"A Toxic Trend"?: Generational Conflict and Connectivity in Twitter Discourse Under the

#BoomerRemover Hashtag

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Abstract

Background and Objectives: This study examines the #BoomerRemover hashtag on Twitter to understand discourses of intergenerational conflict and unity that emerged during the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) global pandemic. The research highlights conflict and connection surrounding generational cohorts via social media, particularly in a time of crisis.

Research Design and Methods: The study used an inductive-dominant qualitative content analysis to examine 536 tweets collected between March 9 and April 9, 2020 under #BoomerRemover.

Results: Data analysis revealed five forms of conflictive generational discourse: derogatory endorsement of the #BoomerRemover moniker, conflict regarding the nature and origins of the moniker, conflict surrounding the virus, political conflict, and generational jabs. Two forms of intergenerationally unifying discourse were identified: implicit and explicit pleas for connectivity.

Discussion and Implications: The analysis of discourse under #BoomerRemover revealed more nuanced expressions surrounding generational cohorts than widely reported in media outlets. Some users tweeted the hashtag in ways that reflected conflict, with #BoomerRemover acting as a vector through which stereotypes were perpetuated and magnified. However, a number of users tweeted the hashtag to call for intergenerational connectivity, highlighting the complexity of online discourse. These results yield implications for the study of online generational discourse, particularly in light of the unique circumstances surrounding the pandemic.

Keywords: generational identity, discourse, intergenerational conflict, social media

Social media offered users an outlet for sharing anxieties surrounding the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing shelter-in-place orders globally. Although some social media communications during the pandemic attempted to connect different generations to proactively fight the virus together (Schulman, 2020), others captured fractured intergenerational identities (Gerhardt, 2020) and conflicts (Hoffower, 2020a), often pitting Baby Boomers against younger generations (Hoffower, 2020b). Pointing to the virus' disproportionate effect on aging populations, the #BoomerRemover hashtag began trending on Twitter in March 2020. Similar to other points of intergenerational discourse online, such as the #OKBoomer hashtag (Lim & Lemanski, 2020), #BoomerRemover offered unique insights into discourse surrounding generational cohorts and ensuing conflict and connectivity on social media, especially in light of the pandemic's unique context. Widely circulating media narratives (Hoffower, 2020a; 2020b) surrounding #BoomerRemover have focused on its promotion of intergenerational conflict. However, building upon previous research regarding generational identification, stereotyping, and online discourse, we argue that the discourse under the hashtag reveals a more nuanced space of communication.

Literature Review

Construction of Generational Differences

The term "generation" has been broadly used but unclearly defined (Pritchard & Whiting, 2014). Its meaning has shifted from *associations with kinship* to *membership in a social group* (Pritchard & Whiting, 2014). Most often, it is associated with a person's "birth cohort," or group of individuals born in the same time period who share common experiences (Alwin & McCammon, 2014; Carlsson & Karlsson, 1970). Some scholars (Lyons et al., 2019; Mannheim, 1952; Urick et al., 2017) have argued generations are not merely a demographic category reducible to individual differences, but rather a social mechanism comprising collective beliefs, ideas, and attitudes. This perspective "views generations as inter-related and multi-dimensional social groups that take shape within the flow of history" (Lyons & Kuron, 2014, p. S140). Individuals may associate themselves with

cohort or age-based identity labels like "Baby Boomer," "Generation X, "Generation Y," and "Millennial," but their overall generational identity is more complex. Generational identity, by contrast, accounts for self-conceptualization derived from a shared set of values, expectations, behaviors, and beliefs across members of a cohort of individuals close in age who share common experiences (Urick et al., 2017). This multidisciplinary, identity-based approach posits generational identity as a "multifaceted construct" that describes "an individual's knowledge that he or she belongs to a generational group/role, together with some emotional and value significance to him or her of this group/role/membership" (Urick et al., 2017, p. 393).

