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Framing the Generations

News Discourse and the Gendered Construction of Generational Identities

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Abstract

This study investigates the linguistic construction of generational personae and how they are framed in news discourse. To achieve this, a corpus of British newspaper articles has been collected and analysed using corpus-based methodologies (Baker 2023; Egbert and Baker 2020; Egbert et al. 2020; Baker and McEnery 2015). By adopting a Critical Discourse Studies approach (Fairclough 2003) and drawing on the tools of Appraisal Theory (Martin and White 2005), the investigation has revealed how attitudinal meanings help shape and reflect societal perceptions of different generations, at times contributing to what Lumby (2001) defines as 'generation panics,' that is, discursive surges of public anxiety that destabilise conventional understandings of age as a cultural and social category. This study additionally explores matters pertaining to masculinity and femininity, focusing on their intersection with generational representations. Furthermore, the following investigation addresses a gap in corpus-based research on generational discourse, where large-scale analyses rarely integrate Appraisal Theory with News Values to explain how evaluations become *newsworthy*. In this way, by focusing on (Baby) Boomers and Millennials – i.e., the two cohorts that most saliently structure media debates in our corpus – the present study shows how evaluative meanings align with news values to (re)produce ideological framings.

1. Introduction

The concept of generational cohorts refers to the identification of a group of individuals who share common characteristics such as behavioural patterns, significant culture-historical experiences, or substantial birth rates in a particular timespan (Strauss and Howe 1991; Jaeger 1985). While identifying a generational cohort may appear vague and abstract, it nonetheless serves as a valuable framework to explore how distinctive generations may differ in their attitudes, beliefs, values and behaviours (Biggs 2007). More specifically, scholars from different fields of study agree that a new generational cohort arises whenever there is a considerable shift in behaviour or a significant change in birth rates (Rainer and Rainer 2011; Erickson 2008; Howe and Strauss 2000; Tapscott 1998). However, as Howe and Strauss (2000) state, a

generational persona, comprising perceived membership, shared beliefs, behaviours and historical context, is a more crucial determinant of a generation than birth numbers alone. In particular, the authors define it in the following way:

> What is a generational persona? It is a distinctly human, and variable, creation embodying attitudes about family life, gender roles, institutions, politics, religion, culture, lifestyle, and the future. […] a generation can allow plenty of individual exceptions and be fuzzy at the edges. But unlike most other categories, it possesses its own personal biography. It can feel nostalgia for a unique past, express urgency about a future of limited duration, and comprehend its own mortality. As a generation arrives, advances, and recedes, this core persona invariably reveals itself. Not every member will share it, of course, but every member will have to deal with it, willingly or not, over a lifetime. (Howe and Strauss 2000, 40)

As a result, defining a generational cohort is a complicated process that involves considering several factors and is subject to interpretation. To better understand this, it is useful to mention the concept of 'generational panics' coined by Lumby (2000) on the basis of the observations provided by Sternberg (1997) when describing the lifestyle panics linked to the emergence of Generation X. Generational panics reflect anxieties about cultural shifts and perceived threats to societal norms. Sternberg (1997) describes the Generation X phenomenon as a 'lifestyle panic,' a term that is a variation of the conventional moral panic originally theorised by Cohen (2002). Unlike traditional moral panics, which typically focus on specific deviant groups, lifestyle panics are linked to entire generational populations, addressing not just isolated behaviours but general aspects of their everyday lives:

> While moral panics may be seen as 'circular and amplifying' (Cohen 1972, 25), the lifestyle panic is both cohesive and fragmentary and expansive and reductive. The Generation X panic attempted to encompass almost every aspect of young people's lives – that is, their lifestyles – into one overarching mega-panic. (Sternberg 1997, 80)

In line with Mannheim's (1952) seminal work, Sternberg (1997) points out that media play a key role in shaping these panics by amplifying fears, stereotypes and creating caricatured portrayals of youth. Thus, generational panics highlight how media industries often contribute to the construction and perpetuation of social anxieties by turning media narratives into perceived social realities, demonstrating that generational identities are shaped not only by demographic markers such as birth rates, perceived membership, shared values, behaviours and socio-historical context, but also by the ways in which generations are discursively constructed in relation to one another through processes of comparison, contrast and relational positioning. Lumby (2001), therefore, expands on this by conceptualising generational panics as symptomatic of deeper cultural anxieties as these illustrate the continuing power of narratives

of generational decline, and are closely linked to the media's ability to fuel and amplify public concerns, often drawing on anecdotal evidence and moralistic rhetoric rather than grounded empirical research. This process of amplification thus reinforces public perceptions that new generations pose a threat to social stability and established values.

Considering these observations, the objective of this study is to investigate the linguistic construction of generational cohorts and their framing within news discourse. To achieve this, a corpus of newspaper articles has been systematically collected, spanning several decades to capture longitudinal shifts in generational representation. This corpus will be subjected to corpus-based linguistic analysis employing both quantitative and qualitative methodologies (frequency analysis, collocation analysis and concordance analysis, among others; see Baker 2023; Egbert and Baker 2020; Egbert *et al*. 2020; Baker and McEnery 2015). By leveraging these methodologies, the research critically examines lexical patterns, metaphorical framings, evaluative language and other discursive strategies, to uncover how media narratives construct generational categories, influence collective attitudes and potentially perpetuate societal anxieties and stereotypes. Additionally, the study integrates an exploration of gender representations, examining how news discourse intersects generational identities with culturally constructed notions of masculinity and femininity. This dimension is crucial since existing literature has highlighted significant gender differences in societal perceptions and experiences of generational cohorts (Reis and Blanchard 2022; Woodman 2018; Madoglou *et al*. 2017). Therefore, our investigation probes the extent to which these differences are discursively articulated, reinforced, or contested within media texts. In doing so, the study seeks to reveal the interaction between gender roles and generational identities, addressing how news discourse might either perpetuate traditional gender norms or foster new forms of gendered expressions and expectations within generational cohorts. In sum, this article contributes (i) a longitudinal corpus-based study of the evaluative meanings discursively associated with specific generational cohorts in the press; (ii) an integrated interpretive approach combining CDS with Appraisal and News Values Discursive Analysis to move from quantitative to qualitative insights; and (iii) a gender-aware reading of how evaluation works in creating specific generational personae. Together, these explain *how* routine evaluative choices become media frames that sustain generational panics.

2. The Generation Corpus (GenCor): data collection and methodological framework

In order to study how the press constructs generational categories discursively, a corpus was compiled by systematically collecting news articles through the NexisUni database,[1] ensuring a structured and balanced representation of generational discourse. In order to achieve such a balance, the corpus collection process was designed to include a total of 1,000 randomly selected news stories per decade, spanning from 1981 to 2024.[2] The articles were retrieved based on their relevance to a predefined set of seed words, encompassing widely recognised generational labels in the literature (see Twenge 2023; Holton and Fraser 2015; Vittadini *et al.* 2013; Jorgensen 2003; Lumby 2001), such as 'Lost Generation,' 'Greatest Generation,' 'Silent Generation,' 'Baby Boomer*,' 'Generation X,' 'Millennial*,' 'Generation Z' and 'Generation Alpha.' The search also included alternative terminologies such as 'Boomer*,' 'Gen X,' 'Gen Z' and 'Zoomer*.'

