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# Memetic Narratives of Generational Conflict: The "Boomers vs. Millennials" Frame on Instagram

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**Abstract**

This article examines the "Boomers vs. Millennials" generational conflict as it is constructed within digital meme cultures on Instagram. Drawing on generational theory, media-generation research, and platform studies, it treats generational identities as socially and culturally produced rather than as purely demographic categories. The study adopts a qualitative and exploratory design based on a multilingual corpus of 60 static Instagram memes collected between May and June 2026 through purposive sampling. Memes are analysed as visual–textual artefacts through a four-stage interpretive procedure addressing visual composition and templates, thematic coding, framing strategies, and discursive registers. Five first-order thematic categories are organised into four higher-order analytical dimensions: digital literacy gaps; economic precarity and material inequality; intergenerational responsibility for structural crises; and identity, recognition, and generational boundary-work. The findings show that memes condense structural inequalities into simplified oppositional narratives and use irony, satire, and expectation reversal to redistribute responsibility between generations. Rather than empirically measuring recommendation systems or algorithmic amplification, the article interprets these patterns within the broader platform environments in which memetic communication circulates. The study concludes that memes contribute to generational othering by reinforcing symbolic boundaries while simultaneously providing a space in which dominant narratives of merit, responsibility, and intergenerational justice can be contested.

**Keywords:** boomers; millennials; generational conflict; internet memes; Instagram; media literacy; platformisation; generational othering

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, the conflict between Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964) and Millennials (born between 1981 and 1996) has become a highly visible form of symbolic polarisation in contemporary public discourse (Bristow, 2015). Although apparently organised around age differences, this conflict is also produced through media narratives and participatory practices that circulate stereotypical representations of each cohort. Digital memes are particularly relevant in this process because they compress complex social tensions into recognisable, repeatable, and easily shareable forms.

The labels Boomers and Millennials are culturally charged constructs rooted in different historical experiences. Baby Boomers are commonly associated with post-war prosperity and relative social stability, whereas Millennials are frequently represented through precarity, uncertainty, and intensive engagement with digital technologies. These representations

intersect with structural changes including the 2008 financial crisis, labour-market precarisation, widening inequality, barriers to homeownership, and the diffusion of digital media into everyday life (Bristow, 2019; Furlong & Cartmel, 2007). Legacy media and digital platforms translate these differences into simplified narratives based on stereotypes, moral attributions, and oppositional identities (White, 2013; Bristow, 2016).

The Boomers–Millennials divide is therefore approached here as a symbolic conflict rather than as the direct expression of demographic difference. The article asks how Instagram memes frame, negotiate, and circulate this opposition, and how comic and visual conventions transform structural inequalities and cultural disagreements into narratives of generational responsibility and blame.

### 1.1. Theoretical Framework

The concept of generation has long occupied a central position in sociological theory because it provides a framework for understanding the relationship between biographical experience, historical change, and the construction of collective identities (Eyerman & Turner, 1998). Over the twentieth century, the concept progressively moved beyond purely biological or demographic definitions to acquire a broader historical, cultural, and symbolic meaning. In this perspective, a generation is not simply a cohort of individuals born within the same chronological period, but a group whose members share formative historical experiences and common cultural horizons that shape their interpretations of social reality (Mannheim, 1928).

Mannheim's seminal essay "Das Problem der Generationen" (1928) marks the decisive theoretical shift from chronological cohorts to generations as historically situated social formations. Generational belonging emerges when people occupying a comparable historical position interpret formative events through shared cultural horizons. His distinction between *Generationslagerung* (generational location) and *Generationseinheit* (generation unit) is crucial: sharing a birth period creates only the possibility of a common generational location, while generational units arise through shared interpretations and orientations. Generations are therefore produced through the interaction between historical experience and collective meaning.

Bourdieu (1993) complicates this perspective by rejecting the assumption that generations are internally homogeneous. Experiences associated with youth and ageing differ according to class position, education, cultural capital, gender, and other forms of social stratification. Age cannot therefore operate as an autonomous explanatory variable. This caution is particularly important when media discourse turns broad cohort labels into apparently uniform cultural identities.

Contemporary research on generations has increasingly focused on the structural inequalities shaping relations between cohorts. Labour-market precarisation, declining social mobility, unequal access to housing, and the growing role of inherited wealth have become central to analyses of generational change (Peugny & Van de Velde, 2013; Woodman & Wyn, 2015; Roberts & France, 2021). Younger cohorts often face less favourable economic prospects than those experienced by their parents, challenging assumptions of continuous intergenerational progress (Chauvel, 2010; Peugny, 2013).

At the same time, generational conflict should not be treated deterministically. Generations are relational and narrative constructions that intersect with multiple social cleavages and are continuously negotiated through institutions, media representations, and public discourse (Dubet, 2010; Comaroff & Comaroff, 2023).

