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OK, Boomer: The Impact of Age Based Language Ideologies

Cover Page Footnote

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Abstract

In 2019, memes containing the phrase *Ok, Boomer* flooded social media as conflict between generations became more prevalent. Terms with similar connotations, like snowflake, already maintained a stronghold in mainstream discourse, creating a niche for additional age-related terms. Examining memes, tweets, and podcasts, I work to examine the impact terms like *Ok, boomer* have on online discussions. While it can be argued this type of communication reflects ritualized insults similar to that found in Labov's writings or Delfino's examination of joning, such comments show an ideology deeper than hierarchal establishment. When compared to samples found in social media and a *National Public Radio* podcast, this research indicates a larger age-based language ideological issue, reflecting presumption and negative stereotypes related to age. These ideologies echo the tension between generations online, demonstrating issues similar to that discussed by Crystal Kadakia in her book discussing the difficulties millennials encounter in the workplace. This project examines the usage of age-related insults in modern discourse and the language ideologies it reflects using a digital discourse analysis.

Keywords: Ok Boomer, Language Ideologies, Ageism, Presumption

Introduction

2019 saw the rise of the TikTok meme *Ok, boomer* which quickly circulated into other social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook. While terms with similar connotations, like *snowflake*, already maintained a stronghold in online discourse, this meme adjusted the niche to include new insults in a similar formula. Phrases like *Ok, noob* and *Ok, millennial* added to the phrase's spread and demonstrated certain language ideologies reflected in the term. In turn, this helped to indicate commonly spread ideas in the social media environment. Examples like *Ok, Boomer* showed more than just a difference in terms used by those of different generations. They indicated specific ideologies which serve to create further schism between already tense groups online.

The *Applied Linguistics Journal* refers to language ideologies as “sets of beliefs about language articulated by users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use” (Vessey 2017). Most notably relevant in this context are presumption and ageism, that is negative stereotypes related to age. Age based insults are hardly a new concept. Younger generations will frequently develop insults like *fogey* or *fuddy-duddy* to mark their fears of becoming the next generation or to indicate derision at the older groups political opinions while older generations view the perceived difference in performance between two age groups (Elliot-O'Dare 2019). Such distinctions are frequently drawn by the interlocutor and frequently fail to encompass the identity of the person addressed. Nevertheless, the usage of these terms show age variation in language as older adults refer to younger as *snowflakes* and younger adults refer to older as *boomers*. These terms not only serve as aged based insults between two distinct groups, but also work to mark the ideologies which lie between them.

Defining some terms

Before diving further into the discussion of online discourse and the ideologies reflected there, a few key terms require defining. This allows for better understanding of the ideologies reflected. The word *generation* refers to a unit in a system of nomenclature which groups people together with certain time periods (*Oxford English Dictionary* 2019). These are typically done within a prescribed range of birth years, although the limits placed upon the age range can frequently be impacted by key events commonly associated with an age bracket. For example, the Pew Research Center defines the term *Baby Boomers*, or *boomers* as born between 1946 and 1964, immediately after World War Two when families were being established from returning veterans. The event of the veterans returning from the second World War as well as their reception demonstrates key events which created the base line for the Baby Boomer generation. Those in Generation X, sometimes called *Gen x-ers*, were born from 1965-1980. *Millennials* are seen as the age group born between 1981 and 1996 (Fry 2018). A key feature generally tied to this age bracket is that they were either adolescents or children during the switch from the twentieth to twenty-first centuries. The events immediately before the millennial switch, such as the Y2K fears, and those falling after, like 9/11 and the invasions of Iraq and Iran, had profound impacts on the coming of age time period of this generation. Those born after this era, beginning in 1997, are frequently defined as Generation Z, with an end time usually described at 2010 (Fry 2018).

None of these divisive terms are categorized by the individuals they describe. Rather, they can be thrust upon a person regardless of identity. Nomenclature is rarely voted upon by the subjects categorized. This allows for the terms to be seen as scientific, which adds validity in the eyes of the public to the lines drawn between age brackets and makes increases the socially acceptable usage of such terms as an insult or to further spread the division between the age

brackets. For example, a person who is not a classically defined as a *Boomer* because they were either born too early or too late can still be called one online if the interlocutor perceives they are matching traits of such a person.

Literature Review

At first glance, this level of age based insult could be seen as lighthearted attempts to establish a social hierarchy online. Such hierarchies are common in most human interaction as one member establishes their belonging or even dominance in the group via insults. Indeed, age related insults online could be interpreted as falling in line with the work of William Labov's studies into the ritualized insults or joning, the usage of hierarchy establishing comments, used in inner city Black English and how this works less to insult than to establish dominance such as when children insult each other's mothers in order to place the other in a lower social position (Labov 1972). Ritualized insults certainly hold their place in discourse, as was supported by Jennifer Delfino in examining how school aged children in Baltimore use joning to maintain their roles in society (2016). However, the usage of *Ok, boomer* is more precise and less interchangeable for different scenarios. A person might refer to another's mother as a duck and be seen as joning for a social position, attempting to express already asserted dominance, or to join in with others already insulting (Labov 1972). But the usage of *Ok, boomer* relies on communicating the same message of distaste from one generation to another. Based on this line of reasoning and Labov and Delfino's research, *Ok, Boomer* falls more in line with expressing negative stereotypes, rather than a ritualized insult or joning.

