

# Baby Boomer Culture Gets its Comeuppance

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The values from the thirty-year monopoly of the baby boomers may be finally coming to an end. It is called Generation Y. The *IPA Review* wonders if this is the beginning of the demise of the chattering classes?

**T**HE baby boom generation has been the defining force in Australian popular culture for three decades. But why? You are a baby boomer if you were born between 1946 and 1961 and you are currently aged between 42 and 57 years. Baby boomers are followed by generation X, born over the 15 years to 1976 and who in turn are followed by Generation Y, born over the 15 years to 1991. The *New Yorker* first used the term 'baby boomer' in 1979; Douglas Coupland invented Generation X as the title of his 1992 book. As for Ys, they are so named for no reason other than the fact that they follow Xers; therefore they must be Ys.

But why the dominance of the boomers? After all, there are more Xers (4.4 million at June 2001) than boomers (4.1 million). Part of the reason for this cultural dominance of boomers is the 'stepped difference' between their number, and the number of pre-boomers (2.5 million) born between 1931 and 1946. Whatever housing, shops, schools and factories were created to service the pre-boomers had to be upped by 64 per cent to accommodate the avalanche of boomers.

However, the infrastructure that was created to service the boomers had to be increased by only 10 per cent to accommodate the Xers. For this reason, boomers have been—and will remain—the leading cultural force within the Australian mass market. But the influence of

boomers goes well beyond their demand for services. As 20-somethings in the late 1960s, they changed fashion: the 'mop top' Beatles and long-haired hippies were at the forefront of social change. Indeed long hair remained in fashion for a quarter of a century after San Francisco's 1967 *Summer of Love* which introduced hippiedom into popular culture. But

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by the mid-1990s male baby boomers, then aged between 35 and 50, were confronted with thinning hair. The boomer response? Shave it all off and make popular the big No. 1 haircut. At the same time, the fashion colour 'black' seemed to gain ascendancy and was much favoured by middle-aged boomers. Part of the reason, I suspect, is that black is a

slimming colour and it 'just seemed to look right' on 'heavy' baby boomers.

Chic 40-something men were suddenly shaving their heads and wearing black as a fashion response to a thinning pate and a spreading waistline, although this 'look' transcended middle-aged boomers, and was adopted by über-chic Xers. It is not at all uncommon to see a 30-something male dressed in black and with a No. 1 haircut—even if there are no signs of either receding hairline or spreading girth. The point being that this fashion trend, forged of necessity by boomers, was adopted by Xers—totally complicit to this middle-aged fashion conspiracy.

But how lucky are the boomers? As they age, they change fashion to disguise the decline of their bodies. Boomers were less kind to their elders in the late 1960s: long hair, shabby clothing and beards were part of a uniform that defined 'their generation' as being quite different to the preceding generation. John Lennon confirmed this intergenerational divide when, at the age of 28 in 1968, he declared 'Don't trust anyone over 30!' Three decades on and the boomers have shifted the goal posts with a new refrain: '40 is the new 30'. All of this was travelling along quite nicely until the turn of the century when, out of left field, came Generation Y—the children of the baby boomers. This lot now comprises the nation's teenagers and young adults.

**REVIEW**

Ys have rejected baby-boomer denim and replaced this with canvas; they have also rejected baby boomer brands and embraced their own labels such as Globe, Fubu, Billabong, Mooks and Stussy. Generation Y has not only rejected boomer culture and fashion, they are celebrating their time in life. Over the last 12 months, Generation Y teenage girls have evolved a fashion look that is quintessentially 'young'. The midriff is exposed and jeans are lowered to sit squarely—and precariously—on the widest part of the hips. The reason why this look is fashionable is that it cannot be copied by a 45-year old baby boomer woman. Or to put it more accurately: this look *should not* be copied by a 45-year-old baby boomer woman.

It is part of Y's rejection of boomer's middle age. It screams: 'I'm young and slim and you're not'. The low-cut jeans look is much more than mere 'youthful fashion'; it has been carefully engineered, by a process of Darwinian evolution, to accentuate and celebrate youth.

Can this be the beginning of a new youth revolution? Popular culture has been relatively free of intergenerational bickering for some decades. The proposition is that baby boomers have determined both the popular culture and mass-market agenda for three decades. They have been able to achieve this positioning because of their number relative to the number of people in the preceding generation. And boomers will continue to be a powerful consumer force for some time yet. The youngest baby boomer will not pass beyond superannuation age of 55 until 2016. Most boomers are currently at the peak of their life-time earning power, although as they approach and pass into their 50s they will increasingly embrace the concept of stepping-back: 'perhaps do a bit of a sea change'.

This is not retirement: 'retirement is for old people' they will argue. Although they will, they must, wind down over the balance of this

decade. And as they do so, they will underpin demand for lifestyle residential property. They will embrace the concept of 'work-life balance'; they will be attuned to marketing concepts such as 'looking after yourself': day spas; looking good; staying fit; investing in their relationships. I also argue that the boomer will actually embrace religion as they suddenly realize the dreadful truth that they are not immortal.

But, boomers being boomers, they will do it differently: possibly this innate desire to 'make peace with their maker' will find expression in

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an embrace of what they will term 'spiritualism'. This ascendant interest and concern for 'repairing the damage' extends neatly into the pharmaceutical industry: nicotine patches; weight loss; cosmetic surgery/dentistry; looking good by clinging, perhaps, to the last vestiges of youth; and ... Viagra! (Oddly enough, baby boomers demanded, and got, the female contraceptive pill as they approached puberty in the early 1960s.)

The property industry will be directly affected by boomers' search for lifestyle residential property within a 90-minute commute of a capital city. Generation Y, on the other hand, encouraged by their boomer parents, will continue to delay mar-

riage—and will continue to follow fashion that celebrates their youth—and either remain in the family home until their mid-20s or move into an inner-city apartment. This, too, is a rejection of boomer culture. Boomers lowered the average age at first marriage to 21 for women by 1971; the current crop of 20-somethings had pushed this out to 28 by 2001.

Boomers' tilt at the work-life balance suddenly supports demand for tele-commuting from sea change, or hill change, places. Xers and Ys require instant communication to coordinate the busy social lives of non-committed 20-somethings. Ys take full ownership of SMS text messaging: it fits their budget; it requires dexterity of fingers and thumbs (Boomers cannot be bothered with all of this, and they are less constrained financially—although this will change). SMS 'texting' is also a way for Ys to further distinguish their generation as being quite different to that of boomers in much the same way that Y girls expose their midriff: they text and they bare their bellies because boomers can do neither! It's another way of saying 'I'm young and you're not'. Perhaps there's scope for a new television series: *Text and the City*. The message from all of this is that while there may be 20 million consumers in Australia, this market is very much comprised of a 'loose confederation of warring tribes'.

Such tensions are likely to gather momentum as retiring baby boomers demand the re-allocation of national budgets away from, say, education to, say, health. Perhaps this fashion revolt is just the beginning. Perhaps a Generation Y comedian will strike a chord with the mass market in 2016 with this: 'What's the difference between a retired baby boomer and a leech? Leeches die quicker!'

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