meta-stereotypes? I had hoped to understand how we could overcome these generational stereotypes regardless of their point of origin. Hersh (2021) has a simple suggestion. He explains we should talk just about them.

“If the stereotypes (or the meta-stereotypes) are in fact the real problem, what should companies do in order to create a more harmonious, more productive workplace? The answer, not altogether surprisingly, appears to be to talk about them. Using well established tools such as role playing and role reversal, more and more companies are finding that the better they draw attention to the nefarious role of stereotypes the more they can reduce their negative impact” (p. 69)

Could such a simple suggestion could be the answer? In this view, if we could merely talk about these stereotypes, we would understand we are not that different. After all, the research shows there is little difference between cohorts. Hirsh (2021) references the Harvard Business Review study data that suggests that the fundamental differences between generations are far less than what we are typically led to believe. Reviewing a meta-analysis of 20 studies covering 20,000 workers, the *Harvard Business Review* suggests that actual generational differences in job attitude are, in fact, small and inconsistent (King et al., 2019, as cited by Hersh 2021).

I found this article valuable to my research question because it demonstrates the power of a simple meme on social media that can explode into the real world. The example of that phrase making its way onto the parliament floor in New Zealand further demonstrates the power that social media has in driving intergenerational conflict at the highest levels of society. I will be interested in the results of my survey that can measure if individuals of all cohorts feel that social media influence their perceptions of other

generations. I believe memes such as “Ok, Boomer” are a definite indicator of social media affecting generational perceptions, shorthand descriptions and jargon handles that morph into hardened perceptions and potentially implicit or explicit bias. Will my survey results will reflect this? What is the role of the pandemic in this problem? Is it making things worse?

In today’s world, it seems almost impossible to ignore the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and how it is playing a role in all parts of our lives, including social media and intergenerational relations. Looking at research that investigated whether the COVID-19 pandemic has caused further generational divide driving from social media. A study by Antonius Skipper and Daniel Rose titled #BoomerRemover: COVID-19, ageism, and the intergenerational Twitter response. This study explores this very concept. I was aware of the #BoomerRemover hashtag and its negative connotation but was unaware of the backstory; it explored how the hashtag has contributed to generational relations being further influenced by social media.

Skipper and Rose explored the use of the #BoomerRemover hashtag on Twitter over two weeks in March 2020 during the dawn of the COVID-19 pandemic. The first reference to #BoomerRemover was in the form of a tweet on Twitter with a user using the hashtag to describe the fact that COVID-19 was killing older adults (Sparks 2020 as cited by Skipper and Rose 2021). Over the next several days, the hashtag became even more frequent, with tweets receiving upwards of 700,000 likes. According to the Pew Research Center (2019), the demographics of Twitter are 73% under 50. With this data, it seemed obvious which generational groups were participating in using this hashtag.

Skipper and Rose's (2021) research encompassed using Twitter's search engine to identify tweets with the #BoomerRemover hashtag over the two weeks of March 16th through March 30th, which is where the hash was most referenced. They presented their results using various themes. The first theme they explored is that the tweets represented a real generational divide referencing these two tweets among many.

"#BoomerRemover, well, I mean, I'm not saying cough on elderly, but, they don't care about Gen Z's death (climate change), so, why should we care about theirs? (coronavirus)." (p. 2)

"I'm just gonna say it: most boomers are irrational and can't be trusted. They've ruined the planet for younger generations... #BoomerRemover." (p. 2)

These tweets show that generational conflict on social media is becoming increasingly unpleasant. With "Ok, Boomer" simply dismissing the baby boomer generation, this hashtag wishes death upon them. This leads to the other theme the authors explore, which is that #BoomerRemover is simply disrespectful (Skipper & Rose, 2021). Several tweets from the Twitter-users:

ANYONE who supports #boomerremover needs to realize how insane they are. Death is NEVER a joke. I may be a 'boomer,' but I have never not supported those who are not." (p.4)

Another example:

I have never felt so devalued as I have in the past two months. Between #okboomer, #BoomerRemover, and now killing us off to stabilize the economy ... it's horrifying, really." (p.5)

Skipper and Rose's study is influential because it further explores social media's extreme power on intergeneration conflict. This study and its examples were eye-opening to how toxic social media can become, and its potentially real-world implications.

Clearly, the Boomer generation targeted by this hashtag will have their perceptions of the younger generation tainted by this which I plan to explore with my survey. I feel that honest discussion in organizations on intergenerational conflict is extremely important so things like this do not divide us. Skipper and Rose acknowledge that there is a need to close the generational gap on social media.

While the literature on the specific aspect of my question related to perceptions being influenced by social seems to be limited and in its infancy, I hope that by writing this capstone, I can further shed light on the topic. This article inspired me to ask a question in my survey to measure if people feel that the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened intergenerational relations. I want to ask if they know the #OKBoomer or #BoomerRemover hashtag and if they think these are damaging to intergenerational relations in the real world. I will be interested to learn if there are any correlations between the ongoing pandemic intergenerational conflicts. Social media is not going away, and its use across all generations is growing.

My literature review concentrated on the Baby Boomer generation and the perceptions and memes of others, mostly Millennials and Gen Z, casting aspersions on them with “OK, boomer.” and “Boomer Remover”. From what I have personally witnessed other intergenerational memes and social media hashtags about other cohorts, Millennials, Gen X, and Gen Z tend not to have any concentrated effort behind them. Various memes and posts regarding these generations definitely exist but none have reached the level of notoriety as those regarding Baby Boomers. My literature research seemed to reflect this as well considering lack of data on the subject. It appears that now

Millennials and Gen Z relationships are now being scrutinized as the NY Times and others are doing since Boomers are largely departing the working scene.

In conclusion, conducting a literature review has reinforced my theory that social media is an enormous factor in how generational groups perceive each other. It serves as both echo chamber and perception super spreader. By completing my own research, I hope to fill the gaps and find a link between social media affecting real-life workplace interactions.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The ultimate goal of this research paper is to explore if and how generational cohorts' perceptions of each other are influenced by social media and how such interactions in the workplace are affected. This phenomenon has been something I have suspected occurring for some time and in my experience only seems to be becoming more prevalent with the growing use of social media among all age groups. To collect data I considered various options, such as conducting interviews with members of each group, but ultimately decided to use quantitative approaches including polling and survey methods.