A critical aspect of the data collection process was the selection of news sources. In fact, the dataset includes a representative sample of British newspapers, both print and digital, to provide a balanced representation of up-market, mid-market and down-market publications (see Table 1 for a list of the newspapers included in the corpus). This selection was devised to enable an analysis that accounts for variations in editorial focus, audience demographics and reporting styles. As for the focus on the British press, this is particularly justified given the media landscape in the UK, where newspapers exhibit distinct market segmentation while maintaining national and international readerships.

Newspaper Name	No. of news stories	No. of tokens	Token coverage (%)	Token density per article
Financial Times	837	678,175	19.91%	810.24
The Times	827	635,883	18.67%	768.9
The Guardian	626	586,878	17.23%	937.5
The Independent	632	570,068	16.73%	902.01
The Daily Telegraph	294	214,972	6.31%	731.2
FT.com	269	212,739	6.25%	790.48
Daily Mail	152	118,779	3.49%	781.44
The Mail on Sunday	80	66,179	1.94%	827.24
Guardian Weekly	52	53,587	1.57%	1,030.52
Daily Star Online	77	45,057	1.32%	585.14
The Sun	79	42,162	1.24%	533.58
City A.M.	48	30,786	0.90%	641.38
Daily Mirror	40	22,060	0.65%	551.5
Guardian.com	24	19,161	0.56%	798.38
The Northern Star Online	24	18,353	0.54%	764.71

[1] NexisUni is an online research database developed by LexisNexis, tailored specifically for academic institutions, offering access to a vast repository of over 17,000 news, business and legal sources. NexisUni can be accessed online at https://www.lexisnexis.com/en-int/products/nexis-uni. Last visited 20/01/2025.
[2] The data collection covers the period from 1 January 1981 to 31 December 2024. Although the NexisUni database includes archival material for some publications before the year 1981, the selected newspapers do not provide consistent coverage prior to this year. For this reason, 1981 was established as the starting point for the data collection.

Newspaper Name	No. of news stories	No. of tokens	Token coverage (%)	Token density per article
The Mirror	29	14,934	0.44%	514.97
Independent.co.uk	16	12,789	0.38%	799.31
Sunday Express	17	11,130	0.33%	654.71
Independent on Sunday	13	10,806	0.32%	831.23
The Daily Telegraph Online	12	10,251	0.30%	854.25
Daily Star	24	7,061	0.21%	294.21
Metro	13	5,781	0.17%	444.69
Sunday Mirror	9	5,749	0.17%	638.78
The New Review	3	4,743	0.14%	1,581
Independent Extra	5	3,849	0.11%	769.8
The Sunday Post	4	3,771	0.11%	942.75
Daily Star Sunday	4	1,042	0.03%	260.5

Tab. 1: Newspapers in the GenCor and token counts

The final corpus, referred to as the Generation Corpus (GenCor), comprises a total of 4,210 news stories (3,407,391 word tokens) spanning over four decades of reporting (i.e., 1980s, 1990s, 2000s and 2010s) and the first years of the 2020s (i.e., 2020–2024). The GenCor was analysed using Sketch Engine (Kilgarriff *et al*. 2014, 2004).

As can be seen from Table 1, the *Financial Times* stands out as the publication with the highest number of news stories and token coverage, suggesting that generational discourse may find a specific place in business and financial reporting, where generational categories may be used to describe socio-economic issues, workforce dynamics, economic policies, and market and financial trends. Conversely, the smaller coverage in tabloids and mid-market newspapers may suggest a more episodic approach, meaning that generational framing appears in response to social trends and celebrity culture events rather than as part of a regular publication routine.

As for the methodological approach adopted in this study, an analytical framework is employed drawing primarily from Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) (Fairclough 2003), Appraisal Theory (Martin and White 2005) and News Values Discourse Analysis (Bednarek and Caple 2017; 2012). In particular, Fairclough's (2003) CDS framework has facilitated the examination of patterns discernible from texts as social events, embedded within broader structures of power and ideology, thus revealing the discursive practices and intertextual relationships that shape and reflect societal understandings of generational cohorts. Appraisal Theory, as elaborated by Martin and White (2005), has provided, on the other hand, a rigorous toolkit for analysing evaluative resources employed in language to investigate how the interpersonal meanings constructed through specific attitudinal resources and engagement strategies are shaped in news discourse. Complementing these two first approaches is Bednarek and Caple's (2017; 2012) News Values Discourse Analysis framework, instrumental in scrutinising how newsworthiness is linguistically constructed to shape and influence audience perceptions of generational groups.

Therefore, the analysis proceeded in a two-stage, quantitatively informed/qualitatively interpretive workflow. First, using the seed set listed above, occurrences of cohort labels were retrieved, duplicates and non-editorial items were removed, and texts were processed in Sketch Engine to obtain frequency profiles, collocational evidence and concordance lines for the main cohort lemmas. Second, randomised concordance samples for each cohort and decade, prioritising headlines/lead paragraphs and their immediate co-text, were close-read and coded. Coding drew on Appraisal Theory to identify interpersonal evaluation (Affect, Judgment, Appreciation) and scaling/stance resources (Graduation, Engagement), and on News Values Discourse Analysis to trace linguistic cues of newsworthiness (e.g., Negativity, Consonance, Novelty, Proximity, Eliteness, Impact). In this way, the generational cohort term served as the node and, for each instance, evaluative target, polarity and graduation were noted, while ambiguous or off-topic hits were excluded. Frequency counts were used to guide sampling and indicate salience, but claims were grounded in recurrent discursive patternings across concordance sets, in line with CDS's emphasis on linking textual regularities to social meanings.

3. Generational discourse across time: patterns, peaks and shifts

3.1 Growth of generational discourse over time: cyclical patterns and decadal shifts

A quick look at the number of articles published per year by the newspapers that are part of the GenCor can already provide some interesting insights into generational discourse (see Figure 1):

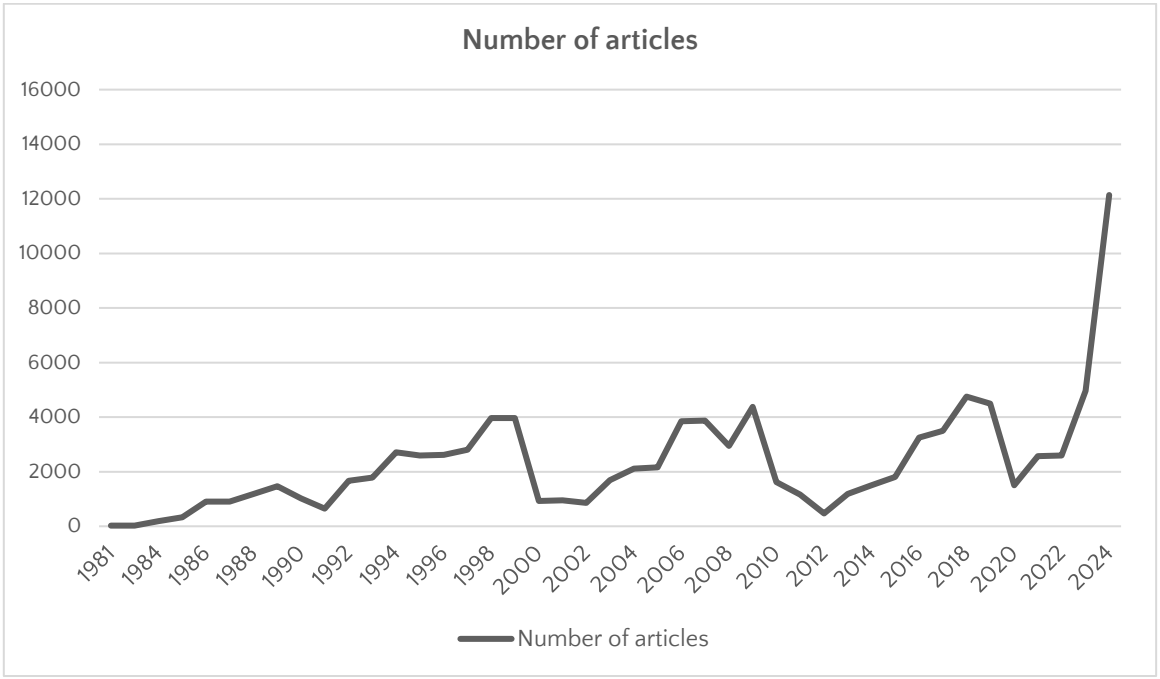

Fig. 1: Trends in generational mentions in news media (1981–2024)