Organizational literature has heavily focused on generational identity and conflict in the workplace, often drawing upon stereotyping, intergroup, and social identity theories in understanding generational identification and tensions (e.g., Joshi et al., 2010; Lyons et al., 2019; Urick et al., 2017). Intergroup theory overarches a cluster of theories suggesting that identities, including those constructed within a generational cohort, can be both individual and social (Williams & Nussbaum, 2013). Under this umbrella, social identity theory (SIT) captures elements of an individual's identity through group memberships as they categorize themselves and others based on similarities and differences (Tajfel, 1978). Specifically, the theory suggests that people derive their identity through group memberships and social comparison. This may yield a positive ingroup orientation and negative outgroup orientation, resulting in discrimination against outgroups (Levy et al., 2013, Urick et al., 2017).

Hogg and Terry (2001) argued that social identity may occur through self-enhancement and sociocognitive processes of categorization that delineate groups. Such categorization enhances one's own ingroup as superior to the outgroup. These categorizations may extend to stereotypes (Haslam et al., 1999), cognitive structures linking attributes such as personality traits and physical characteristics with social categories (Perry et al., 1994). In line with this, literature has documented age-based and generational stereotypes (e.g., Appelbaum, et al., 2005; Posthuma & Campion, 2009),

which may accompany generational conflicts (Binstock, 2010). Perry and colleagues (2013) described common generational stereotypes, finding Baby Boomers, born 1943-1960, were stereotyped as technologically inexperienced, old, traditional, resistant to change, and valuing monetary rewards; Gen X, born 1961-1981, were stereotyped as technologically savvy, self-centered, lazy, and young; Gen Y/Millennials, born 1982 and later, were stereotyped as technologically savvy, young, dependent upon technology to communicate, lazy, and entitled. Despite this, Urick and colleagues (2017) noted a lack of scholarship explaining how and why stereotypes and intergenerational differences produce conflict. They suggest, "conflict or tension can be generated as a result of perceptions of generational differences in values and behaviors even before any interactions occur" (p. 166).

Intergenerational Discourse in Social Media and COVID-19

Traditional news media have also captured intergenerational conflict, emphasizing differences between generations and the limitation of resources and money, increasing the likelihood of conflict through stereotypes (Binstock, 2010). These depictions pit cohorts against each other, especially when members aim to demonstrate generational superiority (Nussbaum et al., 2001).

The growth and popularity of social media sites, like Facebook and Twitter, afforded another space for generational discourse (Oz et al., 2018). These platforms provide connectivity and intellectual dialogue (Papacharissi, 2004), and generate rich sites of identity construction in a highly visible cultural space (Stokes & Price, 2017). However, concerns have been raised about growing instances of incivility and conflict in discourse on these platforms (Coe et al., 2014; Oz et al., 2018). Most recently, Lim and Lemanski (2020) argued that social media shared space with traditional mass media in creating touchpoints of conflict between generations in light of the popularization of the term "OK Boomer," pitting Millennials and Gen Z against Boomers (Gonyea & Hudson, 2020;

Meisner, 2020). Similarly, Levy and colleagues (2013) found social media was a space for generational stereotyping that highlighted negativity and conflict.

Still, such research does not take into account how generational dynamics function in the unique circumstances presented by COVID-19. Scholarship has pointed out the often-contradictory nature of collective behaviors during a crisis (Smith et al., 2019). While some research has documented that crises, including COVID-19, can induce and magnify polarization (Maher et al., 2020), contrary findings show that such events have the potential to bring about pro-social attitudes and behaviors. These include a desire to help others, which is associated with collective coping (Maki et al., 2018).

As COVID-19 spread and individuals social distanced, people altered how they engaged with media and communicated with others (Meisner, 2020). According to Meisner's critical commentary, COVID-19 sparked a resurgence of ageism on social media through the posting of hostile messages, exposing tension between Boomers and Millennials. Meisner showed concern that these posts perpetuated population cleansing by promoting messages that called for the virus to cull older adults, and supported policies that fail to protect this group from COVID-19. Similarly, Jimenez-Sotomayor et al. (2020) found that one-quarter of their sampled COVID-related tweets included ageist or offensive characterizations of older adults. Ayalon and colleagues (2020) also noted that the COVID-19 outbreak resulted in ageist discourse that perpetuated intergenerational conflict though messages that focused only on older adults' susceptibly to the disease or younger adults' reckless disregard for public health directives.