Poll Everywhere

While considering my data collection methods I was invited by my organization's Human Resources department to give a presentation as part of an internal conference. My HR representative was aware of my enrollment in the Organizational Dynamics Program and my capstone topic and felt would be beneficial to share my topic with my organization. I jumped at opportunity and accepted the invitation. I saw this as an opportunity to collect data from the audience I could use to towards answering my research question.

Considering this was a virtual presentation within a fifteen-minute time slot my options for collecting data were limited. I decided I would use Poll Everywhere a cloud-

based polling tool that can be embedded in PowerPoint Presentations to collect live data from the participating audience. Participants would join a link, or text a phone number, displayed in a slide to record their responses to a presented question. This tool has been utilized in several presentations in my organization so my audience would be familiar with the workflow. Considering the time limit I made the decision to design simple polls requesting the audience to share single words. The audience was presented with following generational labels: Baby Boomers, Millennials, and Gen Z. They were then asked to submit words that come to mind.

With this method there were various limitations, most notably being the time constraint. As mentioned, I had a strict fifteen-minute window with even less time being allotted for the polling. Additionally, audience size was less than I originally anticipated. When dissecting the data, I discovered only 13 individuals participated. Regardless of these limitations I felt this was a valuable exercise and revealed my own organizations feelings on generational stereotypes.

Qualtrics Survey

With the goal of collecting more detailed data I chose to create a survey. I felt I could obtain relevant data through a survey designed to have respondents share their personal experiences through a mix of question types. Additionally, I would have more control over my intended audience by distributing through specific channels. My ultimate goal being an even representation of cohorts respondents with more detailed results which was obviously a limitation from the polling.

The survey was designed with the intention of learning how and why members of different generational groups come to think about their peers, the overall goal being to

tease out potentially implicit attitudes based on age or cohort and what might contribute to those attitudes. My hope with this survey is to uncover and even link these influences to social media and to how they might affect workplace relations. My line of questioning focused on attitudes, implicit or explicit biases, and what social, cultural, or economic factors may underlie them.

The survey was created on the cloud-based survey platform Qualtrics. Qualtrics allows for the creation of surveys consisting of various formats of questions and contains the ability to compare data to dissect and interpret the data through various methods. Additionally, the tool allowed for the creation simple link that can be shared through various formats and an accessible interface for straight forward user experience to drive engagement.

Additionally, I elected to design the survey to be completely anonymous with only one self-identifying question. This question would ask the respondent to select a range of years representing their birth year. The intention of this question was to match the respondent to a cohort without presenting the corresponding label. The question was intentionally placed last to avoid any possible influence on other answers.

The survey consisted of 15 questions in total with 7 short answer questions and 8 multiple choice. Short answer questions were designed to yield a simple yes/no response by asking “do you feel?” with a request to elaborate on the given response with no character limit imposed. Multiple choice questions were mostly yes/no with the exception of the self-identifying birthdate range question and one question regarding selection of social media platforms. Multiple choice questions were placed after short answer questions in order to break up the format with the intention of keeping respondents

engaged. I felt the placement of questions allowed for a good flow of themes in the survey with questions designed lead into each other.

Once the creation of the survey was complete, I decided to leave it open for responses for the course of two weeks. The survey was distributed to the current students and alumni of the Organizational Dynamics program at the University of Pennsylvania across email listservs. A listserv is an email list that allows for wide a distribution, in this case alumni and students of the Organizational Dynamics program. The intention of targeting these groups was cover a wide array of generational groups as well as educated individuals with diverse experiences in various organizations. Through my experience in the Organizational Dynamics program, I felt anyone affiliated with the program would be more than happy to share their experiences.

Additionally, I posted the survey in the internal chatroom for the Information Technology team at the University of Pennsylvania School Of Dental Medicine. By posting in my own organizational group, I hoped to be able to collect additional responses from the younger cohort groups, gen z and millennials. These groups make up the majority of my team and I felt this representation could possibly be lacking in the Organizational Dynamics's group.

Following the conclusion of the two weeks 54 surveys were completed with respondents nearly consistently split between the 3 largest generational groups currently in the workforce, Baby Boomers, Gen X, and Millennials. No respondents were recorded in the Silent Generation group, 76-93 years old, which was unsurprising since this group has the smallest footprint in today's workplace. Unfortunately, merely 3 respondents representing Generation Z participated in the survey. Initially I had hoped to have a larger

representation and attempted to reach this group, but considering the group is the newest in the workforce there was a limited selection. However, achieving a virtually even spread across the 3 largest generational groups in the workforce today should yield substantial data for my research question, Gen Z notwithstanding.

CHAPTER 4

DATA FINDINGS and ANALYSIS

Polling Data

My presentation began with a short overview of the concept of generational groups and some examples of how they are represented in media. Intentionally, I did not mention or display any generational stereotypes as not to affect the polling. I explained to my audience that I was seeking to uncover if our preconceptions of generational groups affect how we work together. I then moved on to the polling section of my presentation. While displaying my slides I was able to view my polling results in real time. I could clearly see the audience was engaged with my topic and more than happy to share their thoughts about generational groups. Responses populated very quickly as if these generational stereotypes came immediately to mind. The results are shared in the figures below, the larger the text of a word corresponding multiple recorded responses from unique respondents.