As Figure 1 shows, there is a clear increase in media attention to generational issues over time. But a striking finding is linked to the cyclical nature of generational discourse, characterised by a decline in attention at the beginning of each decade followed by an upsurge toward its end. This pattern is evident across multiple decades. This suggests that media interest in generational discourse is not continuous but follows a recurrent and fluctuating structure. At the start of each decade, media focus may shift, resulting in a temporary decline in generational discourse. However, as younger cohorts establish themselves as distinct societal actors, discussions resurface with renewed intensity toward the decade's end. In this way, the press not only reflects generational discourse but actively shapes public perceptions of generational identity.

3.2 The evolution of generational terminology: tracking the discursive salience of generational cohorts

On the basis of the seed words used in the collection of the GenCor, in the following paragraphs, an examination of the prevalence of specific generational terms over time will be provided, revealing patterns of societal engagement and the prominence of different generational groups. To this end, the following tables (i.e. Tab. 2, Tab. 3, Tab. 4, Tab. 5 and Tab. 6) present the frequency of each seed word per year as recorded in the corpus. Additionally, the last column in Tab. 6 provides the normalised frequency of each term, calculated using a normalisation factor of 1 million words, allowing for more accurate comparisons across different years by accounting for variations in distribution.

#	1981	1982	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990
Millennial*	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Baby Boomer*	0	0	2	3	10	23	19	33	29
Gen Z	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Boomer*	0	0	0	0	5	6	6	4	9
Generation X	0	0	0	0	5	0	0	0	0
Generation Z	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Gen X	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Generation Y	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Lost Generation	1	1	5	9	19	14	11	22	3
Xer*	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
The Silent Generation	0	0	0	0	0	1	4	1	0
Gen Y	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Zoomer*	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Gen Alpha	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
The Greatest Generation	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Gen Zer*	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

#	1981	1982	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990
Generation Jones	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Generation Alpha	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Generation Zer*	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Generation Beta	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Gen Beta	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Generation of 1914	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0

Tab. 2: Frequencies of generational cohort terms (seed words) per year in the GenCor corpus, 1981–1990

#	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
Millennial*	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	20	1
Baby Boomer*	13	39	42	63	67	88	75	98	117
Gen Z	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Boomer*	0	20	10	15	27	23	25	11	23
Generation X	0	10	20	65	22	6	15	49	19
Generation Z	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0
Gen X	0	0	0	3	2	0	1	2	4
Generation Y	0	0	2	1	24	0	0	14	13
Lost Generation	4	15	25	14	20	15	12	12	25
Xer*	0	0	9	3	2	3	3	21	10
The Silent Generation	0	2	0	0	2	0	0	1	0
Gen Y	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Zoomer*	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0
Gen Alpha	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
The Greatest Generation	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Gen Zer*	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Generation Jones	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Generation Alpha	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Generation Zer*	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Generation Beta	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Gen Beta	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Generation of 1914	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0

Tab. 3: Frequencies of generational cohort terms (seed words) per year in the GenCor corpus, 1991–1999

#	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Millennial*	0	0	7	0	3	0	0	4	19
Baby Boomer*	28	33	37	90	135	106	190	216	120
Gen Z	0	0	0	0	0	3	1	0	1
Boomer*	2	9	1	38	24	46	57	113	32
Generation X	2	16	7	7	13	4	8	27	30
Generation Z	0	0	1	1	0	1	2	1	5
Gen X	0	1	1	1	0	3	6	3	5
Generation Y	0	2	5	7	12	2	8	29	55

#	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Lost Generation	5	5	4	6	6	10	13	14	8
Xer*	1	4	2	0	12	2	3	4	0
The Silent Generation	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0
Gen Y	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	6	26
Zoomer*	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0
Gen Alpha	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
The Greatest Generation	5	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Gen Zer*	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Generation Jones	0	0	0	0	25	12	0	0	0
Generation Alpha	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Generation Zer*	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Generation Beta	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Gen Beta	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Generation of 1914	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Tab. 4: Frequencies of generational cohort terms (seed words) per year in the GenCor corpus, 2000–2008

#	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Millennial*	7	1	1	0	12	47	165	609	484
Baby Boomer*	166	177	125	28	95	140	163	248	323
Gen Z	0	0	0	0	0	25	27	1	2
Boomer*	60	80	64	16	26	66	61	74	78
Generation X	51	18	11	2	34	21	37	86	126
Generation Z	0	0	1	0	3	12	16	7	21
Gen X	6	0	0	0	11	3	16	33	24
Generation Y	51	19	13	0	17	46	26	81	21
Lost Generation	83	5	0	0	1	0	0	8	0
Xer*	11	3	2	3	0	1	13	17	15
The Silent Generation	0	0	0	0	1	4	4	16	5
Gen Y	11	10	0	0	18	6	9	23	5
Zoomer*	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Gen Alpha	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
The Greatest Generation	0	2	0	0	8	18	1	0	5
Gen Zer*	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Generation Jones	2	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Generation Alpha	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Generation Zer*	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Generation Beta	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Gen Beta	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Generation of 1914	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Tab. 5: Frequencies of generational cohort terms (seed words) per year in the GenCor corpus, 2009–2017

#	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	Tot.	Norm. Freq. (per million words)
Millennial*	1095	691	155	404	275	592	834	5,426	1,592.42071
Baby Boomer*	368	301	68	141	143	182	335	4,679	1,373.19139
Gen Z	60	73	61	201	231	481	1,413	2,580	757.177559
Boomer*	63	192	75	97	121	208	367	2,154	632.155218
Generation X	63	85	26	43	57	48	85	1,118	328.110276
Generation Z	63	86	42	98	104	89	187	742	217.761918
Gen X	17	67	15	60	55	88	230	657	192.816146
Generation Y	8	7	2	3	3	3	1	475	139.402845
Lost Generation	0	2	0	0	0	0	2	399	117.09839
Xer*	17	22	5	9	18	18	40	273	80.119951
The Silent Generation	14	15	12	8	12	21	20	145	42.5545527
Gen Y	5	2	1	8	2	2	5	141	41.380634
Zoomer*	1	0	0	19	4	11	24	63	18.4892195
Gen Alpha	0	1	4	1	0	10	45	61	17.9022601
The Greatest Generation	4	3	3	1	3	0	0	54	15.8479024
Gen Zer*	0	0	0	5	6	10	26	47	13.7935447
Generation Jones	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	40	11.739187
Generation Alpha	0	4	3	1	4	8	20	40	11.739187
Generation Zer*	0	5	0	6	0	0	1	12	3.52175609
Generation Beta	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	4	1.1739187
Gen Beta	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	3	0.88043902
Generation of 1914	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0.58695935

Tab. 6: Frequencies of generational cohort terms (seed words) per year in the GenCor corpus, 2018–2024 with total number of occurrences and normalized frequencies

Read as discursive signals rather than proxies for social reality, the frequencies in Tabs 2–6 show that the term '(Baby) Boomer*' consistently registers high frequencies, underscoring its prominence in the journalistic landscape and reflecting the past and ongoing centrality of this generation in news discourse. The term 'Millennial*' also registers high frequencies but demonstrates a remarkable increase, registering the highest frequencies among all generational cohorts in recent years. However, unlike the Baby Boomer cohort, which has exhibited consistently high frequencies over a prolonged period of time (starting from the late 1980s), the discourses surrounding Millennials have shown a more abrupt upward trajectory beginning in the late 2000s, maybe due to the effect of the 2008 world economic crisis that affected this generational cohort that was just starting to enter the job market when it was struck by such a crisis.

