The Big Read: What ‘OK boomer’ reveals about the divide between S’pore millennials and their elders

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SINGAPORE — When it comes to LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual and queer) issues, a 22-year-old lamented how she and her mother could never see eye-to-eye.

The fresh graduate, who wanted to be known only as Ms Teo, said: “My mother doesn’t understand homosexuality at all. I’ve tried explaining to her over 500 times about 377A (the law that criminalises sex between men) and why I go to (LGBTQ rally) PinkDot, but she still doesn’t understand.”

While her mother conceded that she would try to be more accepting if one of her three daughters were gay, she still admitted to Ms Teo that she would not promote her colleague because she is lesbian.

“She just cannot and does not want to understand anything that is beyond her immediate surroundings… That is what I don’t understand (about the older generation). Why are these social issues not important to them?”

Like many of her peers, Ms Teo believes there is a divide between her and her parents, who are in their 50s, which appears impossible to bridge.

Generation gaps have existed since time immemorial. But the chasm between millennials and baby boomers has come under the spotlight, and taken a new twist — an insulting one from the older folks’ perspective — after a popular Internet meme became the retort of choice for youngsters fed up with the supposedly patronising, outdated and know-it-all ways of their elders.

The “OK boomer” phenomenon may have originated in the United States, but TODAY’s interviews with millennials and boomers in Singapore found that intergenerational quarrel had already broken out here long before the meme found its way here.

Millennials are generally defined as those born between 1981 and 1996, while baby boomers were born between 1946 and 1964.

Millennials, including those in Singapore, have taken to private Facebook groups to vent their frustrations by role-playing as baby boomers. They can be seen mocking the way older people use Internet abbreviations and make common spelling errors. As of Friday (Dec 6), one of these groups, called “a group we all pretend to be KIASU boomers”, has over 2,300 members.

For millennials all over the world, their frustrations run the gamut of social and domestic issues, such as fears surrounding job insecurity, changing values when it comes to family and marriage, and disagreements with their elders on social issues, such as the looming climate crisis.

The baby boomers, on the other hand, have expressed exasperation over millennials' stubborn individualism and idealism. Though they recognise that their kids are growing up in different circumstances, they are still baffled by the youngsters' motivations.

Some experts whom TODAY spoke to believe young Singaporeans share some of the same worries expressed by millennials in other developed economies.

Assistant Professor Woo Jun Jie, a Singaporean academic from Education University of Hong Kong's Department of Asian and Policy Studies, said: "These include rising home prices, stagnating wages, and an increasingly competitive job market that was fuelled by immigration. While real wages have been rising in Singapore, the unfortunate reality is that the rise in home prices have outpaced wage increases."

Professor Chua Beng Huat, who is the Provost Chair Professor of the National University of Singapore's (NUS) Department of Sociology, noted that millennials and Gen Z are unlikely to have the same economic opportunities that their elders had.

Among other things, baby boomers were able to accumulate wealth as they were the first generation to have dual-income professional families. They also benefited from opportunities provided by the reconstruction efforts after World War II, Prof Chua said.

These opportunities are unlikely to be repeated for post-boomers, he added.

Day-to-day friction

Outside of the wider social issues, millennials and baby boomers who spoke to TODAY said that clashes also arise from personal, day-to-day affairs.

For the millennials, common grievances include disagreements on jobs, marriage and family.

Ms Jasmine Hussain, 23, a postgraduate student at the University of Edinburgh, was seen as a "princess" by her parents for taking her time to decide what she wanted to do after she graduated.

"My dad said I was being so picky because instead of going for whatever job (that was out there). I wanted to wait out to find a job where I can do something that I enjoy," she said.

Meanwhile, Ms Charlene Tan shared the arguments that she had with her parents over parenting styles.

The 34-year-old mother of two said disagreements over things such as food choices for her children were not uncommon.

She said: "There are certain things I would tell my mum not to feed the kids. But she would say, 'you also ate this rubbish growing up'. That's why there're a lot of tensions along the way."

For their part, the baby boomers said they see millennials as individualistic, idealistic and spendthrift.