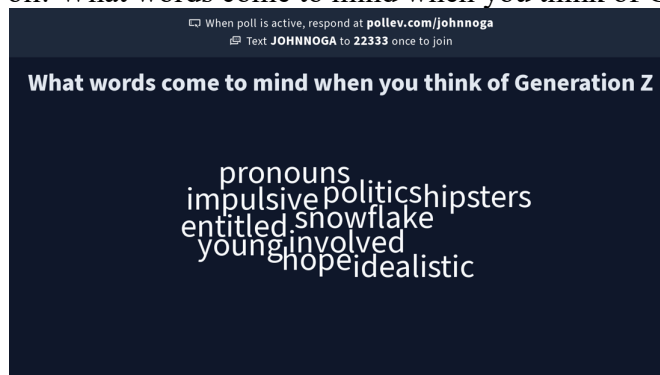
Figure 3: Poll: What words come to mind when you think of Baby Boomers



Figure 4: Poll: What words come to mind when you think of Millennials



Figure 5: Poll: What words come to mind when you think of Generation Z



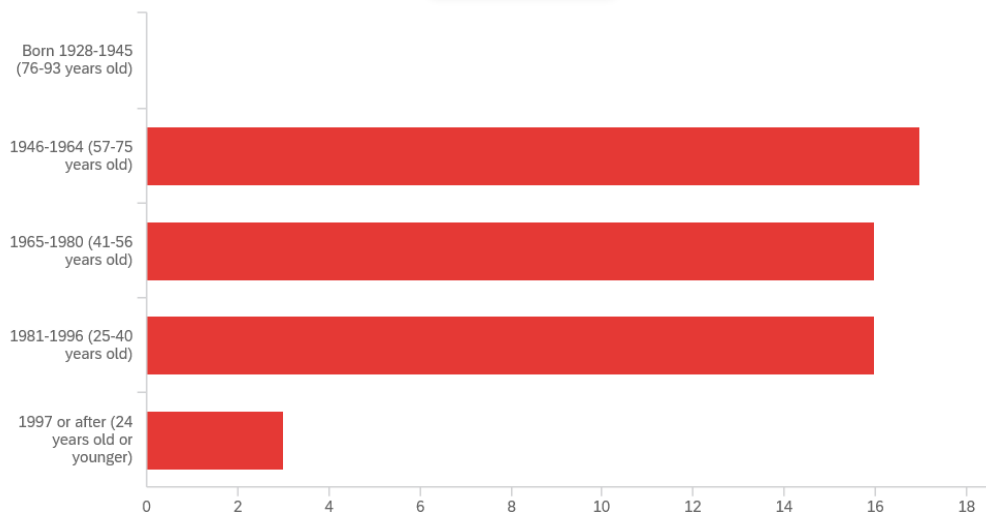
Various words were shared such as close-minded about Baby Boomers and entitled for Millennials and Gen Z. In my opinion the overwhelming majority of stereotypes shared are consistent with what seems to be the public's consensus of these groups as displayed in mass media. The data collected from this poll, although limited, effectively displayed that these stereotypes are active in our organizations and shared by multiple individuals. Furthermore, I believe that albeit limited poll sample results strengthens my

argument that intergenerational perceptions can affect how we work together and is something that needs to be addressed.

Again, I am brought back to part of my question. Where are these perceptions originating from? How is social media involved? Do they affect how we work together? Are individuals aware of these perceptions when interacting with other groups? I hoped to shed more light these questions on with my survey results.

Survey Data

The Qualtrics survey was designed to be completely anonymous with the only one self-identifying question. Respondents were asked to select their generational group by selecting one of five-year ranges commonly accepted as generational group markers. Years only and not the corresponding generational group labels were listed to as not skew any possible results. The concern was respondents possibly self-identifying as the incorrect cohort. Additionally, this was the final question before completion and submission of the survey. The generational breakdown results of survey respondents were as follows:



As displayed in the figure above, of the 52 respondents who chose to answer the question, there were 17 Baby Boomers, 16 Gen Xers, 16 Millennials, and 3 respondents from Gen Z. Overall I was satisfied with this breakdown. My results have the three largest generational cohort groups currently in the workforce at almost an identical split. Although I was disappointed with the lack of responses from Generation Z, I feel that given the group is just entering the workforce I could not have asked for a better representation of today's organization according to generational group.

Now, with having the knowledge of the generation breakdown of respondents I can better analyze the data. The survey proper began with an open-ended short answer question to establish a baseline about generational group biases. Personally, I believe these biases exist and fully expected to see this reflected in the responses. Respondents were asked *'Do you feel that there are biases against generational groups (Baby Boomers, Millennials, Gen X)? If so, can you list three or four that either you yourself feel or that you have observed in others?'* Unsurprisingly, all respondents with the

exception of two agreed that there are biases against generational groups answering “yes” to the question. Honestly, I did not expect any negative responses so it was interesting to these two recording “no” responses. Unfortunately, the respondents did not clarify why they felt this way which would have contributed some interesting data.

Common themes existed in the responses concerning observed biases mostly relating to the aforementioned collective stereotypes that exist in our society. The typical examples were shared throughout such as Millennials being lazy and Baby Boomers being more conservative. Perhaps this was best summed up by one respondent writing:

“Yes. Boomers are often very conservative and are unwilling to conform to the changing times and culture. Millennials are stereotyped as spoiled kids, and newer generations refer to them as "cringey". Millennials are also referred to as narcissistic and lazy.”

Another common theme materializing in the responses were numerous references to the perceived technology use gap between generational groups. Multiple responses mentioned that Millennials and Gen Z are often identified to be more tech savvy while Baby Boomers struggle. With one respondent seeming to sum up the consensus writing:

“Yes. There is an automatic assumption that baby boomers are unable to navigate technology and the opposite assumption is true for millennials and Gen X.”

In my opinion, assuming someone from an older cohort may lack an understanding in a subject matter can be impactful in both stereotyping and workplace treatment. This harkens back to the study from experiment published in the *Journal of Business and Psychology* where younger cohort groups would provide a worse training experience to someone from an older group due to a perceived lack of technological knowledge (McCausland et al., 2015).

Clearly from the first responses collected these generational biases exist; respondents are aware and possibly share some of these sentiments. Further responses such as “Millennials are lazy”, “Millennials are entitled, lazy, spoiled and always on their phones”, and “Baby boomers are out of touch, millennials are irresponsible” only continue to cement this conception. Now that it is revealed these feelings are out there, would anyone believe these stereotypes have any validity? I hoped to explore this with my next question.

Continuing with the short answer format, the intention of the second question was hopefully build upon the responses from the first. Having potentially hooked the respondent’s attention by asking about generational biases and examples, I then asked *‘Do you believe that stereotypes about generational groups have any validity? If so, could you briefly describe why?’* The intention was to attempt tease out if individuals felt the stereotypes they supplied have any root in reality. With 96% of respondents feeling that these biases existed and even sharing their own observations, I felt that at least some would feel they were valid.