In contrast with the previous categories, the term 'Lost Generation' exhibits relatively modest but stable occurrences over time, indicating that it remains predominantly embedded

within literary, historical and cultural discourses, with little significant variation over time. 'Gen(eration) X' shows a discernible but fluctuating presence across the years analysed, suggesting that it maintains consistent visibility but does not experience the same dynamic growth or substantial peaks in media discourse compared to other generations. This pattern likely reflects the intermediate position of Generation X (i.e., between the more extensively discussed Baby Boomers and Millennials). The 'Silent Generation' exhibits in general a comparatively low frequency, implying a limited presence in journalistic discussions and suggesting that this cohort is not a primary focus within socio-cultural narratives, potentially due to its advanced age and reduced societal visibility. 'Gen(eration) Z,' however, shows a notable increase in visibility. Its sharp ascent in mentions clearly signifies growing societal interest, reflecting the generation's influential role in current societal debates. The same can be said for 'Gen(eration) Alpha' that exhibits a modest but increasing presence in news discourse.

This brief but insightful diachronic analysis of generational cohort terminology distribution in the GenCor highlights distinct patterns showing, for instance, that Baby Boomers and Millennials seem to dominate news discourse, reflecting significant societal and economic influences. This is the reason why, in the next sections, a more detailed analysis of the discursive patterns retrieved in the corpus will be provided only for these two generations, since they most significantly seem to occupy the mediascape. Beyond relative prominence, Tabs 2–6 also trace terminological dynamics that matter for interpretation. First, lexical replacement: 'Millennial*' progressively displaces 'Gen(eration) Y' after the late 2000s; 'Xer*' largely recedes as 'Gen(eration) X' stabilises. Second, register drift: clipped, headline-portable forms increase (e.g., 'Boomer*' alongside 'Baby Boomer*'), whereas slangy alternants remain peripheral (e.g., 'Zoomer*'). Third, stabilisation thresholds: once a label sustains a baseline across consecutive years (e.g., 'Boomer*' from the late 1980s; 'Millennial*' after the late 2000s), it behaves as a live news category, in contrast to heritage labels with low, steady baselines.

3.3 The discursive construction of 'boomers': evaluative strategies and ideological positioning

The concordance lines analysed in the GenCor using randomised techniques have demonstrated that, in the British press, the term '(baby) boomer*' has evolved into a contested generational label, laden with ideological connotations. A dominant pattern emerging from the corpus is the negative evaluation of '(baby) boomer*,' constructing in news discourse intergenerational tensions and reinforcing generational stereotypes, but more specifically, representing Baby Boomers as morally blameworthy, socially outdated, or economically privileged at the expense of younger generations. Table 7 summarises the findings from the concordance lines and

collocation analysis of the lemma in the GenCor.[3] The discursive functions provided in the table are the result of the study of the adjectives frequently co-occurring with the lemma '(baby) boomer*.' This analysis has allowed both the identification of specific semantic patternings and discursive constructions associated with the uses of specific terms.

Semantic Category	Adjectives	Discursive Functions
Quantitative / Scope-Based	*many, more, most, few, various, only, other, some, several, enough, whole, 8m, 14million, 82m, 17million, 70-year-old, 50-year-old, 45-year-old, 77m*	Quantify or describe the scope or frequency of the reference, often used to generalise or universalise claims, creating the impression of Baby Boomers as a monolithic or dominant group
Economic and Class-Related	*wealthy, rich, asset-rich, middle-class, affluent, cash-rich, well-off, self-made, high-wealth, comfortable, richest, powerful, greedy, deep-pocketed, cash-poor, poor*	Construct Baby Boomers as privileged or morally questionable actors, foregrounding wealth, privilege, or economic status; often linked to implicit moral judgment; reinforce intergenerational inequality and blame
Temporal / Generational Positioning	*post-war/postwar, first, oldest, younger, early, later, last, middle-aged, youngest, junior, mid-*	Situate Baby Boomers within a historical narrative, locating them within the generational timeline, often contrasting with other cohorts; often reinforce perceptions of life-stage entitlement or cultural dominance
National / Cultural Origin	*American, British, Japanese, French, German, Western, European, Australian*	Nationalise generational discourse; associate Boomers with specific political economies, welfare systems, or cultural norms
Identity / Group Membership	*male, female, white, fellow, domestic, gay, self-employed, self-confessed, honorary*	Describe Baby Boomers in relation to social roles or identity categories, relating them to gender, race, sexuality and work roles; intersectional specificity, showing how age identity intersects with gender, race, or work
Evaluative / Attitudinal (Judgment)	*selfish, greedy, complacent, entitled, disgruntled, brash, smug, insufferable, senile, ignorant, burnt-out, clapped-out, psychotic, lazy, boozy*	Express negative social judgments through inscribed attitude; often found in media critique or generational blame discourse; often used in headlines or quotes, contributing to ideological polarization
Modality / Irony / Labelling	*so-called, quintessential, archetypal, typical, all-powerful, non-conformist, original, over-analysed, self-absorbed*	Frame Baby Boomers as exaggerated, iconic, or ironic figures; often function within satire or critique of generational stereotypes
Descriptive / Factual	*older, early, aging, older-age, mid, longtime, some, former*	Provide demographic or factual framing; may be re-evaluated depending on context (neutral vs. ironic vs. critical)
Socio-political	*conservative, liberal, centrist, right-wing*	Position Baby Boomers ideologically in the political scenario, often tied to discourses of power, resistance to change, or blame
Cultural / Relational	*parental, retired, hippie, influential*	Highlight Baby Boomers' roles in familial, cultural, or lifestyle contexts; evoke legacy, stability, or generational change
Satirical / Hyperbolic	*real, classic, famous, stereotypical*	Iconize or exaggerate Baby Boomers for humour or critique; contribute to caricature in generational conflict discourse

Tab. 7: Semantic categories of adjectives co-occurring with the lemma '(baby) boomer*' in the GenCor and their discursive functions

[3] In the specific case of the collocation analysis, a symmetrical span of five words to the left and five words to the right of the node word was considered. Collocates were identified using LogDice, an association measure that balances frequency and exclusivity, particularly useful for retrieving strong, characteristic associations rather than rare or merely frequent ones, making it suitable for capturing typical yet distinctive lexical patterns (Brezina 2018; Gablasova *et al*. 2017).

