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## Bridging the Gap: How the Generations Communicate

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## ABSTRACT

*This study examines intergenerational communication and perception. Using the Anxiety/Uncertainty Management theory and statistical analysis, the following research questions are examined: RQ1: What is the main cause for the generational disconnect between Baby Boomers and Millennials? RQ2: How do the different generations believe they are perceived by the others? Faculty and staff at a private, religious institution in the Midwest, employees of a manufacturing company, and participants from a social media site took an online survey with questions regarding preferred communication methods, ease of communicating with other generations, and self-perception within the generational title they associate most with. The study ultimately found that overall, it is not that generations inherently perceive each other negatively, but that generations believe they will be perceived negatively by others and act accordingly.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

In this study, the effects of the impact that new forms of communication have had on the generations' communication methods and intergenerational disconnect are examined. An example that inspired this research study is the grandparent-grandchild situation. Grandparents love to be able to talk to their grandchildren, regardless of the method (Hurme 2010). Whether that is over the phone or face to face, the "grandparent generation" mostly consists of those born in the Baby Boomer or Generation X generations. However, most grandchildren of these groups fall into the Millennial generation. While the grandparents would rather talk verbally or face to face, it seems that most grandchildren would rather text (Venter 2017). This split in the generations has caused a disconnect between common intergenerational groups such as grandparents and grandchildren.

We also see this disconnect in the working world and through organizational communication. As Millennials enter the workforce at higher levels each year, Baby Boomers may feel uncertain about what this means and what it means for their careers (Lyons 2016). Members of Generation X often find themselves in the “middle child” position and feel that they must make an attempt to soothe the disconnect between Millennials and Baby Boomers (Urick 2017).

To learn more about this generational disconnect, the following two research questions were created:

*RQ1: What is the main cause for the generational disconnect between Baby Boomers and Millennials?*

*RQ2: How do the different generations believe they are perceived by the others?*

These questions were created to help guide the study in hopes of finding more answers and information when it comes to intergenerational communication, as well as finding the root of the cause of intergenerational disconnect regarding Baby Boomers and Millennials.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### ***Introduction***

We often hear the term “generation” thrown around without any real knowledge of what the concept means. Why does it matter, and why is it important? As Venter (2017) found, there are many different ways of dissecting this concept but for the purpose of this research, we will be studying generations through a sociological approach. The sociological approach studies generations based on groups of individuals that share actions and representations because they are all around the same age and have lived during the same period.

Through this literature review we look at the generational gap differences, communication modality, and how the different generations use social media. Looking at these three concepts will help answer the main research question: What is the main cause for the generational disconnect between Baby Boomers and Millennials? These themes are essential to understanding how these generations communicate and why conflict can arise when our communication styles and methods don't quite match up.

### ***Generational Gap***

The generational gap is one of the biggest reasons for intergenerational disconnect. The largest generational gap is between the Baby Boomer (classified as being born more or less between 1946 and 1964) generation and the Millennial generation (classified as being born more or less between 1980 and 2000). Much of their conflict is rooted in their differing communication methods, styles, and how big the gap between the two generations is. Venter (2017) found that Baby Boomers prefer to communicate face to face, over email, and via telephone, while Millennials prefer to communicate face to face as well, over social media networking sites, and text messaging through their smartphones.

Baby Boomers grew up in an era when being successful in the workforce was their number one priority. Boomers are loyal, committed, reliable, and expect the same from others. Boomers' sense of accomplishment comes from excelling. Millennials have grown up experiencing technology and most have known it throughout the entirety of their lives (Venter 2017). They're masters at communicating technologically, mostly through social media networking sites, text messaging through their smartphones, and other mediums of digital technology (Leung 2013).

Some researchers believe that the Millennial generation's main use for social media sites is to achieve validation and affection from their peers. Venter (2017) believes that because Millennials grew up with "helicopter parents," or overprotective parents, they need more support and recognition from others in their lives, and could be seen as narcissistic. However, Boomers do not need this kind of support or recognition because they find it in their work and other activities, which causes them to sometimes view Millennials as narcissistic beings.