Our study seeks to answer Ayalon et al.'s (2020) call for research that may positively influence COVID-19 public discourse and reduce conflict by emphasizing intergenerational solidarity. Expanding on extant research examining online discourse as a space for intergenerational conflict, our study also considers connectivity and community under #BoomerRemover. Thus, we posed the following research questions:

RQ1: How is conflict surrounding generational cohorts expressed in discourse under #BoomerRemover?

RQ2: How is connectedness surrounding generational cohorts expressed in discourse under #BoomerRemover?

Method

Using an inductive-dominant approach to qualitative content analysis (Armat et al., 2010), this study investigated the presence of conflict and connectivity under #BoomerRemover. Conflict focused on expressions of tensions surrounding generational cohorts (Urick et al., 2017) and was characterized by behaviors such as aggressive commenting, rude critiques, hate speech, and threats (Oz et al., 2018). Connectedness was characterized by expressions of intergenerational solidarity (Bengtson & Oyama, 2007), defined as social cohesion between generations establishing shared expectations and obligations regarding aging and the succession of generations (Bengtson & Oyama, 2007). It is important to note that solidarity does not imply the absence of conflict, as these constructs are not mutually exclusive and may, in fact, coexist (Bengtson & Oyama, 2007).

Data Collection & Sample

We used ScrapeHero, a proprietary datamining service, to collect 6,768 tweets under #BoomerRemover between March 9 and April 9, 2020, when the hashtag trended. All tweets were publicly available at the time of the search. Content was limited to English-language tweets. Following previous sampling practices (Ahmed, 2019; Lachmar, et al., 2017), a random sub-sample comprising 10% of the dataset (N = 676) was assembled for analysis. Each observation included username, handle, tweet content, replies, retweets, favorites, timestamp, date posted, URL linking to each tweet, and corresponding hashtags. Tweets including photos, videos, or GIFs were reviewed for context. Data were further cleaned to remove advertisements, SPAM, unrelated tweets, and tweets that lacked enough context for analysis, resulting in a final dataset of 536 tweets. This

treatment is consistent with previous research analyzing Twitter hashtags (Clark, 2016; Lachmar et al., 2017). The sample included 518 unique posters (96%) with multiple tweets from the same poster occurring 40 times (7%).

This analysis was most concerned with how tweets under #BoomerRemover captured conflictive or connective poster expressions regarding generational cohorts; therefore, demographics of specific posters become peripheral to the expressions themselves. Twitter does not provide demographic information for posters, and some research (e.g., Goga et al., 2015; Sloan, 2017) points out the limitations and unreliability of publicly provided social media demographic information. To offer additional context about posters in our exemplars, we relied upon self-identification of generational cohort membership, as well as language within the postings when available.

Data Analysis

This study applied an inductive-dominant (Armat et al., 2010) hybrid of conventional qualitative content analysis and directed qualitative content analysis. A conventional qualitative content analysis uses inductive techniques and provides researchers with a flexible approach to data analysis, favoring the allowance of categories and their labels to derive from the data over preconceived categories (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). A directed qualitative content analysis takes a deductive approach to apply "theory or prior research" to "help focus the research question" and "provide predictions about the variables of interest or about the relationships among variables, thus helping to determine the initial coding scheme or relationships between codes" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1281). Our approach addresses the natural dualism in qualitative content analysis, providing for processes that capture both inductive and deductive techniques in tandem (Armat et al., 2018). Through our inductive-dominant process, we allow that the "analyst's mind is not entirely blank at the beginning of the study; instead, he has the research question(s), study aim(s), and/or some

pertinent assumptions, practically directing his analysis" while also considering that "new categories will emerge inductively" (p. 219).