Media are central to this negotiation because generational differences are not only experienced but also narrated and made culturally intelligible. Colombo (2012) shows how

shared media environments contribute to collective memories, languages, and interpretive communities, linking generational identity to both historical experience and media change.

From broadcast media to digital platforms, different media environments organise social experience in distinct ways. The transition towards fragmented and personalised media repertoires can weaken the idea of a single shared generational experience while simultaneously providing new symbolic resources through which cohorts recognise and represent themselves (Colombo, 2012).

Contemporary media discourse nevertheless relies heavily on labels such as Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z (Duffy, 2021). These classifications can make social change legible, but they also homogenise diverse experiences and obscure differences in class, gender, education, and cultural context. In this article, generational labels are therefore treated as discursive devices that organise expectations and stereotypes rather than as self-evident social groups.

Generational tensions can consequently be understood as conflicts in which material inequalities and struggles over symbolic recognition become mutually reinforcing. Sociological theories of conflict highlight how group boundaries are built through competition over resources, identities, and legitimate interpretations of social reality. Applied to generations, this perspective directs attention to the relationship between structural disadvantage and culturally mediated representations rather than to age differences alone.

Galtung's (1969) conflict triangle offers a concise framework for connecting these levels. Contradictions concern incompatible interests and unequal access to resources; attitudes concern the stereotypes, emotions, and moral judgements attached to social groups; behaviours concern the practices through which conflict becomes visible. In generational relations, economic insecurity and unequal opportunities can thus feed resentment and reciprocal delegitimation, which are subsequently expressed in public discourse and memetic communication.

Recent empirical work supports this relational interpretation. Francioli et al. (2024) identify an asymmetric pattern of perceived threats: Millennials tend to frame Boomers in relation to economic resources and political power, whereas Boomers more often perceive younger cohorts as challenging established cultural values. Such asymmetries help explain why generational conflict combines material claims with moralised stereotypes.

Media representations translate these contradictions and attitudes into recurrent public narratives. Generational labels simplify difference, while politicised issues such as climate change provide visible arenas in which responsibility is attributed across cohorts (Van de Velde, 2023). Galtung's framework is therefore used here as an interpretive bridge between structural tensions, symbolic representations, and the communicative practices through which conflict is enacted.

### *1.2. Literature Review*

Contemporary intergenerational conflict, including meme wars and the Ok Boomer phenomenon, can be understood as a form of mediatised social conflict. Digital platforms do not simply host pre-existing tensions: their affordances, metrics, governance arrangements, and systems of visibility shape how public narratives are produced and circulated. Recent work on the platformisation of the public sphere emphasises the interaction between platform infrastructures, actors, and narratives in the formation of polarised communication (Boccia Artieri et al., 2025). This perspective complements broader accounts of deep mediatization and digital communication (Hepp, 2020; Bentivegna & Boccia Artieri, 2019).

Platformisation also intersects with participatory culture. Jenkins (2006) showed that media convergence involves not only technological change but new forms of participation in which users circulate, reinterpret, and recombine cultural materials. Memes exemplify

this logic: they are iterative and easily reproducible cultural forms that depend on shared references and collective transformation. Generation consequently becomes a performative and communicative category enacted through everyday platform practices rather than a fixed demographic attribute (Airoldi, 2024; Shifman, 2013; Wiggins & Bowers, 2015).

Research on digital memes has accordingly moved beyond treating them as mere entertainment. Memes are cultural artefacts that condense socially shared meanings while enabling processes of adaptation, remix, and circulation (Shifman, 2013). Their communicative force derives from the combination of repetition and variation, through which familiar stereotypes can be both reproduced and contested. In the case of generational conflict, this mechanism makes figures such as the "nostalgic Boomer" or the "fragile Millennial" immediately legible within online culture (Wiggins & Bowers, 2015; Aglioti Colombini, 2025).

The meaning of memes cannot be separated from the infrastructures through which they circulate. Rogers and Giorgi (2024) show that meme production, collection, and circulation are shaped by platform affordances and architectures. This does not mean that the present study empirically measures platform algorithms; rather, platform studies provide the contextual framework for interpreting the communicative environment in which the analysed memes become visible and shareable.

A media-generation perspective further cautions against reducing differences in media use to age alone. Vittadini et al. (2013) argue that media representations, repertoires, and formative media experiences contribute to the social construction of generational identity. Earlier accounts of the "digital generation" associated digital environments with distinctive learning and multitasking practices (Brown, 2000), but subsequent research has shown substantial variation within cohorts. Longitudinal evidence also indicates that media habits reflect both generational socialisation and changes across the life course (Westlund & Weibull, 2013). Generational media practices should therefore be understood as historically situated and internally differentiated rather than technologically predetermined.