The results regarding the legitimacy of the stereotypes were mixed, with the majority answering they felt validity existed or somewhat existed. Again, some answered no, which could be carry overs from the first question. But a few who answered “no” shared some interesting thoughts. For example one response stated “Not when applied at an individual level”. It appears as if this respondent was looking past the generational labels to see the individual. Sentiments such as these could be the key to overcoming intergenerational biases or conflict in the workplace.

The most common theme in responses was that generational stereotypes do have some root in reality. I believe one respondent summed up the sentiment of responses when stating:

Yes, I think some have some validity because they are usually born of shared experiences and real cultural differences. However, I believe that perpetuating them is unhelpful because it can cause entrenching, pitting generations against each other, and can lead to making unfair blanket assumptions about people.

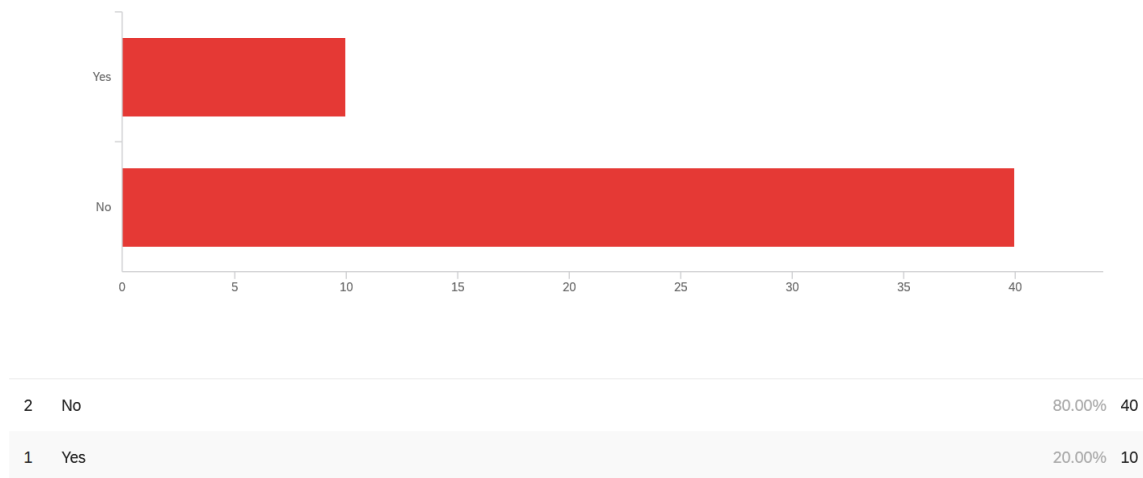
This overall belief was shared among most of the respondents. With most agreeing that these stereotypes have some validity but most feeling that they were not complete assessments and furthermore and be damaging. What I found fascinating was even this early in the questioning the subject of social media influence appeared with the following response as an example:

If there's any validity, it's because the media or other channels of communication and news perpetuate them in showing only one group of that generation. the loudest voices often take over the conversation in the public sphere and heavily influence how ppl view these generations.

Others were making this connection as well. While this respondent is focused more on news or traditional media, I feel their mention of “other channels of communication” can be linked to the social media influence, although not expressly stated.

Pivoting my line of questioning, I next focused on a fundamental piece of my question, how this affects organizations and how generational groups work together. Breaking with the short answer format respondents were presented with a simple yes or no question. “*Would you treat someone differently at work who is from another generational group based off your own perceptions of that group?*” Believing that most respondents would not flat out admit to treating someone differently based on a bias I felt there could be a small amount who would answer honestly. The results were as follows:

Figure 7 Survey Question: Would you treat someone differently at work who is from another generational group based off your own perceptions of that group?



As expected the overwhelming majority, 84%. responded “no” with only 20% responding “yes”. Given the vast majority answering “no” I believe that this may not represent the reality of what may happen in the workplace. Although the majority answered no this may arguably reflect unconscious bias can come into play. Respondents may not realize they are treating somebody differently but in reality they are. With most respondents answering they felt the generational stereotypes existed and had validity I find it difficult not to believe this does not bleed into the workplace Yet again, I am not surprised that such a direct line of questioning regarding a biases would yield such an overwhelming negative response. I feel this can also be attributed to limitation of the survey format. Results could be potentially vastly different if explored in another form such as a training experiment akin to the *Journal of Business and Psychology* study.

Continuing with the theme of intergenerational conflict in the workplace I wanted to focus on specifically on the conflict. Respondents were next asked ‘Have you

witnessed or been involved in intergenerational conflict at work? If so, could you briefly describe the interaction and your feeling as a result toward that person or their generation?' The results from the first part of the question came in at almost a 50/50 split, with negative responses not clarifying due to the nature of the question. I formatted this question with the intention of generating stories and multiple respondents did so. Most were simple anecdotes regarding personally- witnessed organizational conflict such as "Throughout my career, I have definitely experienced and observed Boomers talking down to Gen Xers or Millennials like they know more than the younger folks do." A standout example regarding generation conflict based on age was:

Yes, I have witnessed intergenerational conflicts at work where millennials grouped together and made assumptions about their older supervisor that were untrue.

This response is a perfect example of generational groups banding together in organizations. This was explored in my literature review with Moore & Krause's (2021) study where they found generational groups tended to stuck together.

Wrapping up the theme of workplace intergenerational conflict I sought to further reinforce the occurrence of cohorts banding together in the workplace. Respondents were asked "*Do you feel more likely to gravitate to members of your own generational group at work? If so, why do you think that?*" Again, following breakdown of the previous question, responses were almost 50/50 split between yes and no.

Most respondents who answered no to the question explained that they feel they work well with all groups. One respondent stating:

No, I'm pretty open minded and ty to learn from all people. I have people that work for me that are the same age - one is amazing, the other is terrible. That's not a generational problem. Nonetheless, stereotypes exists." I found this response

very interesting, the respondent did confirm they felt these stereotypes existed but from their response they were not affected by them.