Leung (2013) studied the generational differences in motivations and narcissistic personalities when using Facebook, blogging sites, and forums. This study observed Baby Boomers, Generation X-ers (classified as being born more or less around 1965 and 1980), and Millennials' activity and motives for using the aforementioned social media sites. Similar to Venter's work, Leung also found that frequent social media site usage was best for narcissistic people to self-regulate and gain control over their surroundings. However, Leung's study ultimately found that there are no generational differences in using Facebook or blogging sites as a mean to satisfy affection or social needs and that Millennials were no higher in narcissistic tendencies than Baby Boomers or Generation X-ers.

The gap between Baby Boomers and Millennials is staggering, but Generation X-ers find themselves in the middle of the two, sometimes overlapping in both directions, serving as a "mediating generation." Members of Generation X find ease in relating to members of the Baby Boomer generation because many of them also had to learn to use technology and social media sites as they arose, but can also relate to the Millennial generation, as those are their children and their children's lives are saturated in the ever-changing world of technology.

Urlick (2017) believes Generation X must be up to the task of pairing the Millennial generation with strong mentors from past generations, such as Baby Boomers to create peace

between the two. Creating mentorships between younger and older generations helps us close the gap and prepares Millennials to work with the newest generation, Generation Z, also referred to as digital natives.

It is important to note that not all hope is lost when attempting to close the generational gap. Not only can we pair members of different generations together, but we can also begin to focus on differences in communication methods and style to assist in bridging the gap. Venter (2017) found that while both Baby Boomers and Millennials prefer face to face communication over any other method, it is not used most often because of time and planning restraints.

### ***Communication Modality & Interpersonal Communication***

Over the last 2 decades, technology has expanded at a rapid pace, which shifted how different aspects of work and everyday life changed. There are many more ways to communicate now than ever before and interpersonal communication has evolved (Swiggard, 2011). In many cases the generations that didn't grow up with social technology, such as the internet, may see a depletion of the traditional or "old" ways of communicating (Haserot 2009). Face to face, letter, and telephone were the only ways to communicate for the prime years of most Baby Boomers through Generation X. Baby Boomers may feel threatened by what they see as a radical shift in communication styles and may not be as open to embracing new technologies (Madison, 2016).

The two types of shift in interpersonal communication is from face to face to computer-mediated communication. Face to face communication is defined as interactions that allow people to communicate verbally or nonverbally with spoken and or body language (Venter 2017). Computer-mediated communication is the term for all types of communication via computers, such as email, text, and social media such as Facebook.

According to Daley (2014), Millennials like to communicate over text or internet because it allows them to have more control over their interactions than if the interaction was over the phone or face to face. According to Haserot (2009), the Millennial generation feels that Baby Boomers over-explain and overuse face to face meetings, which they believe can take vital time from other parts of their day. Baby Boomers on the other hand, believe Millennials over use email and texting when it would be more effective to communicate over the phone or meet in person. Overall, all generations believe in the importance and benefits of face to face communication, but they have trouble in finding balance between the two (Haserot 2009).

Baby Boomers were born in a time where they had to wait for things, unlike the Millennial generation where things are available instantaneously. Generation X is often referred to as the “middle child generation,” in between two very different yet influential generations. As the middle child, they look for a balance of values, explanations, and behaviors between Baby Boomers and Millennials (Urlick 2017). Looking at the differences in interpersonal communication styles, the preferred methods of interpersonal communication from each generation can be examined. However, this will not apply to all individuals within a generation, as some will prefer a communication approach that lies outside of the norm.

### ***Social Media Usage***

Social media and how has been used is still a relatively new and exciting field to study. In particular, a deeper look into exactly how different generations utilize their social media accounts will be analyzed. Those in the Millennial generation are more likely to use social media in their day to day lives because they are more familiar with it, whereas Baby Boomers have been exposed to this new technological world at a more advanced age and may be more hesitant to utilize these sites (Leung 2013).

The use of social media varies with the generations. According to Towner (2016), Millennials are more likely to get updates about political campaigns and news from their social media accounts. This is usually through posts that their friends have shared on social media. Baby Boomers, on the other hand, often still prefer to use more traditional mediums such as television, magazines, and newspapers to obtain similar kinds of information.

Chung (2010) detailed how the perception of privacy on social media sites differs among the generations. Younger adults that fall into the Millennial generation do not expect to maintain their online privacy in the same way that other generations might. This is because most have been raised with the internet their whole lives and see the act of sharing personal information online as a less serious concern than some members of the older generations.