Following processes outlined by Hsieh and Shannon (2005), data analysis began with the first and second authors independently "reading all data repeatedly to achieve immersion and obtain a sense of the whole" (p. 1279). Second, the first and second authors reviewed the tweets line-by-line to begin forming codes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). As aforementioned research has captured conflict and connectedness within intergenerational communication (e.g., Bengtson & Oyama, 2007; Joshi et al., 2010; Lyons & Kuron, 2014; Urick et al., 2017), the current research deductively aimed to describe expressions of conflict and connectedness surrounding generational cohorts under #BoomerRemover. However, following a more inductive process, subthemes were allowed to emerge from these overarching categories to capture the nature of conflict and connectedness. The first and second authors independently noted patterns in the data and conferred with one another to identify and label themes, or categories, and relationships among them to create subthemes (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The first and second authors then reviewed subthemes for consistency and clarity to ensure they coalesced to produce an accurate reflection of the discourse. As a result, five forms of conflictive generational discourse emerged: derogatory endorsement of the #BoomerRemover moniker, conflict regarding the nature and origins of the moniker, conflict surrounding the virus, political conflict, and generational jabs. Two forms of connectivity were also identified: implicit and explicit pleas for connectivity. These themes and subthemes represented the presence of each type of discourse captured within a tweet as the unit of analysis; therefore, conflict and connectivity may both be present within one tweet. Additionally, subthemes are not mutually exclusive, as a single tweet may capture multiple forms of discourse. For example, political conflict and derogatory endorsement of the moniker may be both present in one tweet. Categories in a qualitative content analysis may not be mutually exclusive (Tesch, 1990), but should maintain as much internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity as possible (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

A final line-by-line re-reading of the data was then done by the first and second authors to determine the incidence of codes within the data set (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). At this point, we performed an intercoder reliability check (Miles & Huberman, 1994), which reached 91% agreement for the two coders across the data set. The third author joined in the final step of writing the analysis. Three measures were taken to ensure analytic rigor. The first measure, investigator triangulation, called for the researchers to work together during steps of the inductive coding process to achieve convergence of meaning (Creswell & Miller, 2000). In the second measure, the researchers used thick, rich description and quotes[1] when reporting findings, creating a sense of the feasibility of the experiences described in the discourse of tweets (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The third author, an experienced qualitative researcher, also acted as a peer debriefer by reviewing the codebook and asking questions about the coding process, challenging the findings, and offering support by being a "sounding board for ideas" (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 129) to ensure the findings accurately told the story of the data.

Results

Research Question One: Conflict Under #BoomerRemover

Research question one asked how conflict surrounding generational cohorts was expressed in discourse under #BoomerRemover. Given that social identity may form through patterns of categorization (Hogg and Terry, 2001), such as stereotypes (Haslam et al., 1999) that reflect conflicts and delineation of generations (Binstock, 2010), conflictive discourse was often characterized by repeated generational stereotyping. Inductive data analysis revealed five subthemes under conflict: *derogatory endorsement of moniker, conflict regarding nature and origins of moniker, conflict surrounding the virus, political conflict,* and *generational jabs.*

Derogatory Endorsement of Moniker

This subtheme (N = 83; 15%) was characterized by overt endorsements of the hashtag in a derogatory manner, such as wishing death upon older generations like Baby Boomers. Some brief posts generally were "rooting" for the virus to wipe out Baby Boomers, such as, "#BoomerRemover Bring it on." Others were more detailed and explicit, equating the virus to "divine intervention," and suggesting the "silver lining" of its killing older people, with one poster stating, "This virus is great. Attacking old men. Almost makes you believe there is a god, and he heard us!" Other posts in this subtheme pondered a post-virus world without Baby Boomers, with one suggesting the virus "Solves the social security problem."

Some celebrated wiping out specific members of older generations, like actors or politicians. For example, in response to actor Robert Duchaine, who had previously expressed conflict with younger generations in a March 13, 2020, post on Twitter, one poster tweeted, "This is why we can't wait for you to get Covid-19." Politicians belonging to older generational cohorts were also targeted, with one post directed at Republican United States Senator Richard Burr stating, "@SenatorBurr #BoomerRemover do your thing!" President Donald Trump was also a frequent focus for such attacks, with one poster stating, "#BoomerRemover please remove this Trump boomer."

Conflict Regarding Nature and Origins of Moniker

This subtheme (N = 288; 54%) was characterized by expressing conflict surrounding the use of the moniker itself. Discourse in this category ranged from reports of various groups generating or perpetuating the moniker—typically assigning blame to generational cohorts—to more overt feuding.