Respondents who answered yes were much less shy regarding their reasoning for sticking with their cohort compared to previous explanations. Some stand-out examples included:

Absolutely. I relate more closely to members of my own generation. I know I share similar traits and skill in that regard, for example, I can assume that they engage in social media as much as I do.

Yes, simply because I think we have more in common, more shared experiences, and can better understand one another.

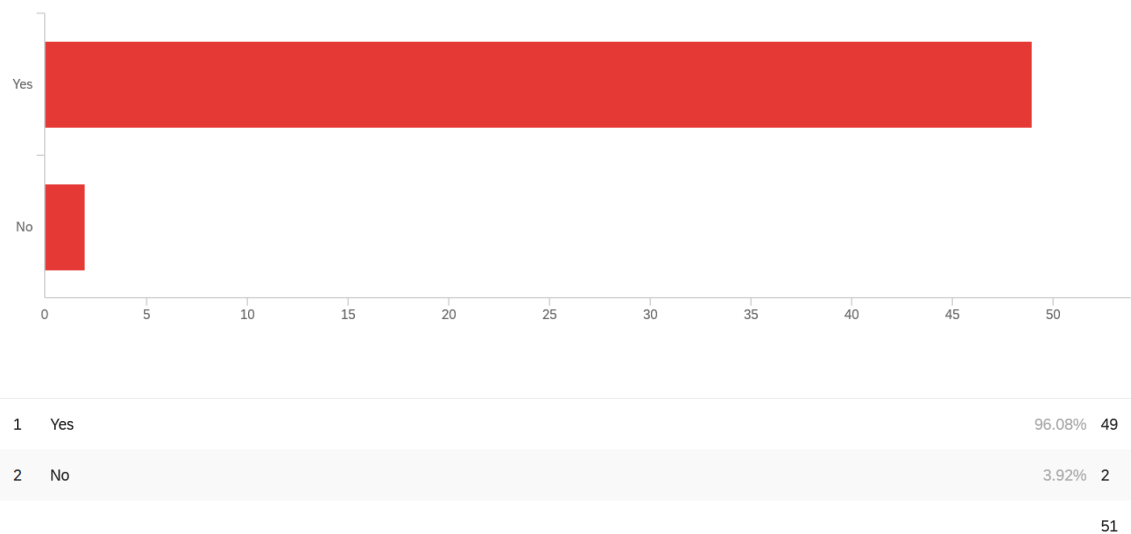
100%, we just have so much more in common. Probably more than other generations (9/11, financial crisis, cost of living changes)

The theme of relating more to your cohort due to shared experiences was prevalent in these responses. Besides year of birth another marker for generational groups is shared experiences. It was interesting to see 9/11 mentioned since there is an overall consensus that the Millennial cohort was significantly shaped by the event. Nevertheless, the data from the question further reinforces that generational groups will stick together in organizations. Again, this could be another example of something that is done unconsciously.

Data findings from this point in the survey echo the literature reviewed while researching the topic. Intergeneration conflict clearly exists in organizations and affects how we work together. Knowing this, I wanted to determine what role social media has to play in this conflict. The cornerstone of my research question is does social media play a role in generational conflict. Considering the literature exploring the prominence of #OKBoomer and #BoomerRemover, social media is rife with intergenerational conflict. But does this translate to how we work together? My next line of questioning would attempt to find a connection.

Following the numerous of short answer questions I started with a simple yes/no question. Another simple baseline question asking ‘*Do you use social media?*’

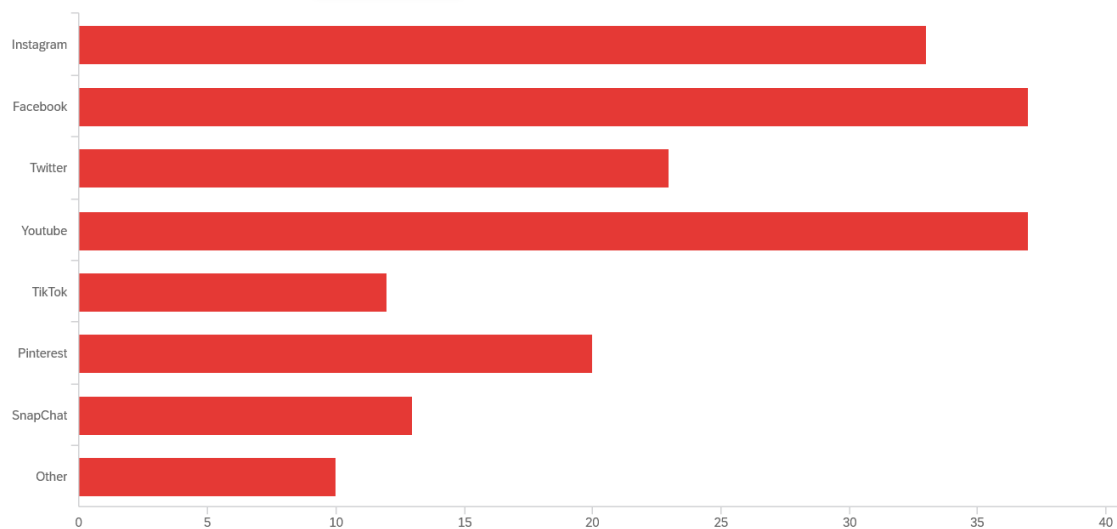
Figure 8 Survey Question: Do you use social media?



Obviously if someone could access this survey they must have some sort exposure to social media. 98% (49) respondents answered yes. Considering social media is now a part of most people’s lives it likely requires a concentrated effort to avoid. Referring back to Figure 2 by the Pew Research Center social media’s use only continues to grow year by year. Although I assumed, knowing basically all the respondents use social media, these results still lend validity to the survey and other questions on the topic.

Following up, I was interested what platforms my respondents were utilizing. I asked respondents to choose multiple answers from a list of common social media platforms shown in the figure below:

Figure 9: Survey Question: What platforms do you use (select more than one)



Predictably, Facebook was the platform of choice followed narrowly by Instagram, which is owned by Facebook, with YouTube rounding out the top three. Interestingly enough this breakdown almost completely matches data with the *Pew Research Center* with only YouTube and Facebook swapped (Auxier & Anderson, 2021).