“When we spend, we try to be thrifty. We would go for value-for-money food, cheap and good. Nowadays, young people always go to the food court, restaurants. They don’t go to the coffeeshops or hawker centres anymore” said Mr T P Neo, 64, a businessman in the building and construction industry.

Retiree Ivan Fu, 58, said that family discussions become more heated when the topic of family values is brought up.

He said: “We discuss a lot about the values today and the different generations seem to prioritise values differently… (The younger generation) would be more individualistic but my generation would be more focused on family values. It is a default responsibility for people my age, your family will come first and all your decisions are based on your family.

“Millennials are given a lot of choices today and they tend to sacrifice their family for passions and individual goals.”

While these discussions have never turned into shouting matches, Mr Fu believes that it is difficult to find common ground. “It will be a continuous communication and it never ends because it is just difficult to find the point of agreement,” he added.

A divide amplified by social media

The “OK boomer” phrase started as a meme on social media platforms such as TikTok and Twitter. First, as a retort aimed at those who voiced criticisms on millennials and Generation Z, generally defined as those born after 1997. Then, it evolved into a viral meme on the social media app TikTok.

The TikTok video, which shows a 16-year-old girl holding up a sign that says “OK boomer” next to an unidentified man ranting about millennials and their inability to grow up, has been viewed over 15,000 times.

The phrase has since become the caustic, rallying cry of millennials and Gen Z all around the world, bandied about in response to social posts on social media that dwell on often-heard stereotypes of young people.

The young people who have used “OK boomer” said the snappy response encapsulates the collective exhaustion and exasperation that has built up over the years of trying to explain themselves to their elders.

Dr Crystal Abidin, a senior research fellow at Curtin University who specialises in Internet cultures, describes the meme as “a way of just ending a conversation and not investing energy in something that is a lost cause anyway”.

“OK boomer” has since found its way into the real world.

A 25-year-old New Zealand lawmaker, Ms Chloe Swarbrick, used the phrase in early November after being heckled by an older Member of Parliament while she was giving a speech supporting a climate crisis bill.

But the chorus of youthful mockery has not been left unchallenged — it has received a significant pushback from the very group that the meme targets.

Much ink has been spilled about the meme in the old and new media after it entered the popular lexicon, with many arguing that “OK boomer” is an ageist epithet.

An article in The New York Times declared the end of “friendly generational relations” between millennials and baby boomers.

Speaking to TODAY, experts reiterated that generation gaps are not new and the supposed “generation war” between millennials and boomers only appears amplified because of the Internet.

Dr Abidin said: “This is not something that affects people on an everyday basis, as much as its quite prevalent (on the Internet). Virality in Internet culture is always going to be amplified to give the impression of scale.”

Nevertheless, the “OK boomer” phenomenon has thrown into relief the longstanding gripes that each generation has about the other, the experts said. The Internet has magnified these differences and made them more visible, they added.

As Professor Lim Sun Sun put it, the anonymity of the Internet promotes “more unbridled expressions of differences where people are less conscious and respectful of social niceties”.

“So differences of opinion are expressed more sharply and could to some extent make social differences more pronounced,” said Prof Lim, who is also the head of Singapore University of Technology and Design’s School of Humanities.

Reflection of socio-economic anxieties in US, UK

While the extent of the generational divide may be exaggerated by social media, experts noted that the “OK boomer” retort should not be dismissed as just a response used to entertain millennials at baby boomers’ expense.

Interviews with millennials and Gen Z conducted by The New York Times and Vox revealed that there are specific socio-economic anxieties that young people in the United States experience, but are too exhausted to articulate.

Concerns over climate change, economic instability, student-loan debt and job insecurity are among the common refrains echoed by the young people interviewed.

To top it all off, they are frustrated because they believe these problems were created by the choices made by generations that came before them.

A Vice News report, backed by data from the US Federal Reserves, found that when baby boomers were the same age as millennials, they were much more well off than millennials today.

The data showed that back in 1989, when baby boomers were aged between 25 and 43, they owned 20.9 per cent of the country's wealth.

This year, millennials are between 23 and 38, and they currently own 3.2 per cent of America's' wealth, which means that baby boomers had over six times as much wealth in 1989 compared to millennials today.