This point is especially relevant to media and information literacy. The distinction between "digital natives" and "digital immigrants" (Prensky, 2001) has been criticised for assuming uniform competence among younger users. Hargittai (2010), for example, demonstrates substantial differences in digital skills within the so-called net generation, while van Dijk (2020) situates digital competence within broader inequalities of access, resources, and skills. Recent intergenerational research also suggests that media and information literacy can be developed through reciprocal learning rather than mapped straightforwardly onto age cohorts (Yépez Reyes & López-Paredes, 2026). In the present study, "digital native" and "digital immigrant" are therefore treated as culturally circulating stereotypes that memes may mobilise, not as analytical categories adopted by the authors.

Differences in meme production and interpretation nonetheless remain culturally significant. Giorgi (2026) identifies distinct memetic grammars associated with generational belonging and different forms of digital literacy, including contingency, nostalgia, and interaction. Other studies emphasise the role of contextual resonance, irony, repetition, and remixability in transforming memes into shared vehicles of identity negotiation and social discontent (Arrobo-Agila et al., 2025; Hassan, 2023). These findings reinforce the need to analyse both the content of generational memes and the semiotic conventions through which that content becomes recognisable.

Among generational memes, Ok Boomer is an emblematic case. Initially used as an ironic response to paternalistic attitudes attributed to older generations, the expression rapidly acquired a broader cultural and moral meaning. "Boomer" came to signify not only membership in a birth cohort but a stereotyped orientation associated with resistance to change, nostalgia, and the delegitimation of younger people's claims (Lim & Lemanski, 2020; Anderson, 2022). Counter-narratives similarly portray younger generations as fragile,

technologically dependent, or insufficiently committed to values such as hard work and sacrifice.

Taken together, this scholarship suggests that meme wars operate as symbolic arenas in which generational identities are constructed, negotiated, and contested. They translate disagreements over resources, values, competence, and responsibility into competing semiotic repertoires and recognisable oppositions between "us" and "them".

Despite the growing literature on digital memes and generational conflict, less attention has been devoted to how Instagram memes stabilise the symbolic opposition between Boomers and Millennials through recurring thematic and visual frames. This article addresses that gap through an exploratory qualitative analysis of a multilingual corpus, focusing on the ways intergenerational conflict is framed and made communicatively legible rather than claiming statistical or cross-national representativeness.

## 2. Materials and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative and exploratory research design based on a corpus of 60 Instagram memes related to intergenerational relations and conflict, collected between May and June 2026 through purposive sampling. The study is designed for close interpretive comparison rather than statistical representativeness. The corpus was collected manually through the Instagram search interface. Searches were conducted using the following keywords and hashtags: "okboomer," "millennials," "boomers," "boomersvsmillennials," "boomersmeme," and "millennialsmeme." Hashtags were used as retrieval devices but were not themselves included in the interpretive coding. No predefined accounts were used as sampling sources. Memes were included when they made explicit or implicit reference to Baby Boomers, Millennials, or conflict between these two generational groups. Memes published by accounts clearly associated with commercial initiatives were excluded, as were memes whose primary generational opposition did not involve Boomers and Millennials. Memes in which other generations, such as Generation X, appeared only as secondary actors relative to the Boomer–Millennial frame were nonetheless retained. When the same meme was reposted by multiple accounts, only one instance was retained in the corpus. The resulting $N = 60$ is therefore treated as an analytically bounded corpus appropriate to the exploratory aims of the study, rather than as a representative sample of Instagram meme culture.

The corpus consists primarily of static memes in English and Italian, with a small residual portion in French and Spanish. Specifically, 49 memes are in English, 8 in Italian, and 3 in French or Spanish. Language was not treated as an analytical variable, as the study does not aim to compare linguistic or national contexts. The linguistic distribution is therefore reported only as a descriptive characteristic of the corpus. The unit of analysis is the meme artefact itself, understood as the visual image together with any text embedded in that image. Post captions, hashtags, comments, and engagement metrics were therefore excluded because they belong to the wider Instagram post ecology rather than to the bounded unit analysed here. This choice is addressed explicitly as a limitation below.

The analysis treats memes as cultural and communicative artefacts through which meanings of generation are negotiated and circulated (Shifman, 2013; Wiggins & Bowers, 2015). It combines thematic and framing analysis with attention to visual-semiotic features, including composition, template conventions, intertextual references, visual typification, and the relationship between embedded text and image.

The analytical procedure was organised into four sequential but iterative phases, allowing thematic, framing, discursive, and visual observations to inform one another during interpretation.

In the first phase, each meme was decomposed into its visual and textual elements. The analysis considered image composition, recurring templates, character or figure positioning, culturally recognisable references, visual contrasts, and the internal textual layer. Particular attention was paid to relations of reinforcement, contradiction, hyperbole, or expectation reversal between image and text, so that the visual layer was treated as constitutive of meaning rather than as a simple illustration of the punchline.