The controversy surrounding Facebook aside, it connects individuals in a way never before seen, sometimes with unintended results. While the reviewed literature mostly explores Twitter as a haven for intergenerational conflict Facebook is not innocent in its contributions. Having respondents' social media preferences is valuable knowledge to have when exploring further responses.

Memes or posts relating to generational groups could be one of the largest contributors of conflict on social media. The literature from Skipper and Rose (2021) and Hersh (2021) exploring post such as #OKBoomer or #BoomerRemover explores this

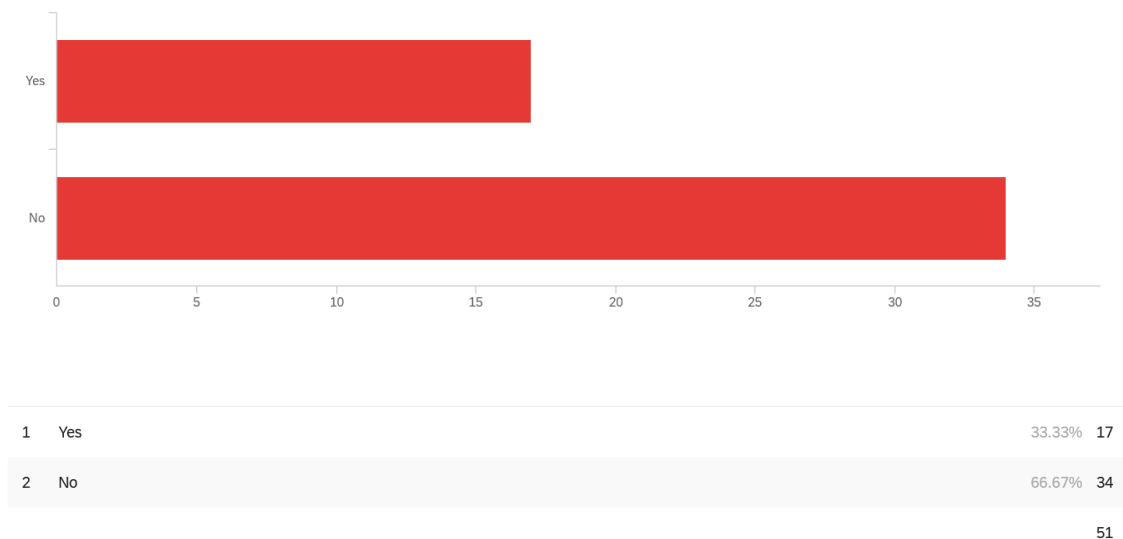
immensely. A quick look at the comment section about Boomers or Millennials will confirm evidence of dislike, disagreement and/or distrust and even disgust, teeming with conflict. I wanted to know what my respondents were witnessing on their social media platforms of choice. Specifically, respondents were asked ‘*Have you witnessed posts/memes about generational groups on social media (Boomers, Millennials, etc.)? Briefly, please describe them if you remember.*’ The majority answered “yes” to this question and shared examples complete with generational stereotypes. One response hit all the marks:

Yes. I have seen mostly negative posts about Boomers, usually making fun of them for being outdated, rigid, crabby, or even racist or intolerant of otherness. Gen Z is often portrayed as being social media obsessed and trendy beyond the point of comprehension to other generational groups. Millennials are portrayed as materialistic and "basic".

With multiple respondents collectively sharing witnessing these stereotypes this shows social media is another avenue for exposure potentially one of the largest considering its increased use. Other interesting data showed the memes/posts of generations showing superiority with “Yes. Whatever generation posts purports themselves as the superior generation”. This is nothing new, in my opinion. It’s the modern day equivalent of “back in my day”. Nevertheless I’m sure this could fuel conflict. Multiple responses mentioned #OKBoomer and #BoomerRemover such as “Yes.”Ok Boomer" took the social media world by storm as the phrase used to silence that generation in a demeaning way.” and “Yes, I have seen memes about boomers being old and wanting things done how it was done when they were younger, how millennials (and specifically Gen Zers) are "snowflakes". I have also seen "boomer remover" during the pandemic.”

With the most of the audience aware of generational posts on social media I sought follow up to uncover how this affects perception of individuals in these groups. I started with how it affects their own cohort. I specifically was interested in the concept of meta-stereotypes explored in the study by Hersh (2021). The study showed Millennials were not immune to holding biases against their own group based on stereotypes such as being self-absorbed and lady. I presented a yes/no question: “*Do you feel that social media posts about your own cohort (Millennial, Boomer, etc.) affects how you feel about your group?*” The results displayed below:

Figure 10: Survey Question: Do you feel that social media posts about your own cohort (Millennial, Boomer, etc.) affects how you feel about your group?

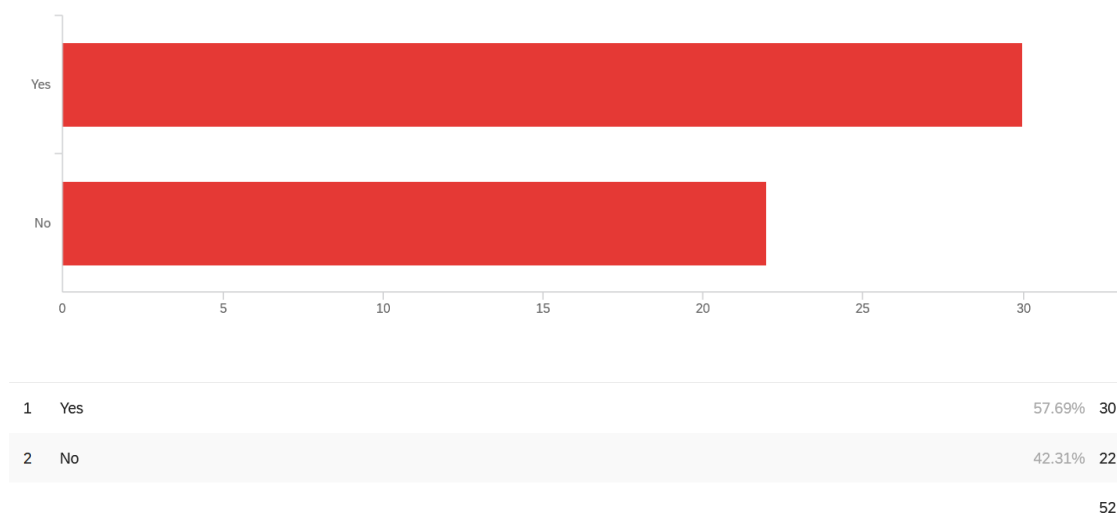


Most responded “no” (66%) with 33% answering “yes”. Removing the respondents who answered “no” to the previous question, regarding exposure to posts, the breakdown is closer to 50/50 with more “no” responses. From this data it can be argued that individuals can feel immune to the influence of social media regarding their own cohort but does not prove that they are. Although I feel with an alternate research method

or different line of questioning this result could change, potentially revealing these meta-stereotypes influence could be more prevalent.