In the United Kingdom, a report by think-tank Resolution Foundation found that Britain's young generation earned 8,000 pounds less during their 20s than their predecessors.

The report, which was released in 2016, highlighted that millennials today are faring significantly worse than those in Generation X during their first years of employment.

The data paints the bleak reality that has left these young people fatigued. The baby boomers have added insult to injury by not taking the younger generation's worries seriously and by resisting the changes that millennials and Gen Z are urgently fighting for, the report said.

This fatigue is what makes this generational conflict different from the ones that had come before it, said Dr Holly Scott, an assistant professor of history at Piedmont Virginia Community College in the US, in response to TODAY's queries.

Situation in Singapore

There are currently no public studies available to show that intergenerational income mobility — the degree to which income status persists across generations within a family — has slowed for the millennial cohort in Singapore.

The most recent study, conducted in 2015 by Singapore's Finance Ministry, found that for those aged 37 to 41 — who belong to Generation X — intergenerational income mobility in Singapore has remained high.

However, the study acknowledged that upward mobility for younger cohorts of Singaporeans would not be as easily achieved as the country's development slows.

It said: "As the pace of Singapore's development slows, it will be an increasing challenge to sustain such mobility in the future".

While this is an indication that Singapore could face similar problems of slowing intergenerational income mobility in the future, they are at present still less pronounced in Singapore than elsewhere, some experts said.

The gulf between generations in Singapore has more to do with disagreements on the "softer" social issues, where boomers and millennials see things differently and where the younger generation is able to blame their elders directly for the existing situation, said Prof Chua.

Echoing his sentiments, Associate Professor Tan Ern Ser from NUS' Sociology Department said that there is less cultural continuity between the baby boomers and millennials, as compared to the latter's predecessors.

He said: "There is a high degree of cultural continuity between the baby boomers and Gen X and even older Gen Y, given that they subscribe to the same mobility game: Study hard, work hard, work smart, move up the social ladder, take care of family."

Today, millennials are confronted with a different economic environment that requires practical skills on top of a degree — and this has fragmented the concept that baby boomers hold dear, said Assoc Prof Tan.

Recent studies conducted by CNA and the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) revealed some of the issues where a clear difference in ideologies could be observed between the generations.

A door-to-door survey conducted by CNA between April and June, which involved over 1,200 respondents from different age groups, explored the views on issues such as the environment, foreign talent, LGBTQ and politics.

- **Attitudes on LGBTQ issues**

In particular, there were stark differences between the age groups on how they saw LGBTQ issues: When asked if they agreed, disagreed or were neutral to not exposing their child to LGBTQ influences, 69.8 per cent of baby boomers agreed. In contrast, only 39.6 per cent of millennials agreed.

Similarly, when the respondents were asked if they would have positive or negative emotions if their child were LGBTQ, 61.5 per cent of boomers indicated "negative" compared with 37.5 per cent of millennials.

Separately, an IPS survey conducted between August last year and January this year also showed that younger Singaporeans had become increasingly liberal towards homosexuality over the past five years.

The study involved 4,015 Singaporeans and permanent residents, and its findings were compared with the results of a similar survey conducted in 2013.

In 2013, 47.6 per cent of Singaporeans aged 18 to 25 felt that gay sex was always wrong but for the lastest survey, the figure was nearly halved, to 25.4 per cent.

The proportion of Singaporeans from this age group who felt that gay sex was not wrong at all nearly tripled from 11.6 per cent to 30.2 per cent between 2013 and 2018.

In 2013, about 40 per cent of Singaporeans aged 18 to 25 believed gay marriage was always wrong. This fell to 23.9 per cent in 2018.

In response to TODAY's queries, a Pink Dot spokesperson said that young Singaporeans have more access to different platforms that provide LGBTQ content, and this, among other things, has led to a general increase in open-mindedness and acceptance towards the LGBTQ community among them.

Ms Jean Chong, founder of women gay rights group Sayoni, noted that with more people coming out of the closet, it is likely that a young person would have a friend or a classmate who is LGBTQ, which has led to greater acceptance.

The baby boomers, on the other hand, came from a time when there was not much exposure on these issues.