In the second phase, inductive thematic coding identified five first-order categories: (1) technological gap and media literacy; (2) labour and precarity; (3) housing and economic conditions; (4) climate and intergenerational responsibility; and (5) identity, mental health, and rights. For analytical presentation, these five categories were subsequently organised into four higher-order dimensions: digital literacy gaps; economic precarity and material inequality (combining labour/precarity with housing/economic conditions); intergenerational responsibility for structural crises; and identity, recognition, and generational boundary-work. References to so-called "digital natives" and "digital immigrants" are coded as emic stereotypes appearing in generational discourse, not adopted as explanatory categories (Prensky, 2001; Hargittai, 2010).

The third phase focused on framing strategies, identifying recurrent devices such as expectation or blame reversal, comparative typification, and systemic responsibilisation. These frames indicate how memes assign causality, moral responsibility, victimhood, and legitimacy within intergenerational conflict.

The fourth phase classified discursive registers, distinguishing irony, explicit social critique, sarcasm, nostalgia, and hybrid forms such as melancholic or disenchanted irony. Coding was conducted iteratively and comparatively by the two researchers. As the analysis was conducted collaboratively, coding decisions were discussed throughout the analytical process, and no substantive discrepancies emerged between the two researchers' interpretations.

The study therefore aims to identify recurrent interpretive patterns within a bounded qualitative corpus rather than to produce an exhaustive taxonomy or population estimate. For the purposes of the coding matrix, each case was assigned one primary thematic category, one dominant framing strategy, and one predominant discursive register, while acknowledging possible secondary characteristics. The descriptive distribution reported in Table 1 is intended to make the relationship between the coding structure and the illustrative examples transparent.

**Table 1.** Relationship between first-order thematic categories and higher-order analytical dimensions in the corpus.

| First-Order Thematic Category | Higher-Order Analytical Dimension | *N* of Memes |
|---|---|---|
| Technological gap and media literacy | Digital literacy gaps | $n = 14$ |
| Labour and precarity | Economic precarity and material inequality | $n = 8$ |
| Housing and economic conditions | Economic precarity and material inequality | $n = 6$ |
| Climate and intergenerational responsibility | Intergenerational responsibility for structural crises | $n = 5$ |
| Identity, mental health, and rights | Identity, recognition, and generational boundary-work | $n = 27$ |

Note: The distribution of dominant framing strategies in the corpus is as follows: comparative typification ($n = 31$), expectation/blame reversal ($n = 20$), and systemic responsibilisation ($n = 9$). The complete case-level coding scheme, including discursive registers, is provided as Supplementary Material.

## 3. Results

The analysis of the 60 selected memes reveals five first-order thematic categories organised into four higher-order dimensions: digital literacy gaps ($n = 14$); economic

precarity and material inequality ($n$ = 14); intergenerational responsibility for structural crises ($n$ = 5); and identity, recognition, and generational boundary-work ($n$ = 27) (Table 1). The distinction between five coding categories and four analytical dimensions reflects the aggregation of labour/precarity ($n$ = 8) and housing/economic conditions ($n$ = 6) within a broader material-inequality dimension. Identity, recognition, and generational boundary-work constitutes the single largest and most internally heterogeneous cluster, followed by digital literacy and material inequality, while the explicit attribution of responsibility for structural crises is comparatively infrequent. This distribution suggests that, within the sampled corpus, generational antagonism is elaborated less through direct causal indictment than through the everyday registers of technological competence, material comparison, and, above all, contested identity.

The corpus repeatedly constructs generational difference through media use, digital competence, and critical information practices ($n$ = 14). Rather than treating younger users as inherently competent "digital natives", the memes mobilise this culturally familiar opposition as a stereotype to be reproduced, exaggerated, or challenged. Three framing strategies recur within this cluster: the ironic reversal of boomer complaints about youthful technology-dependence into demonstrations of boomer incompetence, typically through an "X/also X" hypocrisy template; the depiction of older users as unable to perform routine digital operations (cash machines, passwords, smartphones); and the portrayal of boomers as credulous consumers of online misinformation and "fake news". Several examples therefore move beyond technical skill towards media literacy, misinformation, and the capacity to evaluate content critically, illustrating how assumptions about digital competence become resources for generational typification (Hargittai, 2010; Yépez Reyes & López-Paredes, 2026).

Figure 1 illustrates this mechanism through a reaction-image structure. The upper caption assigns a general behavioural disposition to Boomers, while the close-up facial expression and the emphatic embedded phrase "It's Real" visually condense credulity into a single, confident response. The irony depends on the contrast between certainty at the visual level and the accusation of insufficient critical judgement at the textual level. The template therefore does more than describe older users as vulnerable to misinformation: it visually typifies them as simultaneously confident and credulous, exemplifying the misinformation-credulity strategy that recurs across the digital-literacy cluster. This comparative framing shifts the generational divide from technical access to critical media and information literacy, while also reproducing an age-based stereotype about evaluative competence.