Age based ideologies online work to mirror themselves, with groups on either side of a divide using discourse about the other. In the case of *Ok, Boomer*, discourse has reached balance

with the term *snowflake*. Crystal Kadakia's book *The Millennial Myth* discusses the impact of millennials in the workplace and negative stereotypes they frequently encounter, which frequently includes encountering the balancing insults. It works to debunk some of the more common misconceptions about this generation, and, by doing so, it provided insights into age based ideologies like presumption. Kadakia (2017) explores the stereotypes that "millennials are lazy, entitled, job-hopping, need to be handheld, and have issues with authority" (Kadakia). Naturally, this opens consideration into the impact from other directions, such as the negative stereotypes that boomers are stuck in their ways or at fault for economic crises. Whether these ideologies share any truth or not is outside the purview of this study. Rather, I examined the impact of the markers and the ideologies they reflect.

Data Collection

Throughout the research process I gathered samples of digital discourse on social media to better understand the usage of age based insults like *Ok, Boomer*. This process largely involved the collection of memes and threads from a variety of sites and with a plethora of mediums, from text to images, and from gifs to videos. My primary source of information came from TikTok itself as well as Twitter and other forms of social media. I only used memes published in public forums to avoid conflicts of interest or invasion of privacy. This allowed me to better explore the social impact of age based insults and the language ideologies they reflect. Likewise, I sought to include samples of *Ok, Boomer* being used in non-social media settings. To accomplish this, I gathered information from already published podcasts and news programs. In November 2019, National Public Radio published an episode of their podcast *Ia*, a news round robin discussion. The episode in question discussed the impact of *Ok, boomer* both online and the real-world perceptions the

term represents. Using samples from this episode, I transcribed several comments which demonstrate the language ideologies presumption and ageism. These are also reflected in the memes and tweets located online.

Presumption

The *Journal of Pragmatics and Cognition* regards presumption as a key part of discourse analysis which “reveals the differences in interlocutor’s interpretations of an utterance” (Macagno 2017). In essence, every conversation must be based upon an assumption of some type. The speakers must assume the hearer will understand the same variety of language and will have had enough similar experiences to have a well-balanced discourse. The interlocutor in an online discourse must assume much more. They must expect the hearer or reader to have access to the same site, to share similar interests, and to agree on at least a few fundamental points. Examining the presumptions behind a speaker’s statement allows for better understanding of the opinions expressed.

In the episode of *Ia*, a millennial interviewees said “I think it’s based on a lot of older people just thinking you could bootstrap our way to success and not realizing the job market has actually changed and it’s now more difficult to find stable employment” (Johnson 2019). The speaker’s statement about the attitudes of other generations has some faulty assumptions. They refer to other age based groups without regards for the struggles each generation has faced. Each new generation encounters its own triumphs and tragedies. The Greatest Generation saw two world wars and the Great Depression. Baby Boomers had recessions and the Vietnam war as well as the Civil rights movement. Millennials faced the recession in the early part of the twenty-first century as well as racial struggles and wars in the Middle East. As new children are born and mature, they

face hurdles and challenges which are frequently used to define their generation. Each group has faced their own defining crises. While some of the speaker's comments were undoubtedly justified in expressing their own generations struggles, their statement as a whole suggests a presumption revealed as language ideology by disregarding previous generation's difficulties in the job market and economy.

Similarly, my examinations of online conversation revealed presumption being used in discourse regarding millennials. Most discussion of this meme refers to millennials as the creators of *Ok, Boomer*. However, the appearance of this term on TikTok, a social media platform designed for, and primarily used by those characterized in Generation Z (Meola 2020), exemplifies the presumption commonly occurring on internet platforms. Many of the memes and social responses to this term associate its origins with Millennials, yet all evidence shows that it likely originated with Generation Z. The connection of this term to the age bracket puts an unwarranted assumption upon the user based on generation, rather than actual age and identity.