Research has shown that Baby Boomers are more likely to use the internet and social media for finding health information, making purchases, and obtaining religious information. Unlike younger generations, they are less likely to use it for entertainment such as watching videos, downloading music, playing games, or reading blogs (Chung 2010). The article also goes on to explain that Baby Boomers are often times more skeptical of new technology. This is because older generations often believe that they are too old to learn a new technology and believe it may not be worth their time and effort.

In regard to direct communication with others, Baby Boomers tend to lean towards the more personalized methods of contacting others. They prefer to send emails or call others by phone if they cannot contact them face to face. According to Venter (2017), Baby Boomers rarely resort to using instant messaging for their interpersonal communication needs. This is because unlike Generation X, they grew up experiencing face to face interactions more frequently than computer mediated communication



Krishen (2016) found that as a result of being raised in such a technological society, Millennials commonly find multitasking online to be much easier than other generations. For example, watching videos or going onto Facebook while simultaneously writing a school paper is usually less difficult for them to accomplish than those belonging to older generations. Unfortunately, this difference in multitasking ability can lead to a gap in communication between Millennials and Baby Boomers (Krishen 2016).

### ***Conclusion***

Interpersonal communication has changed drastically over the lives of each generation. First, face to face communication was the main preferred type of communication for the Baby Boomer generation, as well as letters. Soon, Generation X began to use letters as well, in addition to telephone calls as different means of communicating. Most recently, Millennials have taken to text messaging, social media use, and different technologies to communicate. As time passes, new generations are born along with the constant and rapid changes in technology. The way communication has changed due to new technological changes are inevitable and will be ever changing. We must understand how the different generations communicate in order to assure that we do not lose touch with one another. In this study, different communication modalities, such as text messaging and social media use, will be examined to better explain how its changed interpersonal communication and how this affects the different generations of our time, including Baby boomers, Generation X, and Generation Y.

### **RESEARCH QUESTIONS & HYPOTHESIS**

In the year of 2017, there 3,855,500 people born in the United States (Martin, 2018). This means that 3,855,500 people were born into the new generation, and millions of people will

continue to be born each year and into a new generation. Our current situation of dealing with generational disconnect and discomfort is not an issue that will go away if we attempt to simply turn a blind eye to it. Rather, it will instead become increasingly more detrimental as new forms of communication continue to arise. Current research continues to reiterate that the generations are different and often have growing pains. Current research also highlights that the generations are unable to communicate effectively with each other and this causes even more of a disconnect (Towner 2016). With this in mind, the following research questions were formed to help make up for what current research lacks.

*RQ1: What is the main cause for the generational disconnect between Baby Boomers and Millennials?*

The hypothesis for the first research question is that generations that use technology to communicate as a main method will have more of a disconnect with those that use it less or are unfamiliar with it. As past research indicates, Millennials are more comfortable with using technology and use it frequently, while Baby Boomers tend to use it less often because of concerns about their privacy online (Chung 2010). Researcher Lyons in 2016 also found that Baby Boomers and Millennials have very different ideas of what success and productivity looks like, especially in the workplace. The researcher wanted to know if possibly this was a reason for the generational disconnect that we feel today.

*RQ2: How do the different generations believe they are perceived by the others?*

The hypothesis of the second research question is that the generations will believe that they are perceived mostly negatively by others. Based on past research, this hypothesis was created on

the understanding that each generation has their own ideas of what is to be prioritized in life and what different aspects of life must be present to give their personal lives meaning (Leung 2013).

## **METHOD**

### ***Participants***

Randomly selected faculty and staff employed at a faith-based institution in the Midwest were asked to participate in a survey and sent a link via email, as well as people employed at a manufacturing facility in the Midwest. Lastly, to increase replies, the survey was shared via a social media networking site, Facebook, and snowball sampling was used to increase the study's reach. The participants were provided with an email or social media post that included reasoning and explanation of the survey, approximation of the time it would take to complete, consent form, as well as a link to the survey. The survey asked participants to distinguish themselves as part of one of three generations: Baby Boomer (being born between 1946 and 1964, Generation X (being born between 1965 and 1980), and Millennial (being born between 1981 and 2000). The survey also asked for the sex that they identified as.