Table 7 shows a wide variety of adjectival elements that shape the discursive positioning of Baby Boomers in news discourse. In particular, adjectives included in the identity/group membership semantic category may be regarded as intersectional markers in discourse. For instance, references to white baby boomers might intersect with discussions of racial privilege (e.g., 'these old white baby boomers are being phased out and are fading away after 2030,' *The Guardian*, 19 March 2004), while female baby boomers often appear in contexts invoking gendered representation in discourse. As for the latter, although references to Baby Boomers in the GenCor are not always explicitly gendered, yet when they do, a distinct gendered voice emerging from female baby boomers occurs, responding to generational comparisons with personal narratives and emotional investment. For example:

(1) Some 58 per cent of Gen Ys look to boomers for advice and 58 per cent of boomers like helping them "navigate" work. Helen, a children's television consultant, is one of the boomers cited. She says young professionals often ask her what the industry was like when she was their age: "The Ys come for advice, but they also come to let me know if there is something I could be doing differently. It's like a dialogue with my kids." (*Financial Times*, 18 June 2009)

In this excerpt, the relational metaphor of a 'dialogue with my kids' and the nurturing tone position the speaker as a mentor or caregiver, reinforcing the traditional feminised roles of guidance and emotional support. This aligns with a gendered discourse of Baby Boomer women as emotionally engaged and situated within interpersonal roles, often in contrast to more abstract portrayals of economic or political agency.

The representation of male baby boomers in the GenCor reveals ideologically charged construction as well, where gender intersects with ageing to produce discourses of burden, control and ambivalence. The instances that explicitly identify 'male baby boomers' foreground distinctive discursive patterns that position this group within two dominant frameworks: one rooted in economic responsibility and systemic strain; the other in domestic disruption and relational tension. One particularly illustrative example of the first is the following statement:

(2) The looming retirement of about 6.8 million male baby boomers is something to make everyone happy. Everyone, it seems, except their wives, many of whom are dreading the prospect of living in close quarters with virtual strangers. (*The Independent*, 4 May 2006)

Here, irony underpins the representation of male baby boomers' retirement, initially framed as a moment of collective relief or celebration before being swiftly undercut by the revelation that 'their wives' are anticipating it with dread. The expression 'virtual strangers' functions metaphorically, positioning male baby boomers as unfamiliar presences within the domestic sphere, despite marital intimacy. This metaphor constructs retirement not only as a biographical milestone but as a site of relational friction, foregrounding the emotional labour expected of women in accommodating their husbands' newly increased domestic presence. In Appraisal Theory terms, this sentence foregrounds Affect, encoding emotional discomfort and resistance from 'their wives,' while simultaneously suggesting Judgment, that is, male disengagement from domestic or emotional life across the lifespan, reflective of culturally entrenched views of masculinity. The possessive construction 'their wives' also reproduces a traditional, heteronormative family model, one where men's roles have been defined primarily through work and women's through relational management. The resulting narrative is one of domestic disturbance, where the reintroduction of retired men into private space threatens household equilibrium. But most notably, the example presupposes a male absence vs. a female presence in the household, perpetuating gendered stereotypes.

A second pattern, situated within the political-economic context, is found in examples like the following one:

(3) And yet, as Willetts notes, the baby boomers have another nasty surprise in store for taxpayers over the next 30 years. For this year marks the point when the first male baby boomers are due for retirement, which means that not only will we lose the tax revenue on their incomes, but they will also be looking forward to collecting their pensions. Nobody, of course, should begrudge people who have worked hard for half a century a prosperous retirement – they were promised it: they deserve it. The only problem is somebody has to pay for it. (*Daily Mail*, 13 March 2010)

This excerpt stages an ideological ambivalence that is crucial to the construction of male baby boomers. The phrase 'nasty surprise' immediately establishes a negative evaluative frame (Affect: dissatisfaction/disapproval), presenting their retirement not as a neutral demographic shift but as a looming fiscal challenge. However, the (unnecessary) specification 'male baby boomers' situates the burden within a gendered framing, reinforcing the link between men and economic impact. The structure 'we lose' vs. 'they will collect' introduces a clear binary opposition between taxpayers and retirees, where 'we' are economically depleted while 'they' benefit, despite their earlier contribution.

Together, these examples show that references to male baby boomers in news discourse are not neutral demographic descriptions but are discursively (re)productive, shaping public understandings of ageing, gender roles and intergenerational responsibility, and reinforcing a broader ideological narrative in which male baby boomers are cast not only as figures of past privilege but also as agents of current and future strain. This aligns closely with Fairclough's (2003) notion of discourse as a site of social struggle, where broader power relations and value systems are reproduced. It also resonates with Appraisal Theory, particularly through the use of Graduation (e.g., 'nasty surprise,' 'virtual strangers') and Judgment, both inscribed (through direct evaluations) and invoked (through contrast and implication). By explicitly framing gender, the discursive patterns analysed tighten the frame around masculinity, ageing and responsibility, positioning male baby boomers as figures of both structural legacy and contemporary consequence. They are, discursively, both the architects of a bygone socio-economic order and the inheritors of its debts.

Going back to Table 7, the group of evaluative/attitudinal adjectives is perhaps the most overtly ideological. Indeed, these terms provide affective and ethical forms of Judgment that support generational scapegoating. Therefore, in the concordance lines of the lemma '(baby) boomer*,' the category of Judgment occurs both explicitly (i.e., through directly evaluative adjectives) and/or implicitly (i.e., through presupposition and contrastive structures), and typically presents this generational cohort negatively:

(4) "We privileged baby boomers are the real snowflakes," Owen Jones writes of a generation "treated with unadulterated contempt by the right" and warns conservative parties of the dangers that will lead to eventual electoral meltdown (The right thrives on bullying 'snowflakes.' But who will vote for it when they grow old?). (*The Guardian*, 9 January 2023)

(5) Wheeler's viral video received thousands of comments from fellow TikTokers who agreed that the boomer generation has "reverted back to children in their old age," according to one user. (*The Independent*, 6 July 2022)

These examples explicitly inscribe negative traits such as self-indulgence, hypocrisy, or infantilisation, commonly amplified through Graduation resources, such as the use of intensifiers, or metaphorical comparisons. In the latter case, the verb phrase 'reverted back' in example (5) can be regarded as a metaphorical instantiation of aging seen not as a linear process of gaining wisdom or status but as a kind of regression, framing Baby Boomers not only as immature but also as dependent, helpless, or irrational, mirroring stereotypical attributes of

childhood. In terms of Appraisal, this involves (1) Judgment as it encodes a negative social sanction (immaturity or incompetence); (2) Graduation as 'revert' already implies a return, so 'back' is semantically redundant but serves to emphasise the action and make the regression seem more emphatic, like a full, unmistakable return to an earlier, undesirable state (i.e., childhood); and finally, (3) Affect since it may evoke irritation or ridicule on the part of the writer/reader. Metaphors like these in the GenCor are not merely stylistic devices; they perform ideological work by re-positioning Baby Boomers in the social hierarchy in ways that challenge or subvert normative expectations of ageing. From the examples provided, it is also interesting to notice that, in the GenCor, explicit instances of Judgment tend to be attributed to third-party voices, often via direct quotation. In doing so, the media outlet distances itself from the judgment, but by repeating and framing it without critique, it reinforces the ideological stance embedded in the quoted material.