Flipping the lens, I asked the same question but with the focus on the perception of other generational groups. With this question I was confident an identifiable shift would be noticeable with a majority of respondents would answering yes. I continued by asking *“Do you feel that social media has an effect on how you perceive other generational groups?”* Results displayed below:

Figure 11: Survey Question: “Do you feel that social media has an effect on how you perceive other generational groups?”



As expected significantly more respondents answered “yes” (57%) but it appeared not by a large margin. However, when removing respondents who answered “no” to the initial social media influence question the results shift closer to 70% answering “yes”. These results strongly indicate that individuals much more likely to have their perceptions of other generational groups influenced by social media.

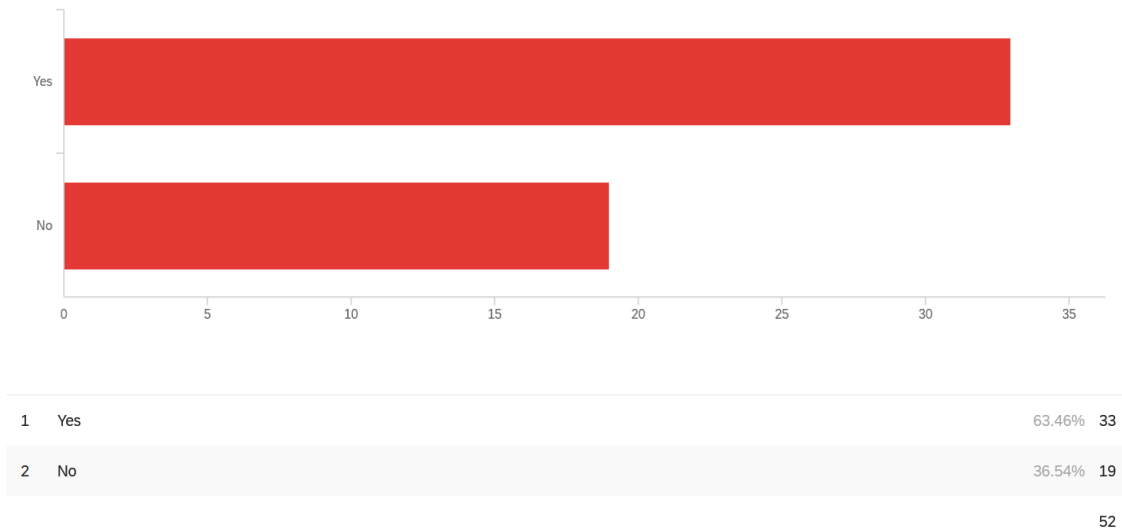
With an apparent link between social media and perceptions of generational groups revealed I now wanted to know if this affects how we work together. This is one

cornerstones of my research question and I felt there had to be a connection. I asked respondents “*Do you feel that these perceptions spills into the workplace? And if so, how?*”

Results to this question were not as clear-cut given its open-ended nature but I chose this format with the intention for explanation from respondents. Answers were varied, a large amount, around 20, felt that there was no correlation with one individual stating “No I don’t let social media influence the way I think.” But, the majority did feel that there is a definite or possible correlation.

There were many insightful responses making connections to the themes and topics I covered in this capstone. For example, regarding unconscious bias more than one person felt that this was a real issue with social media influence. One person simply stated “Yes, unconscious bias” while another expanded further stating “I’m sure that I have some unconscious bias based on media however I’m not aware of anything specific.” Clearly from the results of this question others were making the connection that social media has a clear effect on how we work together.

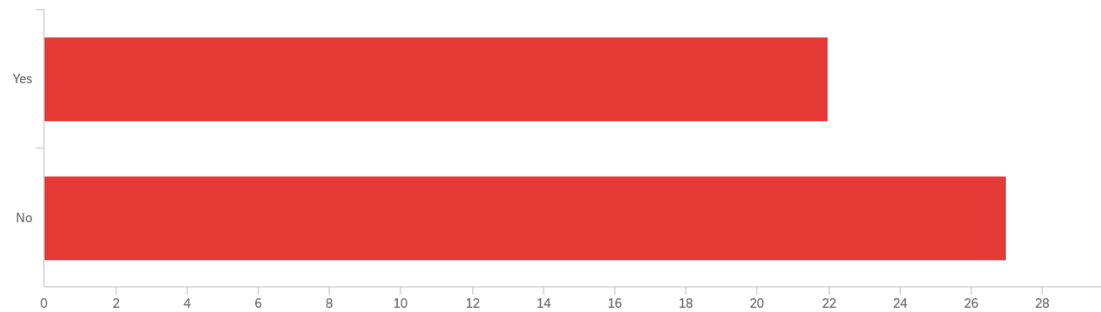
It would be impossible to research any current topic and ignore the effect the ongoing pandemic has had on any part of our lives including intergenerational relations and social media. Considering the literature I reviewed from Skipper and Rose (2021) and the #BoomerRemover hashtag I felt the Covid-19 pandemic should at least be considered a factor. I decided to ask two simple yes/no questions relating to the pandemic’s effect on intergenerational relations. The first question asked was “*Do you feel that COVID-19 pandemic has affected intergenerational relations?*” Results below:



Most individuals answered “yes” (64%) which was my expected result. Again, it is hard to find any aspect of life that has not been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. In my opinion the largest aspect of the pandemic affecting intergenerational relations was and still is the sudden boom in remote work. I have witnessed generational divides between Baby Boomers and Millennials regarding keeping a work from home culture. On the surface it appears there is a large generational divide on this topic. This is a topic that would be particularly interesting to explore on its own. Nevertheless it can be argued with certainty the pandemic has affect intergenerational relations in the workplace.