"It came much later to them when they are much older. If you talk to many of (the baby boomers) they will say, 'oh I don't know any LGBTQ people'. But actually, they do know them. It's just that (LGBTQ people) were not out (of the closet) during their time," Ms Chong said.

- Attitudes on climate change

Climate change is another issue that has been perceived as dividing the young and the old, with young people generally viewed as more passionate about environmental causes.

For instance, millions of youths, inspired by Swedish teen activist Greta Thunberg, held protests in some 150 countries, to speak up about the impending effects of climate change.

World leaders, including Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, have also acknowledged a greater interest and concern among youths regarding climate change.

Environmental experts told TODAY that youth leaders play a major role in influencing others in their generation to take on more active roles in tackling environmental issues.

Earth Society's vice-president Low Chip Khoon said: "With youth leaders such as Greta Thunberg sounding off the alarm, the youths began to realise that if we do not do anything about climate change, they may not have a liveable planet to inherit from us (the older generation)".

He added: "Youths are the ones who are more willing to make lifestyle changes like eating less meat, to help the planet. Most adults have not realised the urgency and seriousness of climate change."

Still, some experts pointed out that older Singaporeans might be just as concerned about the issue.

Ms Kia Jiehui, the principal strategist at Forum for the Future, a non-profit organisation that promotes sustainable practices in the workplace, said that the generational divide on climate change in Singapore is more of a question of different approaches than a "fundamental mismatch of ideals".

Indeed, CNA's survey revealed that both millennials and baby boomers were willing to protect the environment even at the expense of economic growth, with 86.5 per cent of millennials and 87.2 per cent of baby boomers agreeing to the trade-off.

Danger of framing conflicts as 'young vs old'

Some experts have warned against labelling the divide as a generational issue, arguing that the reality is much more complex than a matter of young versus old.

"It assumes entire generations are monolithic, and in many ways, scapegoat people who are also from the boomer generation but suffer from consequences of decisions made by others," said Assistant Professor Walid Jumblatt Abdullah of Nanyang Technological University's School of Social Sciences' public policy and global affairs programme.

"Rather than looking at (the issues in terms of) boomers versus Generation X or millennials, I would rather look at things from the elite-masses, powerful-powerless, just-unjust angles."

In a similar vein, Dr Scott argued in an opinion piece for The Washington Post that framing conflicts in generational terms can be dangerous.

Citing the example of student activism in the US in the 1960s, which was also framed as generational conflict, she said: "Getting bogged down in generation clashes ensured these problems went unresolved, and we run that risk again today if we distill our divisions into a generation gap."

Asst Prof Walid reiterated that while there may be specific issues which different generations face, this by no means indicate a "generational war".

To cast it as such would be ill-advised, he cautioned. "The phrase itself is patronising in many ways, implicitly or explicitly juxtaposing the cool, 'woke' millennial alongside a backward, older person," he said.

Bridging the gap

There are no easy answers to bridging the divide between millennials and baby boomers.

Associate Professor Thang Leng Leng, the co-director of NUS' Next Age Institute, suggested more dialogues to foster greater intergenerational understanding.

"We do the same for racial understanding, and understanding across genders. If people don't know each other, they would imagine the worst… so I think we should do more for generational understanding," Assoc Prof Thang said.

However, some millennials are doubtful that conversations are enough.

"I don't think (these differences) can be bridged. Even if you have a lot of conversations, what we want is for our parents to come down to our level, but they don't want to (do that)," said Ms Tan, the 34-year-old mother of two.

Mr G Tan, 56, believes that it is all about give and take.

When his 23-year-old daughter told him that she was dating a Caucasian man from the US, he was so upset that he did not want to speak to her for a few days.

Intercultural relationships were not common when he was growing up and he was afraid that his daughter, who was studying in the United Kingdom at the time, would emigrate overseas to be with him.

“I did not know his family background… and maybe it’s just tradition but her grandfather also didn’t approve. It came to a point where I was prepared to lose her,” Mr Tan said.

He gradually accepted it and learnt to see things from his daughter’s perspective.

He said: “Having four kids from the younger generation, you can’t outnumber them. So these are some things that we try to figure out, learn to accept and understand.”