### ***Procedure & Design***

The survey was designed based around the hypothesis that generations that utilize technology more frequently have more of a disconnect with generations that primarily communicate face to face. This was a two-tailed hypothesis of relationship. Using the Likert Scale, differences in communication modality, willingness to communicate with those outside of their generation, and how the generations believe they are perceived by each other was measured. The self-administered survey contained mostly closed questions following the Likert Scale, and one open ended question at the end. Once the data had been collected, it was coded

and evaluated. We looked for commonalities and differences in responses. Responses were categorized into preferred communication modalities (i.e. face to face vs. social media), self-perception, and the how comfortable the different generations find themselves to be when in communication with others. The data was assessed in both a qualitative and quantitative manner and included descriptive statistics from the assessed Likert Scale survey responses. Quantitative analysis included chi square tests of association.

## RESULTS

A total of 374 responses were collected by distributing the electronic, self administered survey via Survey Monkey to determine factors that lead to the disconnect in communication between the generations. This survey contained a total of 21 questions including 20 closed-ended questions that follow the Likert scale and one open-ended question to help answer the given research questions and learn more about the different generation's communication styles and preferences. There were three main generations selected to be used to analyze the results: Millennials (N=149), Generation X (N=88), and Baby Boomers (N=102), meaning that 339 responses were used. 30 more responses were collected from members of the Silent and Digital Native generations. These responses were not used due to too small of a sample size and some participants not being over the age of 18. Of these 339 responses, 246 identified as female, 87 as male, and 6 chose not to disclose their sex or identified as "other." The results of these participants were then analyzed against the research questions and their hypotheses.

The inquiry that originally inspired this research-- why there is a disconnect between grandparents and grandchildren -- was lightly studied in the survey. One question asked participants whether they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: "I enjoy talking to my grandparents." 48% of participants said they agreed or strongly agreed with this statement.

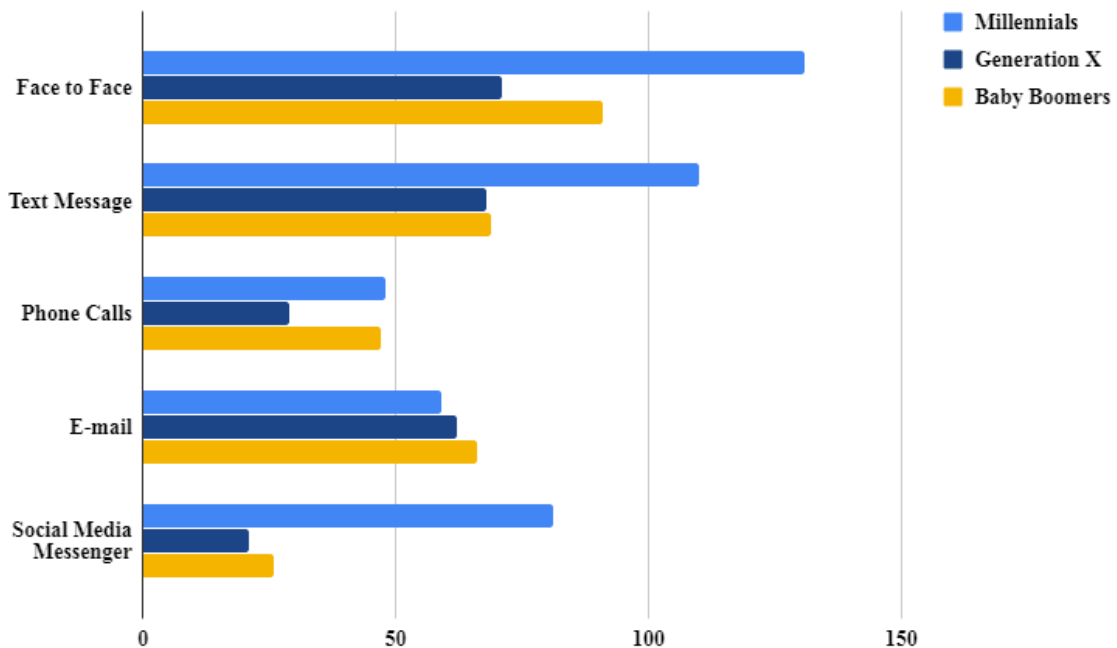
39% of participants did not have grandparents. Participants also had the option to leave a comment. Comments included reasons of why they did or didn't enjoy talking with their grandparents. Many mentioned that their grandparents were some of their favorite people, had a wealth of information, or expressed disdain that they did not spend as much time with their grandparents as they should have.