This type of presumption is largely based on drawing distinctions between those of different groups and having these lines affirmed in online discourse. With the *Ok, Boomer* example, there is a line of derision drawn between old and young marked with the assumed belief that all people of a given generation are the same. This carries on into the permutations of *Ok, Boomer* (see Figure 1)



Figure 1: *Ok, n00b*

This image includes a screen shot from a public tweet in the format of the *Ok, Boomer* insult with the adaption to a more technologically savvy individual. Here the user is assuming that the person they are referring to is not competent at using the internet, marking them as a *n00b*, or outsider from their own group. However, the pattern of the insult shows a likely presumption about the other reader's age, that they are in the Baby Boomer generation. Thus, the user is assigning not only levels of competency to the person being insulted, but also an age bracket which may have nothing to do with the victim's identity

Ageism

Not only do terms like *Ok, Boomer* demonstrate presumption on behalf of the speakers and those who comment on them in future discourse, they can demonstrate a clear ageist-based ideology. These negative stereotypes are often reflected in speech and generally have little to do with the speaker's actual identity as presumption continues to play a key role (Bouson 2016). A person can find themselves grouped in an age based category based on looks or actions at any given time. In this way ageism relies on presumption to form categorization, even if it the actual classification is incorrect. Bouson refers to women being referred to as older than they feel, and thus treated differently than those in their own age bracket. This demonstrates ageism among women. When reapplied to *Ok, Boomer*, it is easy to view lines of presumption which view an underlying ageist ideology.

In the previously mentioned *NPR* round robin, one of the interviewees mentioned: "I think the *Ok, Boomer* is, it's a backlash to that if anything because the first thing we heard was snowflake...as a response to that you hear people just saying *Ok, Boomer*" (Johnson 2019). The speaker perceives the older generation as expressing ageism in the term *snowflake*. Indeed, the

perception has some merit and is the result of negative stereotypes directed at younger speakers. This individual sees the age marked insult coming at them, which they feel is justly retaliated with their own insult. When examined through an ideological analysis, this shows a potential underlying ageism in both groups by explaining the justification for the *Ok, Boomer* response.

Like many stereotypes, political elections allow for more venues for ageism to be expressed as a linguistic ideology. *Ok, Boomer*, as a meme popular in 2019, a year full of political discussion as the United States prepared for a presidential election, allowed for these insults to take on a more political flair which, nonetheless, continued to press the ageist ideologies. Most prominently, certain younger speakers noted the similarities between former presidential candidate Michael Bloomberg's name and the term *Boomer* (see Figure 2)



Figure 2: *Ok, Bloomberg*

This comment certainly demonstrates presumption by placing Bloomberg in the Baby Boomer generation, when he was born four years before its start (Murphy 2001). The speaker is

placing a term upon Bloomberg without actually considering his identity, demonstrating an adaptation of the term. What was once used to mock a specific age bracket was extended to a non Baby Boomer. The described person is older than a Generation Z person, so presumption leads to an evolution of the term to anyone meeting a certain stereotype. However, the greater focus is on the ageism represented in this usage of the meme. In November 2019, Twitter saw a surge in the hashtag #OKBLOOMBERG, which demonstrated an ageist ideology against the political candidate by pairing the usage with other negative stereotypes frequently associated with the Baby Boomer generation, namely those of financial security (see Figure 3).



Figure 3: Purchasing Power

These ageist ideas are reflected in numerous tweets such as in Figure 3 where Bloomberg is connected with his wealth, rather than his political views. Whether the former candidate's viewpoints serve any merit is outside the focus of this analysis, which inspects more the ideologies reflected. Nevertheless, the comment brings focus more to his generational ties than his political ideologies, thus serving to tie him with a certain age group, rather than studying the merit or lack thereof behind his presidential aspirations.

These usages and others demonstrate how language shows the ideologies that those of a different age are other and should be marked with their own insult, effectively demonstrating ageism. They are often played off as humor, such as when paired comedic images. Insults like *Ok, Boomer* and *snowflake* show the distance between Baby Boomers and Millennials. This type of marker shows the negative stereotype associated with certain age groups that are unconsciously considered when speaking.

Conclusion

The internet, like most mediums of communication, contains a plethora of discourse. The usage of the internet does not restrict or limit the variety of conversation happening in comparison to that of the real world. Public conversations have allowed for a breeding ground for demonstrations of various language ideologies both positive and negative. This is especially true when major events in the outside world are discussed in the virtual realm, such as when political candidates appear online. In the past year, this was most commonly demonstrated with age variation based ideologies in the meme *Ok, Boomer*. These echo the tension between generations online as Baby Boomers, Millennials, and Generation Z work to find a balance in relations. While the actual linguistic features like *Ok, Boomer* change from generation to generation, they share a common demonstration of ideologies toward specific age groups like presumption and ageism.

Terms like *Ok, Boomer* and other similar age based insults have clear impacts on online discourse by emphasizing the schism already drawn and working to create greater distance between the two groups. In my research for this project, I noted cases of justification which defend the usages of the term, yet the very act of using it demonstrated ideologies and stereotypes placed upon specific age groups. Although other age based variations and insults already exist in online

discourse, such as *snowflake*, the ideologies of presumption and ageism are clearly expressed in this meme.

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