Several posters cast generalizations about groups they believed were responsible for the moniker, assigning blame to younger generations, "whippersnappers," "children," "kids," and more specifically, "Millennials" and "Gen Z." For example, one poster stated, "Sick of #snowflake

#millennials & their #BoomerRemover #crap." Others debated which generation originated the moniker, with one self-identified Millennial posting, "As it appears to have been kids currently in school to coin the term #BoomerRemover for the #Coronavirus I don't think it's Millennials that are to blame for this, this appears to be the generation after us!" Posters also accused political groups of perpetuating the moniker, including those of "liberal," "leftist," "socialist," and "progressive" ideologies, namely "Democrats." For example, one poster claimed that "#BoomerRemover was started in the last 24 hours by leftists." Some pointed out affiliations with specific political parties or candidates. One stated, "Every single person spreading the coronavirus intentionally and calling it #BoomerRemover is a Democrat."

Beyond assigning blame, other posts engaged in more explicit generational feuding by questioning the appropriateness of the moniker and responses to it. "Younger generations," specifically Millennials and Gen Z, were accused of being "cruel, callous and indifferent" for presumably creating and spreading the moniker via social media, while those taking offense to #BoomerRemover were characterized as being "sensitive" "old timers" unable to "take a joke." One such post stated, "#BoomerRemover is hilarious. We all know someone or have a relative that is a boomer and obviously don't want them to die. . . . Learn to take a damn joke." Many suggested #BoomerRemover was a humorous device, expressing amusement at its "dark," "gallows humor," with such posts describing it as "clever," "extremely funny," "comical," and "hilarious." A number of posters denoted mixed feelings at their amusement. One stated, "Y'all I'm sorry, there's so many older people I care deeply about but I still find #BoomerRemover kinda funny." Another retorted, "Anyone who thinks the #BoomerRemover is funny, I hope the laugh gives you comfort at your grandparents funerals."

Conflict Surrounding the Virus

This subtheme (N = 76; 14%) reflected the contentious nature of discourse surrounding the virus, with #BoomerRemover used in conjunction with debates focusing on the role of age in two areas: (1) the perceived risk of the virus for generational cohorts, and (2) generationally assigned blame for the virus' spread. Alongside #BoomerRemover, the virus was also labeled the "BoomerDoomer" and "BoomerKiller" in reference to "older people being more vulnerable to #COVID19." From this perspective, posters alleged, "anyone under 40 will be fine," and that "High risk is old and sick." Contrarily, others warned of the risk to young people. One implored readers to "PLEASE STOP TELLING KIDS THEY ARE SAFE FROM THIS!" Posters pointed out, "Younger adults are large percentage of coronavirus hospitalizations in United States, according to new CDC data," and that young people "without any health problem may die by corona." Some posted brash warnings "to the ignorant, horrible #Millenials" "who think they are impervious to #Covid_19," demanding they "pay attention" and "stay home."

Others assigned blame for the spread of the virus, depicting the young as indifferent "carriers," with one poster admonishing "spring breakers asserting a 'right' to party - whatever the cost to others." Some also accused younger generations of more sinister activities, suggesting young people were "looking for old people to cough on." Tweets also noted assignment of generational responsibility, with one calling out the head of the Coronavirus Task Force, who the poster believed, "just blamed millennials for community spread at the presser today." Conversely, posters pointed to older generations' attitudes and behaviors that may perpetuate virus spread. These alleged that older generations, such as Boomers, were "cavalier" and dismissive of virus mitigation actions, including masking. As one poster noted, "It's disheartening to have been isolated for the past week to protect the older population, to come have dinner with my in-laws (who are boomers) and have them shit all over our efforts and dismiss them."

Political Conflict

This subtheme (N = 174; 32%) was characterized by tweets expressing conflictive discourse surrounding politics, politicians, parties, elections, and voting. Some tweets explicitly drew political lines between younger and older generations. Such generalizations aligned younger generations as "leftist," "progressive," and "socialist" supporters of liberal presidential candidates, former Vice President Joe Biden or Senator Bernie Sanders. Other tweets more implicitly pointed to policies without specifically naming a party, ideology, or candidate. For example, one poster stated, "yeah, thx for destroying the planet, voting for endless war, poverty & corruption, thanks for whining about anyone younger than you." Older generations, namely Boomers, were characterized as those who "will keep us in their republican nightmare," with one poster remarking, "They gave us Reagan Bush Trump #ClimateEmergency And a stupid amount of debt that they NEVER had to deal with... They KILLED ALL THE POLAR BEARS."