In other cases, however, Baby Boomers are associated with metaphorical constructions that frame them not merely as a demographic group but as disruptive or threatening social forces. One notable example:

(6) Baby boomers outnumber millennials, and by 2066 more than a quarter of the UK's population will be over 65. Thanks to final-salary pensions and booming property prices, the old are wealthier than they ever have been in history. One in five baby boomers is a millionaire. These unprecedented facts are powering an "oldquake" equivalent to the youthquake of the Sixties. (*The Times*, 27 May 2021)

The neologism 'oldquake' blends 'old' and 'earthquake' to signify a disruptive generational movement originating among older adults. This metaphor constructs aging not as decline but as social upheaval, encoding Appreciation (e.g., 'unprecedented facts' signalling significance) and Judgment (Capacity/Impact) by attributing agency and disruptive potential to Baby Boomers. From a lexical perspective, 'oldquake' is loaded with Graduation, intensifying both the scope and novelty of the generational force it names. The use of the comparative structure 'equivalent to the youthquake' creates an intergenerational analogy that elevates the actions of Baby Boomers to the level of historical social revolution, albeit ambiguously. This metaphor activates multiple news values: Novelty (the coinage itself of the term), Consonance (echoing known generational revolutions/contrasts), and from a certain perspective, also Eliteness as Baby Boomers are elevated to central, agentive actors. At the same time, the metaphor carries an undercurrent of Negativity.

Metaphors like this in the GenCor contribute to the discursive construction of Baby Boomers as more than a demographic label: they become symbolic agents of crisis, change, or blame.

Through metaphors, newspapers encode emotional, moral and ideological evaluations in ways that align readers with specific generational narratives. Interpreted from a generational panic perspective, 'oldquake' functions as a condensation device: it scales routine demographic change into imminent disruption to make alarm feel commonsensical. In this framing, Baby Boomers are not just a demographic but a problem category whose effects must be anticipated and managed. The coupling of intensified Judgment with routinised lexical triggers is precisely how generational panics circulate in the data.

As for examples of implicit judgment, this emerges via presupposition and contrast, as in:

(7) Baby boomers – born between 1946 and 1966 – are sitting on record levels of wealth and are poised to receive a bumper 20 per cent more in support than they will have contributed in taxes over the course of their lives. Meanwhile, young people are struggling to find affordable housing, are earning less than people of the same age did 15 years ago and now face sharply falling take-home pay in order to fund their parents' care in retirement. (*The Independent*, 5 March 2018)

Implicit judgment operates through presupposition, contrast and ideational configuration, thus subtly constructing moral or ethical stances through the argumentative structure of the text itself. Specifically, in example (7), the judgment is constructed through a contrastive frame: Baby Boomers are discursively positioned as wealthy beneficiaries of an intergenerational system, while younger generations are depicted as economically disadvantaged and burdened. Although the text does not overtly say Boomers are 'greedy' or 'unfair,' the contrast implicitly moralises their position through the use of material process verbs like 'are sitting on,' 'are poised to receive,' which all imply unearned or excessive privilege. Meanwhile, clauses about young people (with material verb phrases like 'are struggling,' 'are earning less') evoke economic hardship, thus constructing sympathy via Affect and moral imbalance via Judgment.

From the analysis of the concordance lines investigated so far, it becomes evident that news discourse plays a key role in reinforcing generational divisions. Therefore, what emerges is not simply a critique of policy or demography, but a broader ideological project in which generational cohorts are imbued with moral attributes. The Baby Boomers are not merely older; they are constructed as a group that has disproportionately shaped, and benefited from, political and economic systems. The analysis of generational discourse surrounding Baby Boomers reveals an ideologically charged discursive landscape, underpinned by complex linguistic strategies that consistently reinforce generational polarization. Central to these patterns is the systematic deployment of contrastive binaries that oppose Baby Boomers to other generations, embedding these generational relationships within oppositional frameworks of responsibility

vs. victimhood, privilege vs. deprivation, and past stability vs. contemporary crisis. Such dichotomous positionings are linguistically realised through hyperbolic and emotionally charged forms of evaluation, which serve as powerful rhetorical mechanisms to amplify moral judgments. Consequently, the generational label 'boomer' emerges not as a neutral demographic identifier but as a deeply contested discursive construct. Taken together, the Baby Boomer profiles show Judgment clustering around responsibility/entitlement and Engagement patterns that broaden stance beyond reporter voice. Their circulation as 'bigger' stories is aided by news values of Eliteness and Impact (wealth, pensions, intergenerational transfers) combined with Negativity. The interpretive point is not that high frequency causes stigma, but that recurrent evaluative wordings, made newsworthy through these values, stabilise a recognisable 'Boomer problem' repertoire across outlets.

3.4 Millennials in news discourse: evaluative patterns and ideological representations

As for the analysis of the lemma 'millennial*' in the GenCor, the concordance lines have shown that the term demonstrates a semantic duality shaped by sometimes contradictory evaluative stances. To better understand this, as done for the Baby Boomer cohort, an analysis of the adjectives frequently preceding the lemma 'millennial*' was performed (see Table 8):

Semantic Category	Adjectives	Discursive Functions
Quantitative/Scope-Based	*many, most, more, fewer, several, few, only, other, various, some, enough, large, wider, whole*	Used to generalise Millennials, creating perceptions of collective behaviour or attitudes; frequently introduce statements that describe common struggles or generational challenges
Temporal/Generational Positioning	*older, younger, oldest, geriatric, young, elder, early, late-born, earlier, senior, 40-year-old, imminent, 30-year-old, previous, first, last*	Locate Millennials within specific age-related boundaries or timelines, contributing to narratives about their life stages/styles, economic struggles and their comparative position against other generations
Economic and Class-Related	*asset-poor, wealthy, affluent, cash-strapped, priced-out, underemployed, well-off, overstretched, flushest, middle-income, hard-up, poor, super-rich, non-homeowning, non-investing*	Highlight economic disparities and financial challenges faced by Millennials, contributing to discourses of economic vulnerability, financial exclusion, or privileged sub-groups within this generation
Evaluative/Ideological (Judgment)	*unrealistic, needy, workshy, frustrated, entitled, precarious, ungrateful, miserable, much-vilified, beleaguered, selfish, murderous, lazy*	Carry explicit judgments, predominantly negative, often critiquing Millennials' supposed attitudes, behaviours, or societal impact; reflect stereotypical constructions of Millennials in news discourse as emotionally or behaviourally problematic
Identity/Group Membership	*non-binary, female, male, fellow, native, pet-loving, houseproud, graphic, staunch, left-wing, leftwing, Tory, mainstream, professional, academic*	Foreground intersecting identity markers, such as gender, political affiliation, or professional status, adding complexity to the representation of Millennials by reinforcing specific stereotypes
National/Cultural Origin	*Chinese, British, American, Australian, Norwegian, Spanish,*	Anchor Millennials geographically and culturally, enabling discussions on national

Semantic Category	Adjectives	Discursive Functions
	UK-based, US-based, European, western, Slovenian, global, home-born	characteristics, policy implications and cultural influences impacting this cohort; often highlight differing economic opportunities or cultural attitudes among Millennials globally
Satirical / Hyperbolic / Labelling	*so-called, stereotypical, typical, quintessential, real, true, mock, facile, passé, roasting, horoscope-obsessed, avocado-obsessed, selfie-obsessed, hot-breathed, pudgy, much-vilified*	Frame Millennials in exaggerated, ironic, or satirical ways, typically reinforcing or questioning generational stereotypes and caricatures prevalent in news discourse; reflect ironic distancing, either to critique or exaggerate Millennial stereotypes, often appearing in humorous or satirical media contexts
Behavioural/Psychological Attributes	*savvy, brightest, clean-living, talented, idealistic, encouraging, climate-conscious, dynamic, smartly-dressed, influential*	Frame Millennials emphasising beneficial or socially desirable traits, and counteracting prevalent negative stereotypes by highlighting strengths or commendable values; frequently underpin discourses around consumption habits, work attitudes, or lifestyle choices