**Figure 1.** Meme on generational conflict and media literacy.

A second thematic cluster concerns labour conditions, housing, and economic precarity, which are analytically grouped under material inequality ($n$ = 14; labour/precarity $n$ = 8, housing/economic conditions $n$ = 6). The memes depict unstable employment, insufficient wages, restricted access to homeownership, and delayed economic autonomy. Their recurrent framing strategies include stark numerical juxtapositions of past affordable house prices against present prices, rents, and student debt; the subversion and ridicule of the "stop buying coffee/lattes" trope; the reframing of the accusation that "young people don't want to work" as a matter of employer exploitation; and the attribution of unaffordability to structural and monetary factors rather than to individual spending. Comparison with previous generations is central to this frame: the capacity to purchase a home, establish a stable career, or attain financial independence is represented as less accessible to younger cohorts. Precarity is thus framed as a structural condition rather than an individual failure.

A third dimension concerns the attribution of responsibility for structural crises and, notably, is the least frequent in the corpus ($n$ = 5). When it does appear, it assigns older generations historical accountability for issues such as climate change, economic inequality, and welfare retrenchment. The characteristic strategies are inheritance or gift metaphors that depict a degraded planet handed to the young, blame-shifting reversals (as in the "weak men create hard times" template turned back against its originators), and hypocrisy contrasts in which boomers are shown resisting the very changes that would benefit future generations. Generational conflict is thereby moralised through blame attribution: diffuse structural processes are translated into identifiable generational agents to whom responsibility can be attached. That this explicit moralisation is comparatively rare is itself significant, indicating that in most of the corpus responsibility is implied through comparison rather than asserted through direct indictment.

The fourth dimension involves identity, rights, mental health, and political recognition, and is by a wide margin the most numerous ($n$ = 27). It is also the most internally varied. Its recurrent strategies range from the ironic reappropriation of stigmatising labels such as the "snowflake generation", turned into resources for self-representation, to the defence of LGBTQ+ visibility and gender-inclusive language, the assertion of self-worth and mental health independent of external validation, and the mockery of values coded as reactionary, sexist, or "retrograde". Alongside these substantive claims, the cluster also absorbs the large body of memes that perform generational boundary-work more than a specific rights claim: the "ok boomer" catchphrase functioning as a dismissive marker, generational-comparison grids, and aging or nostalgia-based self-identification. Such memes contest the authority of older cohorts to define the legitimacy of younger people's identities and claims; at the same time, because so many of them operate as compact boundary-marking dismissals, they reinforce the binary Boomer/Millennial structure discussed below in relation to Generation X.

Across these thematic dimensions, recurrent framing strategies structure the assignment of causality and responsibility. Expectation reversal challenges established generational narratives; comparative typification builds legible oppositions between cohorts; and systemic responsibilisation reframes unemployment, housing difficulties, or economic insecurity as consequences of broader socio-economic transformations rather than individual shortcomings.

Figure 2 makes this process visible through a vertically organised comparison between "my parents at my age" and "me at my age". The upper panel associates an older generational type with a couple, a house, and a brief affirmative exchange, producing an image of attainable adulthood and material stability. The lower panel isolates a younger figure beside an inexpensive cable and an exaggerated statement of financial distress. Repetition of the phrase "at my age" establishes formal equivalence between the two panels, while the disproportion between a house and a low-cost consumer item breaks that equivalence

and generates the comic effect. The stylised figures function as generic generational types rather than individual characters; the spatial separation, contrasting objects, and hyperbolic price comparison translate abstract changes in wages, living costs, and homeownership into an immediately legible visual opposition.