Much of the discourse surrounded voting, particularly in the March 2020 Democratic presidential primaries. Posts involved chatter about candidates' policies, often signaling younger versus older generational values and behaviors: "We do not have to choose between action against the #BoomerRemover (COVID-19) or #FutureSocietyRemover (climate change), we could just elect #PresidentSanders, he has plans to tackle both. Trump and Biden do not." President Trump was also a source of fodder, with discourse implicating Trump and two Republican senators in corruption, claiming they, "*Profited off massive environmental destruction *Profited off low wages that impact youth heavily *Profited off outsourcing *Profited off electing Pols to slash social programs." Some posters expressed discontent with all major party candidates, noting "the preference is to have white old men as presidents."

Generational Jabs

This subtheme (N = 161, 30%) was characterized by the utilization of the hashtag alongside intergenerational conflicts, jabs, or divides that did not clearly fall into the aforementioned subthemes. These involved generational name-calling, stereotyping, and ageism.

Some posters labeled younger generations as "narcissistic," "lazy," "snowflakes," who are a "politically correct generation that is offended by virtually anyone who has a different point of view" and require "safe spaces." One poster termed them "generation idiot," suggesting, "The Boomer generation built all the schools, hospitals road systems, airport and lots more. All gen. Idiot has built is the sense of self entitlement." Posters also took shots at generational antics, with one stating, "While it may take a novel virus to take out one of the greatest generations ever, at least it wasn't death by Tide Pods." Younger generations were chastised as "kids living in their parents basement," with one poster labeling them "basement dwelling brats."

Paralleling this, others charged older generations with responsibility for societal disintegrations, including "gun violence, education costs, climate change, endless wars, and anything but lower taxes," creating "increased wealth inequalities while crushing any attempt at addressing those issues," as well as practicing "indigenous genocide" and "homophobia or racism." Such accusations lent to stereotypes of Baby Boomers as "selfish," "greedy pigs" and "a generation which forsook their grandchildren" who had "run up a few trillion dollars more debt because their whole life strategy is to rock on in luxury and leave the bills for next seven generations to pay." Slights were thrown at Boomers' supposed technological deficiencies, labeling them "angry boomers who've been fooled by the internet again" and "haven't figured out how to close an internet tab." One poster implicated Boomers for younger generations' anger, noting, "Boomers consistently denigrated and ignored the young, and now they're crying foul when the kids call them out," while another empathized that Boomers, "Haven't learned a thing. You bet the kids are mad."

Research Question Two: Connectivity Under #BoomerRemover

Research question two asked how connectivity surrounding generational cohorts was expressed in discourse under #BoomerRemover. The results yielded two subthemes under the overarching connectivity category: *explicit* and *implicit pleas for connectivity*.

Explicit Pleas for Connectivity

Data analysis revealed a handful of explicit calls to work together, to "Take care of the elderly," to "#StaySafeandIsolate the most vulnerable" populations, and to social distance to "save the lives of many." This theme included pleas to "MoveHumanityForward," by exercising connectivity (N = 17, 3%). One poster offered comfort to all, "sending emergency hugs to those in need." Such pleas encouraged individuals to "Come together, create an inspiring reality," and practice "isolation, not division." One poster lamented older generations, saying, "I have been moulded and shaped by my grandparents and many other older people. I wouldn't wish ill on any of them and hope everyone who catches coronavirus recovers quickly. We are better than this divisive hatred." Another poster noted, "this virus can kill anyone. We need to pull together."

Implicit Pleas for Connectivity

This theme was characterized by pleas for unification across generations that were not expressed in an explicit manner but rather captured the spirit of intergenerational connectivity, mainly those chiding use of the #BoomerRemover moniker and imploring others not to use it to perpetuate generational divisiveness. Despite a wide range of reactions to the moniker, a significant number of posters explicitly chided its use (N = 114; 21%), with one poster calling it "a toxic trend" and another labeling it "generational warfare we don't need." Posts expressed disagreement with the moniker and deplored its use as "genocidal rhetoric." Such commentary suggested the hashtag "isn't funny" and shows a "lack of empathy," characterizing it as "dumb," "vile," "mean," and "wrong." Some chiding expressed disgust, such as one post remarking, "Now #BoomerRemover is

trending on Twitter … what are we doing with our society." Others expressed distaste for attempts at humor: "it's not funny to make fun of death" and "#BoomerRemover Not the time to joke as seniors die."