Participants were also asked if they agreed or disagreed with a similar statement: "I enjoy talking to my grandchildren." This question had less participants, as the majority of those that took the survey were a part of the Millennial generation, and many are not old enough to be grandparents. 11% of participants said that they strongly agreed with the above statement, while 82% of participants reported that they did not have grandchildren. Participants also had the option to comment on this question. Many of the comments expressed the desire for grandchildren, and one comment explained that while they enjoy communicating with their grandchildren, their communication modalities do not match; the participant prefers face to face, and their grandchildren prefer texting. These results were helpful in getting a better idea of how the generations actually feel about each other and help lead into the results found when analyzing the first research question.

To answer the first research question (what the main cause is for the disconnect between the Baby Boomer and Millennial generations), a chi square test of analysis was used to quantitatively assess the results. Using the test, the differences and similarities of communication modalities between Baby Boomers and Millennials was analyzed. At a 0.05 significance level, it was determined that there was no specific relationship between the generations and their main method of communicating ( $P = .063$ ). These findings failed to reject the null hypothesis. This

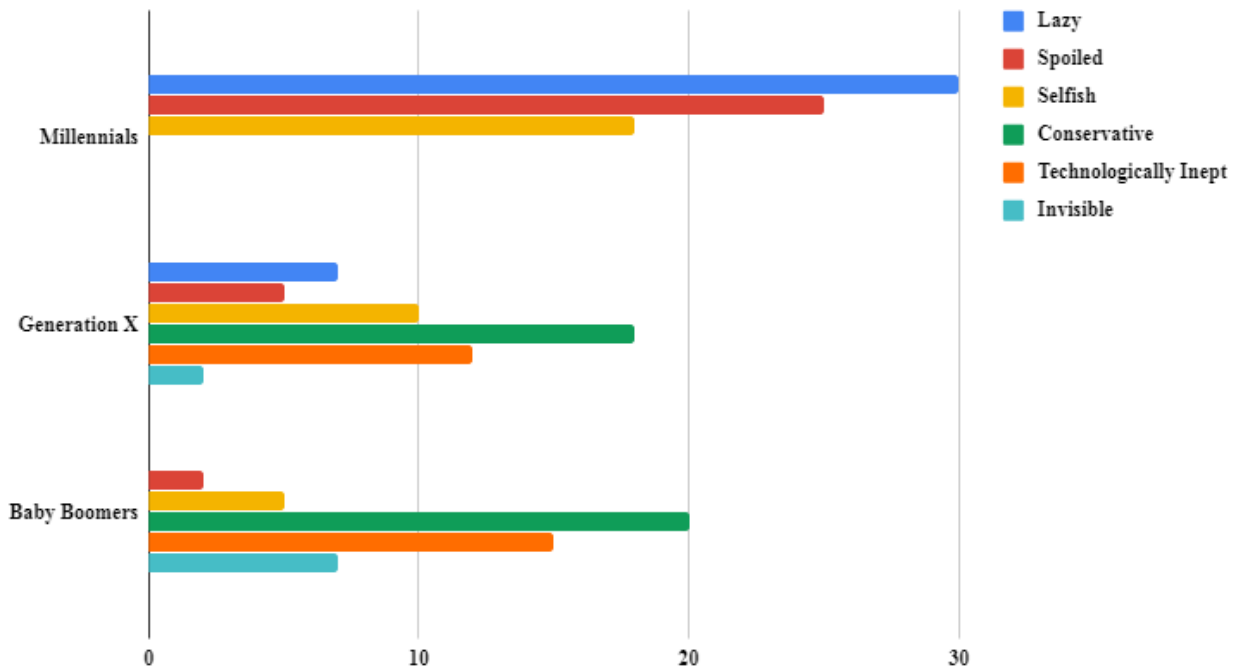
means that each generation's main communication methods were not different enough to be significant.