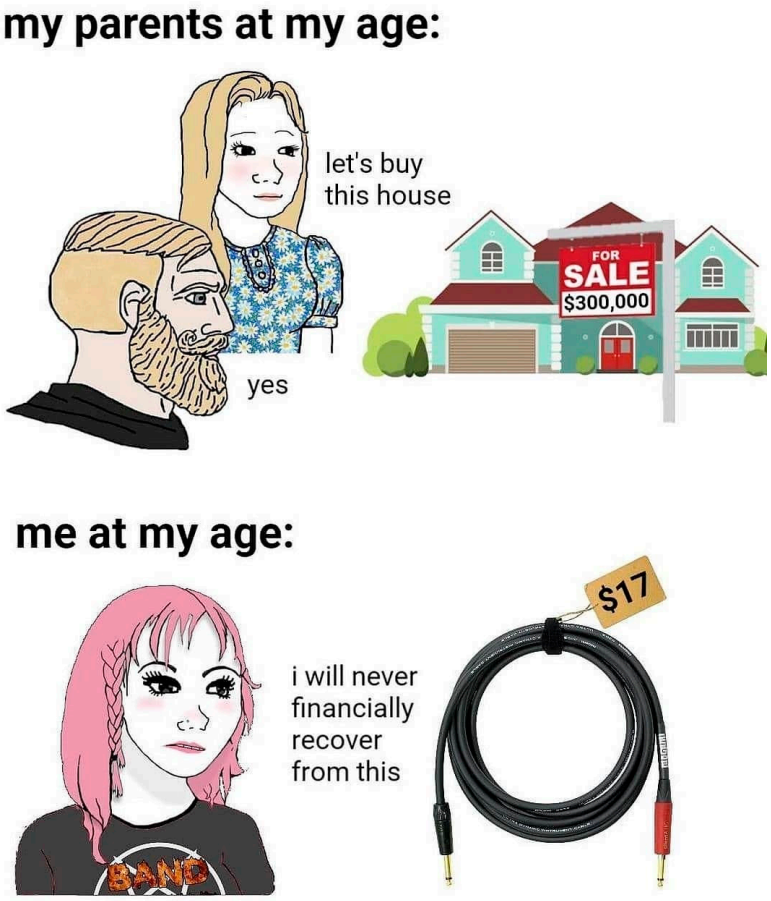



**Figure 2.** Memetic representation of economic inequalities between generations.

Irony is the dominant discursive register across the illustrative material. It can reinforce generational belonging by turning shared experiences into recognisable jokes, but it can also intensify conflict by exposing perceived inequalities and contradictions. Sarcasm and disenchanted irony are particularly visible in memes dealing with work, precarity, and future prospects.

Berger's (1997) account of the comic helps explain this double function. Humour introduces distance from the taken-for-granted social order, making apparently natural arrangements appear contingent and open to reinterpretation. In generational memes, laughter can therefore expose the historical character of norms concerning merit, adulthood, work, and economic independence.

Expectation reversal, parody, and exaggeration transform this distance into symbolic critique. Comic forms reconnect apparently individual experiences with structural conditions, allowing personal frustration to be narrated as a shared generational condition rather than as private failure.

Satire intensifies this mechanism by directing humour towards a target. In the present corpus, the target may be a generation, a moral stereotype, or a social arrangement associated with perceived privilege and responsibility. The comic does not neutralise conflict; it makes conflict communicable through compressed and shareable forms.

Memes can thus operate as devices of social reflexivity through which precarity, inequality, and responsibility are recoded into familiar visual narratives. This mechanism is central to the transition from structural complexity to generational blaming analysed below.

Generation X occupies a distinctive position within these representations. Although the conflict is primarily organised as a binary opposition between Baby Boomers and Millennials, Generation X appears in several memes as a peripheral or lateral actor, frequently positioned as an observer rather than a direct participant.

Figure 3 uses a widely recognisable cinematic still to stage this position. A solitary figure stands calmly before an environment dominated by fire and destruction, while the overlaid text explicitly reframes the scene as a "Boomer vs. Millennials" conflict observed by Generation X. The image therefore supplies an intertextual vocabulary of chaos and detached spectatorship that the caption reassigns to generational relations.

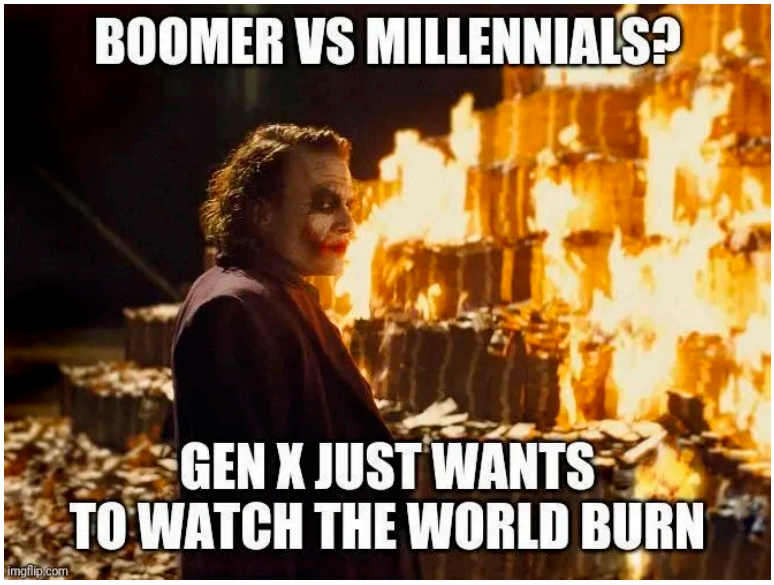



**Figure 3.** Meme portraying Generation X as an indifferent observer of the Boomer–Millennial conflict.

The visual layer is crucial to the joke. The static posture of the observing figure contrasts with the high-intensity background of flames, producing a tension between environmental chaos and personal detachment. The macro-style text at the top and bottom anchors this cinematic image to the generational frame and converts an existing scene into a typification of Generation X as cynical, disenchanted, and external to the main conflict. Irony therefore emerges through intertextual recognition as well as through the punchline itself.