Changing the subject to social media I asked another yes/no question. I was interested if my participants saw a connection with social media. I asked “*Do you feel that COVID-19 has increased intergenerational conflict on social media?*” Results below:

Figure 13: Survey Question: Do you feel that COVID-19 has increased intergenerational conflict on social media?



1	Yes	44.90%	22
2	No	55.10%	27
			49

From all that's been written, discussed, and talked about, it would seem likely that survey respondents would similarly see a connection between the virus and intergenerational perceptions. They didn't. Although some people were aware of #BoomerRemover from previous results, clearly most did see a connection. However, I stand by my opinion that a connection still exists. Given the study by Skipper and Rose (2021) and how #BoomerRemover was directly targeted at the Baby Boomer cohort group the connection is clear.

Given the collected data it can be argued with confidence that social media can affect intergenerational relations and even affect how we work together. Knowing this, what can be done about it? With my final question I had hoped for some suggestions from the respondents. This question is perhaps the most important, removing all association with social media or other factors I simply asked "*How in your opinion can intergenerational conflict in the workplace be resolved*"?

Most every respondent had a suggestion. Simple recommendations were shared such as “Sit down face to face and talk”, “Continue working together and listening and appreciating the differences and perspectives.” and “Addressing those biases and having conversations.” Other responses were much more detailed with solutions to tackle this issue one respondent wrote:

We need forums in both the work place and our communities that get people to engage with each other. In school there were orientation programs and classes that changed every few months so we were meeting more people - that does not happen when people graduate from college and those that have graduated in recent years don't seem to have the know how to build new connections and network outside their own small circle of people they knew from school.

I could not agree more with this suggestion. Regardless of generational cohort we tend to stick with our own circles. Perhaps if organizations had opportunities for different cohorts to engage with each other this could solve several issues including unconscious biases. Pausing and looking inwards was another common suggestion with one person sharing:

By constantly reminding ourselves that while stereotypes may be rooted in some truth, that every individual person is different, and they all have different learning capacities and thresholds. Every individual has different strengths and weaknesses that may be either typical or atypical of their generation's stereotypes. So keep an open mind and try to treat everyone with the same level of respect and patience.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the purpose of this capstone was to explore if and how generational cohorts' perceptions of each other are influenced by social media and how such interactions in the workplace may be impacted. After collecting and analyzing the data I collected I feel a clear link was revealed between social media and intergeneration biases. Furthermore, the data indicates that many respondents are aware of this link, feel it can affect their perceptions, and can possibly influence how they work together.

But what can be done about these social media-influenced biases that are clearly influencing our organizational relationships? From the explored literature and the data from survey responses, several paths suggest themselves. These perceived differences and biases, whether we are aware of them or not, need further scrutiny if not more open discussion. This could mean having exercises or activities in organizations where these generational differences are discussed and brought out into the open. Perhaps they could include role playing. After all, regardless of the generational label, we all want to be treated fairly, equably, and inclusively and have our ideas and behaviors judged on the merits rather than the cohort from whence they were uttered. From that perspective, we all want the same things at the end of the day. As uncovered in the *Harvard Business Review* study, significant differences in what cohorts want from work do not seem to exist (King et al., 2019). I feel if more people were aware of this fact, look past these broad generalizations, and be willing to work together, these biases would subside drastically.

Dissecting the generational stereotypes, I feel that some to be more damaging to workplace interactions. For example, the familiar Baby Boomers the Bad with technology stereotype was mentioned by multiple respondents. Although the older cohort group, Baby Boomers and even Gen Xers, may not have been raised with social media and particularly smart phone technology, I feel this does not affect their tech ability. In fact, I have always found the younger generational groups, Millennials, and Gen Z, to be more technologically aware, able to use devices/navigate social media, but lack a fundamental understanding of the technology. In my professional career thus far, I have encountered multiple IT professionals who would be considered Baby Boomers whose technical knowledge surpassed any Millennials on their team. I realize this example is anecdotal, but I feel it represents these perceptions can often be damaging.

I believe the countless examples of posts/memes shared spread on social media do have an effect on not just generational relations but relations with each other as people. Having Facebook rank as the top social media platform from my respondents was not surprising in the least, considering it is the most used nationwide. But what I have felt about Facebook for some time appears to be coming to fruition. The various whistleblower complaints and leaks from within the company seem to confirm this, i.e., Facebook thrives on conflict, and its algorithms bring this conflict to the forefront, whether these are arguments about generational differences or topics with far worse connotations such as vaccine misinformation or political disinformation.

It can argued that the extreme polarization we face politically can be attributed to social media. With major events like the January 6th insurrection being fueled by social media, the real-world implications of the power of social media are becoming terrifying.

But what is the answer? Regulation? I don't think that's the answer, but I feel that the impact of social media needs to be addressed in organizations and in our personal lives. I can confidently say that social media will be with us as a society for a very long time, and we are just beginning to see its ramifications.

Researching and completing this capstone has revealed that these topics are currently under-researched as well as complex, emerging, and adaptive phenomena and conform to what systems pioneer and former Wharton professor Russ Ackoff calls "a mess," defined as a system of problems and opportunities for systems thinking as a strategy to make sense of the mess and "dissolve it" (Ackoff, 1981, p. 52). I hope that I have been able to bring the issues of social media influenced intergenerational biases and their effect on the workplace to other's attention. In the coming years, I feel this topic, along with social media's other influences, will only become more prevalent, and we will continue to learn more about its implications. I hope to have the opportunity to explore this concept more in the future. I can only imagine the different results of a more detailed or further reaching survey and other analytic and even systems thinking tools. If I have learned one thing from researching this topic it, would we must all take the time to pause, think, and consider if we are being influenced by what we consume on social media. While the data shows we may be aware of the influence I think if we have no idea the extent.

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