### Communication Methods



To determine how participants believe their individual generations were perceived by others, a word cloud was used. Using a word cloud generator with the responses from the open-ended question at the end of the survey, “How do you believe your generation is perceived by others?” words used most often by each generation to describe themselves were analyzed. It was hypothesized that each generation would believe that they are perceived negatively by others. Millennials used the following words to describe themselves the most: lazy (N=30), spoiled (N=25), and selfish (N=18). Generation X used the following words to describe themselves the most: conservative (N=18), technologically inept (N=12), and selfish (N=10). Baby Boomers used the following words to describe themselves the most: conservative (N=20), technologically inept (N=15), and invisible (N=7). These results were put into a bar graph to give a better visual:

### How the Generations Believe They are Perceived



Next, the responses from the statement: “In general, I get along well with other generations than my own,” were assessed using a chi square test of analysis. Participants had the option to choose whether they strongly agree, agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, disagree, strongly disagree, or neither agree nor disagree. 51% of Millennials stated that they agreed, along with 37.5% of Generation X and 46% of Baby Boomers. Less than 3% of all generations stated that they disagreed to any degree. A chi square test determined these results to be significant at the 0.05 level of significance ( $P=0.002$ ). From the results of this chi square test, it can be determined that the generations do not have an inherent dislike toward one another--generations may actually be more accepting of each other than they may think.

Though some results found through this study were not statistically significant, this does not mean that valuable results and information was not reached. Researcher Leung (2013) found that Baby Boomers may be more hesitant to use social media and technology because it is

something that they had to learn-- not something that they were born with. The statistical results found will help spur future research in the field of intergenerational communication and help us research new ways to close the generational gap.

Even though the results of the word cloud analysis tell us that the hypothesis is accurate - generations do believe they are perceived negatively --, it doesn't help us to explain *why* they believe they are perceived negatively. In fact, the chi square test of analysis tells us that they believe they get along well. As mentioned previously, they do not have any inherent dislike toward one another. If this is true, then why do they believe other generations think of them in such a negative light? The Anxiety/Uncertainty Management theory strives to help us better understand this quandary.

## DISCUSSION

### **Anxiety/Uncertainty Management Theory**

Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM) Theory seeks to understand how our communication changes to balance our anxiety or uncertainty in different social situations (Stephan, 1999). Created by William B. Gudykunst, this theory relies heavily on the initial findings of the Uncertainty Reduction Theory created in 1974 by Charles Berger and Richard Calabre. AUM theory helps to explain why some generations may seem to “put up a wall,” or be less responsive when interacting with generations out of their own based on stereotyping, whether this is accurate judgement or not. For example, a member of the Millennial generation may feel uncomfortable or uncertain when interacting with their grandparents, members of the Baby Boomer generation, because they may believe that their grandparents are not interested in the same activities or topics that they are interested in (Swiggard 2011). Venter (2017) tells us



that Millennials and Baby Boomers actually have more communication methods in common than different, and the results of this research tell us the same. However, this research does not outweigh the fact that each generation perceives that other generations think of them negatively.

The researcher hypothesized that the generations would perceive themselves negatively when asked to describe how they believed they were perceived. As formerly mentioned, this research found that many Millennials believe they are seen as lazy, selfish, and spoiled. Their perception is that older generations may see them as a hassle or annoying to communicate with--even though further results show that this is not the case. In fact, this study found that none of the surveyed generations felt that they did not get along well with members of other generations. However, because Millennials are convinced that older generations perceive them negatively, they may seem distant or unwilling to communicate with the older generations. As stated in the AUM theory, uncertainty greatly influences the way that people think about others. AUM theory continues to detail that uncertainty lies not only in knowledge, but also involves the degree to which people believe that others will behave in a predictable way (Stephan 1999). This can be linked to the disconnect between Millennials and Baby Boomers from a Baby Boomers' viewpoint.

Past research has found that Baby Boomers may feel threatened by new technology and the different ways to communicate (Madison 2016). Even though the results of the current study did not find this, still many Baby Boomers believed that other generations marked them as conservative, technologically inept, and felt that they are invisible. These beliefs were in line with what Krishen (2016) found; because Baby Boomers did not grow up with the internet and they feel insecure about their ability to communicate via the internet, social media, and text messaging. The behavioral aspect of AUM theory tells us that Baby Boomers may feel the same

way as Millennials- if they are perceived so negatively by the other, then why bother putting any effort into communication? This idea contrasts what this study found. Baby Boomers and Millennials actually have more communication methods in common than either do with Generation X. Uncertainty to some degree is present in any relationship, but is heightened when communicating with members of different groups (Stephan 1999). This may help to explain why the generations believe that they are perceived negatively-- because they feel uncertain, they assume the others do as well.