This representation is analytically significant because it defines the conflict selectively rather than exhaustively. Generation X occupies a liminal position, neither fully associated with the historical responsibility attributed to Baby Boomers nor with the structural disadvantage claimed by Millennials. Its relative exclusion from blame and claim-making helps stabilise the two antagonistic poles around which the meme war is organised.

This marginalisation also illustrates the simplification logic of memetic communication. Complex intergenerational relations are compressed into highly legible oppositions, while intermediate positions are backgrounded. Generation X thus functions as an "excluded third" whose peripheral presence makes the central binary even more visible.

Within the analysed corpus, this selective representation creates a hierarchy of narrative visibility: Boomers and Millennials occupy the dominant antagonistic positions, whereas intermediate cohorts are less central to the symbolic organisation of conflict. This finding concerns the representational structure of the sampled memes; it should not be

interpreted as evidence of algorithmically produced visibility, which was not measured in this study.

Overall, the findings show that memes provide a compact symbolic space for elaborating generational conflict. Through humour, visual typification, intertextual references, and blame attribution, they translate experiences of uncertainty, inequality, cultural distance, and social change into collective narratives that are easily recognisable and contestable.

## 4. Discussion

The findings suggest that memes about Baby Boomers and Millennials are not merely episodic humorous content. They function as cultural devices through which generational identities are produced, negotiated, and rendered visible in oppositional terms. In line with Shifman (2013), memes condense complex social meanings into shareable narratives; consistent with Bristow (2015, 2019), the analysed material also shows how generational labels organise attributions of responsibility, privilege, and blame. The opposition between Boomers and Millennials therefore appears as a symbolic polarisation grounded in stereotypical representations rather than as a direct reflection of age differences. Notably, this polarisation seems to be carried less by explicit indictment than by the everyday registers of identity, material comparison, and digital competence: within the corpus, identity, recognition, and generational boundary-work forms the most numerous cluster, while the direct attribution of responsibility for structural crises is comparatively rare, suggesting that the generational divide tends to be enacted through boundary-marking and typification, with explicit blame appearing to operate as an underlying register more often than as an overt surface form.

Material inequalities are a recurrent and salient axis of this symbolic opposition. Difficulties in accessing housing, labour precarity, and declining expectations of economic mobility are recurrently associated with younger cohorts, while older generations are framed as beneficiaries of previous socio-economic arrangements or as historically responsible for climate degradation, wealth concentration, and welfare retrenchment. The memes translate these structural differences into morally legible generational positions, even when responsibility is implied through comparison rather than asserted outright.

Douglas's (1992) concept of blaming, recently revisited by Camorrino (2024), helps interpret this translation. Blame attribution reduces complexity by attaching responsibility to identifiable social categories. In the corpus, labour precarity, housing crises, climate change, and intergenerational inequality become narratively manageable when they are assigned to "Boomers" or represented as burdens inherited by "Millennials". Importantly, this blaming rarely takes the form of an explicit causal accusation: the relative scarcity of memes that directly moralise responsibility for structural crises would suggest that blame tends to operate implicitly, through material comparison and identity-based demarcation, more often than through overt indictment, remaining embedded in oppositional typifications rather than concentrated in explicit charges.

Galtung's (1969) conflict triangle further links structural contradiction to attitudes and communicative behaviour. Unequal access to resources feeds resentment and mutual delegitimation, while memetic representation converts these attitudes into visible cultural practices. Francioli et al.'s (2024) model of asymmetric threat perception is consistent with this pattern: Millennials primarily frame older cohorts through resource distribution and power, whereas Boomers are often represented as construing younger cohorts as threats to established cultural values.

Mannheim's (1928) theory also clarifies how biographical experiences acquire collective meaning. Generational location does not automatically produce a coherent identity; shared interpretations and communicative practices contribute to the formation of genera-

tional units. Memes can participate in this process by translating experiences of precarity, frustration, or cultural distance into repeatable narratives. In this sense, generational identity is enacted through communicative repertoires rather than simply expressed as a pre-existing demographic condition (Airoldi, 2024). The prominence of identity-related framing in the corpus is consistent with this reading: generational belonging appears to be performed above all through claims about values, recognition, and legitimacy, rather than through explicit economic or causal argument.