Tab. 8: Semantic categories of adjectives co-occurring with the lemma 'millennial*' in the GenCor and their discursive functions

As can be seen from Table 8, the lemma 'millennial*' presents a notably ambivalent evaluative profile, when it comes to the semantic categories of Evaluative/Ideological (Judgment) and Behavioural/Psychological Attributes. For instance, in terms of positive forms of evaluation, Millennials are frequently depicted using adjectives that underscore desirable behavioural and psychological traits, positively appraising their intellectual capacities, technological proficiency and social awareness, as can be seen in the following example:

(8) The savvy Millennials are socking away an impressive average of £5,036 a year, but it's the Boomers who are sitting pretty on the biggest pile of saved-up quids, with an average of £27,966 in the bank. (*Daily Star Online*, 7 August 2024)

Here, 'savvy' foregrounds technological adeptness, encoding a positive Judgment (Capacity) which positions Millennials as capable actors and ideologically aligns them with narratives of economic modernisation and technological progress. In example (8), several linguistic strategies highlight a clear positive evaluation of Millennials, particularly through the explicit use of Judgment resources. The phrase 'socking away' emphasises Millennials' competence and agency, reinforcing their proactive and commendable financial behaviour. The evaluative adjective 'impressive' explicitly marks a high level of positive Judgment, and it simultaneously encodes Graduation: Force, intensifying the appraisal by emphasising the substantial nature of Millennials' savings relative to expectations. Notably, the comparative construction contrasting Millennials' habits with those of Baby Boomers' serves as an Engagement strategy, specifically employing a dialogic positioning of different generational cohorts: the contrast implicitly

positions Millennials positively in comparison to Baby Boomers, reinforcing Millennials as proactive, disciplined economic agents against the backdrop of stereotypical perceptions of generational differences.

Next to positive forms of evaluation, however, there are also negative evaluative expressions that explicitly encode ideological judgments, often foregrounding perceived moral and behavioural deficiencies of Millennials when compared especially to other cohorts (in particular, Baby Boomers), critiquing their perceived failure to conform to societal norms of appropriate behaviour and moral character:

(9) Just as millennials enter the workforce in greater numbers, there is a stack of literature characterising them as job-hopping, needy, deluded narcissists. Books such as *Generation Me* by Jean Twenge and *Not Everyone Gets a Trophy* by Bruce Tulgan suggest that millennials are the worst possible employees. But while it is true many may have one foot out the door – and according to a Deloitte survey two of every three millennials hope to move on from their current employer by 2020 – young people moving on isn't exceptional to Generation Y. (*The Guardian*, 17 March 2016)

(10) But mostly it diagnoses a collective personality disorder: millennials are demanding, selfish and individualistic. They're pie-in-the-sky Corbyn-loving socialists or dangerous anarchists and they've ruined the Labour Party. They're savvy (and poor) enough not to merely buy into a brand, and they've become increasingly concerned about the additives in their food, so they're unreasonable narcissists with martyr complexes. They're everyone's worst nightmare. (*The Independent*, 18 February 2016)

In these examples, the use of multiple negatively evaluative adjectives and phrases constitutes a dense concentration of Judgment: Social Sanction, particularly within the subcategory of Propriety, which targets perceived moral or ethical failings. The lexical items index a perceived lack of loyalty (e.g., 'job-hopping'), immaturity (e.g., 'needy,' 'deluded') and moral failings (e.g., 'selfish'), painting a portrait of Millennials as both unreliable and socially deviant. In example (9), for instance, the element 'characterising them as job-hopping, needy, deluded narcissists' reflects inscribed Judgment. These attributions are further reinforced through intertextual references (i.e., the books *Generation Me* and *Not Everyone Gets a Trophy*), which function as external authorities that legitimise the critique. This draws on heteroglossia, where multiple voices are brought to the fore to establish a shared evaluative stance while protecting the newspaper's authorial stance. In example (10), the phrases 'demanding, selfish and individualistic,' 'unreasonable narcissists' and 'everyone's worst nightmare' exemplify

Graduation: Force, with intensification amplifying the evaluative charge. The reference to a 'collective personality disorder' is a metaphorical condensation that escalates the critique from individual failings to a pathological diagnosis of an entire generation, indexing Affect (particularly, insecurity and irritation) as a societal reaction to this group. Intensifiers like 'everyone's worst nightmare' and modifiers such as 'pie-in-the-sky Corbyn-loving socialists' sharpen the ideological opposition between Millennials and both political realism and generational tradition. These are not merely humorous exaggerations but ideologically saturated evaluations that sustain intergenerational antagonism, and in van Dijk's (1998) terms, reinforce in-group/out-group polarisation.

As the semantic category of Identity/Group Membership demonstrates, gendered patterns within Millennial discourse also emerge from the data under scrutiny, albeit less frequently. Male Millennials are frequently described in such terms:

(11) MILLENNIAL MEN WORSE OFF THAN GEN X, WITH MORE IN LOW-SKILL JOBS A DRAMATIC increase in the number of young men doing jobs traditionally held by women has left them worse off than the previous generation, according to a study. By the time they hit 30, millennial men – those born between 1981 and 2000 – have earned around £12,500 less than those in Generation X, defined as those born between 1966 and 1980. It makes them the first generation to earn less than their parents' generation, prompting a senior MP to warn that many young men are being denied their traditional role as breadwinners. (*Daily Mail*, 9 February 2017)

(12) A SHOCKING 41% of Brit millennials would dodge conscription if World War 3 broke out, according to a poll by YouGov. CENTENARY: This November 11 marks one hundred years since the end of WWI A third of male millennials would try to find a way to avoid being drafted - despite not having a disability. (*Daily Star Online*, 9 November 2018)

In example (11), the discursive structure present in the headline and the following lead paragraph employ a contrastive binary construction, reinforced by comparative evaluative elements (e.g., 'worse off than Gen X' and 'worse off than the previous generation'), which simultaneously encode Judgment: Capacity in its negative realisation. Male millennials are framed as failing to meet intergenerational expectations tied to economic productivity. Additionally, the phrase 'jobs traditionally held by women' activates implicit Judgment: Propriety and draws on gender normativity to evaluate role deviation. The inference is that men occupying these roles experience symbolic devaluation, not merely economic loss. The social

positioning of 'breadwinner' functions ideologically as a normative standard from which male millennials are said to deviate. This creates a discursive tension: economic precarity is not just a generational issue, but a gendered failure, invoking traditional masculinity as a benchmark and highlighting the erosion of patriarchal privilege across time. Similarly, example (12) reinforces this framing of male millennials as morally lacking and unreliable in fulfilling traditional gender roles. In particular, the example relies on presupposition and evaluation by implication: the clause 'despite not having a disability' implicitly constructs such avoidance as cowardly or unjustified. This acts as a form of Judgment: Tenacity, negatively appraising the character of male millennials through suggestions of weakness, passivity, or lack of patriotic duty. Additionally, the headline (i.e., 'SHOCKING 41%') draws on Graduation: Force, heightening the attitudinal impact and aligning the reader with a position of disapproval or alarm. Furthermore, the intertextual reference to an imagined 'World War 3' and the historical 'end of WWI' situates male millennials within a tradition of national service, thereby setting up a stark contrast with earlier masculine generational identities (e.g., a presupposed Greatest Generation trope). This contributes to a moralised framing of masculinity, where contemporary men are seen as lacking the virtues of courage, duty and resilience once considered foundational to male citizenship. Across both examples, what emerges is a discursively loaded construction of male millennials as economically and socially diminished figures, no longer reliable providers, nor dutiful citizens. Through linguistic strategies of comparison, presupposition and intensification, news discourse encodes anxieties about the erosion of traditional gender roles and their symbolic implications for generational identity. These narratives, therefore, seem to naturalise a crisis of masculinity, mapped onto the figure of the Millennial man, and implicitly contrast it with older ideals of male responsibility, sacrifice and economic success. Such framing both reflects and reproduces the ideological tensions surrounding changing gender norms in contemporary societies.