The researcher also hypothesized that the generations that preferred to communicate primarily through technology would have more of a disconnect with generations that use it less or are unfamiliar with it. In 2010, researcher Chung found that Millennials are more comfortable using technology and use it frequently, while Baby Boomers may be less likely to use technology to communicate because they are less comfortable with it and have more concerns about their privacy. He found that because of this, there is more of a disconnect between Baby Boomers and Millennials, as their preferred communication methods do not match.

However, other researchers found the opposite-- Baby Boomers and Millennials *do* have matching preferred communication methods. In a 2009 study by Haserot, he found that face to face communication was preferred by all generations, and that is what the researcher found in her study and results as well. Overwhelmingly, the generations all preferred to communicate face to face.

## LIMITATIONS

One of the main limitations of this study was finding an effective way to reach out to the Baby Boomer generation. The survey was spread through social media posts and email invitations.

Because not many members of the generation use social media or are active members, the researcher had to rely on the participants that were, which created less variety in the responses and ideas from Baby Boomers that participated. Using the snowball sampling method to increase the survey's reach, many of the Baby Boomers that were surveyed had similar responses or lived experiences. Research has shown that some Boomers are weary of using technology or social media for fear of a lack of privacy (Leung 2013). Navigating this presented an expected challenge as there were not as many varied responses or viewpoints from the Baby Boomer generation. Another limitation of this study was the time constraint. Unfortunately, this study was to be completed in one semester and less results were collected because of this.

Another limitation was that there may have been social desirability bias from those that took the survey. Social desirability bias is when one is concerned about their self-presentation and end up misreporting information in surveys (Krumpal 2016). This can occur because the participant may be trying to report information that they believe the researcher wants to hear, or because they are concerned about saving face. Because of this bias, some of the results may be skewed and could cause information in the study to be incorrect.

In addition, there was not an even amount of responses from each generation, which was to be expected, as some generations are more technologically inclined than others. Millennials had the highest response rate out of any of the other generations surveyed. The uneven number of responses may not accurately represent the opinions of the generations and could make some results look more or less significant. In addition, there could also be researcher bias, as the researcher is a member of the Millennial generation.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Suggestions for future research lie in the “how” part of this topic. There is ample research on the disconnect between the generations and how they communicate. Even though we know that their main and preferred communication methods of communication are similar, we do not know how to bridge this gap. Future research should focus on how we can begin to close the gap between the generations.

Past research has suggested that Baby Boomers should be paired to a Millennial by a member of Generation X to create a mentorship and strengthen the relationship between the two generations (Urick 2017). However, future research should focus on solutions more universal and ones that would be easier to implement. A solution that does not require the help of Generation X should also be studied.

## CONCLUSIONS

To summarize this study’s findings, it isn’t that generations inherently perceive each other negatively; but rather, there is a concern that they will be perceived negatively by other generations and act in accordance. Because the generations believe that they will be perceived negatively, their actions may not accurately represent how they really feel. Even though the generations all prefer to communicate face to face, there is still a level of anxiety when communicating with those of other generations (Venter 2017).

As mentioned in the Anxiety/Uncertainty Management Theory, people will alter their communication styles depending on how well they know the person they are communicating with and how comfortable they feel. This study was able to use this and apply it to the way that the different generations communicate with each other and perceive each other. Each generation

will experience some level of uncertainty when communicating with other generations. The level of uncertainty comes down to how well-acquainted they are with other generations. For example, if Millennials grew up living with members of the Baby Boomer generation, they will have less uncertainty communicating with other members of the Baby Boomer generation, versus a Millennial that grew up around members of Generation X.

New generations are being born every day and we must begin to consciously consider how we will keep up with new methods of communicating that will also continue to be born. How will we make sure that the different generations continue stay in touch with each other, and won't let new methods of communicating be a barrier?

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