Platform studies provide an important contextual lens for these processes. Algorithms, metrics, affordances, and governance systems structure visibility and attention in digital environments (Gillespie, 2014; Bucher, 2018; van Dijck, 2013; Boccia Artieri et al., 2025). However, the present study does not analyse recommendation systems, reach, engagement metrics, or circulation trajectories. It therefore cannot demonstrate that algorithms amplified the specific generational narratives identified in the corpus. The findings are instead situated within platform environments in which such mechanisms may condition visibility and circulation.

This distinction is important for the interpretation of symbolic polarisation. The corpus demonstrates how memes construct oppositional generational categories; whether particular frames receive greater algorithmic visibility remains an empirical question for future research. Studies combining content analysis with engagement data, recommendation pathways, or platform-native metrics could test this relationship directly (Van Bavel et al., 2021; Milner, 2016).

Irony is a key mechanism through which these oppositions are re-elaborated. Expectation reversal can redistribute responsibility by reframing conditions commonly attributed to individual failure as consequences of broader socio-economic transformations. This mechanism is compatible with Giorgi's (2026) account of memetic grammars, in which contingency, nostalgia, and interaction provide different cultural repertoires for interpreting the relationship between past, present, and social change.

The Ok Boomer expression exemplifies this symbolic transformation. "Boomer" can lose its strict demographic meaning and become a moral–cultural label associated with resistance to change, nostalgia, or the delegitimation of younger generations' claims (Lim & Lemanski, 2020). This semantic shift reinforces the interpretation of generational categories as tools of social classification rather than neutral descriptors. It may also help explain why identity-related framing is so frequent in the corpus: much of the boundary-work between "us" and "them" appears to be accomplished through compact, dismissive markers of this kind, which perform generational demarcation without necessarily articulating an explicit claim about material responsibility.

Meme wars can therefore be understood as a form of generational othering in which symbolic boundaries between "us" and "them" are constructed and stabilised. Memes reinforce collective belonging and moral responsibility, but they can also expose and contest the structural assumptions embedded in dominant accounts of merit, adulthood, and intergenerational justice.

Generation X provides an important qualification to this binary logic. Its representation as a detached observer shows that meme wars selectively foreground particular cohorts rather than mirroring the full demographic structure of society. The symbolic centrality of Boomers and Millennials is therefore itself an outcome of narrative simplification within the analysed material.

Taken together, these findings support the interpretation of memes as cultural devices of blaming and narrative condensation. They simplify socio-economic complexity by attaching responsibility and victimhood to recognisable generational categories, while humour makes these classifications easy to circulate, recognise, and contest (Douglas, 1992;

Camorrino, 2024). In the present corpus, this work of condensation appears to be achieved less through explicit accusation than through the identity-based and comparative registers that are numerically more frequent, with blame functioning as their implicit horizon.

*Limitations and Directions for Future Research*

The study has several limitations. First, the corpus is purposive, qualitative, and limited to 60 static memes collected over a two-month period (May–June 2026). Its multilingual composition broadens the range of materials examined but does not provide a representative basis for claims about Instagram meme culture as a whole or about transnational circulation. The methodology therefore reports the language distribution and collection criteria explicitly and treats the thematic frequencies in Table 1 as descriptive characteristics of the corpus rather than population estimates.

Second, the thematic coding is interpretive rather than exhaustive. Memes are frequently multivalent, and a single artefact may plausibly be assigned to more than one category; the identity-related dimension, in particular, also absorbs more diffuse forms of generational boundary-marking and nostalgia that do not map neatly onto the other categories. The reported frequencies should therefore be read as the outcome of a situated coding process rather than as fixed properties of the material, and future studies could strengthen reliability through independent coding followed by formal intercoder agreement measures.

Third, the unit of analysis is the meme artefact rather than the complete Instagram post. Captions, hashtags, comments, engagement metrics, and recommendation dynamics were not analysed, and the study did not systematically code the type or motivations of meme producers (for example, individual users, influencers, agencies, or organisations). These dimensions should be examined in future research through multimodal post-level analysis, creator typologies, and platform or engagement data. Such designs would also make it possible to test, rather than infer from platform theory, whether particular generational frames are differentially amplified by recommendation systems.

In conclusion, the conflict between Boomers and Millennials is best understood not as an inevitable consequence of age differences but as a cultural process through which structural inequalities, moral judgements, and media stereotypes are translated into communicative oppositions. Memes participate in this process by condensing complexity into visual–textual narratives that make generational identities recognisable, contestable, and symbolically consequential within platformed public communication.

**Supplementary Materials:** The following supporting information can be downloaded at https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/journalmedia7030187/s1, Table S1: Coding matrixs; Table S2: Coding scheme; Table S3: Summary.

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register) together with a paraphrased content gloss, so that the coding structure and case-level analytical assignments can be inspected transparently.

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