As for the representation of female millennials in the GenCor, a distinct evaluative profile emerges, one that is shaped by discourses of gendered inequality and social pressure. Compared to their male counterparts, millennial women are framed in relation to structural constraints, particularly in areas of employment, domestic life and public perception. This discursive construction often reveals a tension between social progress and persistent disadvantage. In the following example:

(13) Millennials avoid gender pay gap until their 30s; Equality The gender pay gap in Britain has almost disappeared for people in their 20s but millennial women are still falling behind their male peers in their 30s, new research shows. Analysis by the Resolution Foundation think-tank reveals that the gender pay gap – the average hourly

> pay difference – for young people has halved over the past generation, with men and women beginning their careers on almost an even footing. (*Financial Times*, 4 January 2017)

the evaluative framing hinges on Appraisal resources of Judgment (Social Sanction: Fairness), as the text implicitly critiques the persistence of gender-based income inequality. The phrase 'still falling behind' presupposes an expectation of parity, and its contrast with 'almost disappeared for people in their 20s' draws attention to a structural reversal that unfairly penalises women as they enter their thirties, typically a decade associated with career consolidation. The use of millennial women as a marked group also positions them as the focal point of a broader social imbalance, amplifying their visibility as economic subjects within systemic injustice.

A more affectively charged example is found in:

(14) Millennials are now the largest generation, and our legacy is… what? Boomeranging to live with our parents? Staying in shared homes into our forties? A declining fertility rate? Burnout culture? Monetising our hobbies to try to stay afloat, until the government decides to tax even what we make by selling our old clothes? Part of the reason millennial women are such easy game is that we're easy to dislike. (*The Times*, 30 January 2024)

Here, the lexical intensification (e.g., 'easy game,' 'easy to dislike') conveys Affect, capturing not only personal frustration but also a social antagonism directed toward women of this generation. The repetition of 'easy' introduces Graduation (force), while the admission 'we're easy to dislike' signals a shared affective stance, marked by irony and intra-generational disillusionment. The example uses first-person plural deixis (e.g., 'our legacy,' 'we're') to voice solidarity and a collective identity, while simultaneously exposing the burden placed on millennial women to justify their socio-economic status, reproductive choices and consumption habits. This example also evokes Engagement resources, particularly entertained attribution and rhetorical questioning, to challenge dominant ideological world views, drawing attention to how female millennials are disproportionately burdened with moral and social expectations, especially around productivity, domesticity and economic independence. In sum, based on the concordance lines in the GenCor, the discourses surrounding millennial women tend to oscillate between structural critique and cultural pathologisation: on the one hand, women are framed as victims of enduring gendered inequalities (e.g., pay gap, domestic pressures); on the other, they are frequently constructed as morally deficient or socially undesirable, contributing to an ideological

narrative that simultaneously critiques and reproduces normative expectations of femininity within the Millennial generation.

4. Concluding remarks

Generations represent powerful sociocultural constructs shaping both individual and collective identities across historical periods. They encapsulate cohorts of individuals born within specific socio-historical contexts, imbued with distinct shared experiences, values and worldviews, differentiating them from preceding and succeeding generational groups. Yet, generational cohorts should not be approached as static or objectively determined categories. Rather, as argued throughout this study, generations constitute dynamic identities, discursively constructed through media representations, public debates and policy narratives (Jorgensen 2003; Lumby 2001; Sternberg 1997). News discourse, in particular, emerges as a critical arena for shaping and circulating generational personae, embedding them within broader ideological frameworks that influence public understanding and attitudes (Bednarek and Caple 2017; Fairclough 2003). Therefore, generations are frequently portrayed within polarizing and morally charged narratives, oscillating between idealisation and generational panic, an ideological duality strategically reinforced by media industries to frame societal anxieties and cultural expectations. The corpus-based analysis of British newspaper articles presented here has elucidated how generational discourses surrounding Baby Boomers and Millennials manifest distinct yet interconnected ideological tensions, ranging from economic privilege and social morality to technological adeptness. This aligns with previous findings suggesting that media representations often frame younger cohorts, such as Millennials, as both adaptive agents of neoliberal change and subjects of socio-economic precarity, fostering narratives of individual responsibility and vulnerability (Holton and Fraser 2015; Lumby 2001; Sternberg 1997). Conversely, Baby Boomers are often depicted through discourses of economic dominance, resistance to cultural or technological change and perceived generational selfishness, reinforcing their portrayal as a socially privileged and economically powerful generation whose societal roles and impacts are persistently contested. Additionally, a central contribution of this study has been the critical exploration of gendered patterns within generational discourses. News representations analysed herein reveal that gender functions as an intersectional dimension, significantly influencing how generational identities are constructed and perceived in news discourse. Such representations not only reflect deeper societal anxieties around shifting gender roles and familial dynamics but also actively reinforce normative gender expectations, even as they articulate emergent gendered realities within generational experiences. Moreover, this research aligns with Lumby's (2001) and Sternberg's (1997)

conceptualisations of 'generational panics,' highlighting the media's crucial role in amplifying cultural anxieties through hyperbolic and exaggerated portrayals of generational cohorts. The strategic employment of satirical, hyperbolic and evaluative language within the examined corpus serves ideological purposes by dramatising generational differences, promoting intergenerational binaries and reinforcing societal stereotypes and moral judgments. Thus, this research underlines the need to critically reflect on the contingency and ideological character of generational identities. The media's ability to frame generational differences in moralistic and emotionally charged terms not only amplifies existing cultural tensions but also has significant implications for policy-making and societal cohesion (Holton and Fraser 2015; Sternberg 1997). These findings should be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, the dataset is restricted to UK national newspapers retrieved via NexisUni. Database coverage, archiving policies and metadata practices may unevenly represent outlets and editions, and thus only partially capture the wider UK news ecology. Second, the seed-term retrieval strategy privileges explicit cohort labels, which may under-sample texts where generational categories are invoked implicitly (e.g., via age descriptors or indexical cues). Third, the analysis targets written press; genre/register effects are therefore only indirectly observable and may differ in broadcast, online-native or social media formats. Finally, despite normalisation, frequency profiles remain sensitive to outlet composition and article-length distributions across years. Future work will address these constraints by (i) extending the study to comparative media systems, (ii) triangulating genres (broadcast, online-native, social media) to test genre effects more directly, and (iii) broadening retrieval beyond seed terms (e.g., descriptor-based and distributional cues) while developing targeted collocation/concordance profiles.

Bionote

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Power of Bonding Icons in Collective Narratives (2020); *Contrasting News Values in Newspaper Articles and Social Media* (2019); *In the 'Mist' of an Amplification Spiral: The Case of the 'Great Smog of London'* (2018); *News Discourse and Digital Currents* (2017).

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