Discussion

At first glance, the mere existence of #BoomerRemover and its stint as a trending Twitter hashtag supports media narratives (Hoffower, 2020a, 2020b; Meisner, 2020) amplifying the existence of, at best, intergenerational conflict and at worst, rampant ageism. But, our themes reveal that the conversation under #BoomerRemover was more nuanced than reported in media accounts. The distribution of tweets per sub-theme is visualized in Figure 1.

<insert figure 1 here>

Note. This figure demonstrates the number of tweets that are included in each subtheme. Tweets are non-exclusive to themes and subthemes. Tweets that appear in one subtheme may appear in other subthemes and may be included in both the conflict and connectivity primary themes.

The first research question sought to illuminate how conflict surrounding generational cohorts was expressed in discourse under #BoomerRemover. The data revealed five forms of conflictive generational discourse: derogatory endorsement of the #BoomerRemover moniker, conflict regarding the nature and origins of the moniker, conflict surrounding the virus, political conflict, and generational jabs. Paralleling some previous scholarship on intergenerational conflict (e.g., Binstock, 2010), tweets reflected clashes over resources, with many describing COVID-19 as tool to eliminate what they perceived as older adults' strain on health care and Social Security systems. They also revealed tweeters' efforts to establish their generational cohort's superiority by invoking shared experiences. For example, older generations juxtaposed their sacrifices and hard work with the entitlement of younger generations, whereas younger generations pointed out environmental and social problems they inherited from older generations.

Posters also engaged in generational finger-pointing for electing leaders who exacerbated problems associated with COVID-19. Urick et al. (2017) noted that younger generations are often perceived as more liberal than older generations, and a preponderance of posts captured this stereotype. Posts weaponized the hashtag with stereotypes that spoke less about generations as age and more about generations as a sociopolitical cultural construct, where Millennials were discursively constructed as progressive, lazy sheep and Boomers as greedy, staunch conservatives. Such use of generational stereotypes finds coherence with previous research (Levy et al, 2013; Perry et al., 2013). Further, this pattern of posting behavior may extend to generational applications of SIT, in which "individuals may seek to classify themselves as belonging to a particular generation because they perceive oneness with traits popularly associated with other members of the group, and classify others into separate 'out-groups' based on dissimilar characteristics" (Urick et al., 2017, p. 167).

Research question two asked how connectivity surrounding generational cohorts was expressed in the discourse under #BoomerRemover. The results showed two forms of intergenerationally unifying discourse: implicit and explicit pleas for connectivity. Despite the intergenerational conflict present in many tweets, posters also called for generations to come together. Posters used these tweets to argue that connectivity was more important than conflict in the midst of a pandemic and chided those who engaged in divisiveness.

It is a somewhat intuitive finding that the #BoomerRemover moniker would manifest conflict, as would likely be expected from a derogatory hashtag of this nature. Certainly, there is plentiful evidence supporting intergenerational divides through applying the moniker, as it was used in posts regarding conflict surrounding the virus and assigning blame, political tensions, and conflict-driven generational jabs. But, perhaps a more interesting revelation shows more posts expressing conflict surrounding use of the moniker than posts actually using the moniker in a derogatory way (see Figure 1). As one poster perceptively noted, "The #BoomerRemover discourse is amazing. It's about 50% pure outrage, 50% people reveling in the hypocrisy of those who are outraged. I can't

find a single tweet from someone who is genuinely egging on the virus." Additionally, a number of tweets explicitly called for unity across generations, and an even larger number using the hashtag actually chided the moniker, suggesting an implicit plea for unity. As such, the analysis suggests a counter-narrative regarding the hashtag and provides a fuller picture of the discourse surrounding generational cohorts. Williamson et al. (2003) suggested that such intergenerational conflict may largely be a symbolic battle generated and perpetuated by mass media. The results of the current study seem to support the notion that the media's focus on conflict further sustained generational fractures. Dispelling exaggerated reports suggesting rampant ageism becomes particularly important given the media's power to cultivate audiences' attitudes and behaviors (Gerbner, 1998), with such narratives potentially perpetuating generational divides.

The results add to literature explicating the varying nature of collective generational attitudes and behaviors, especially in light of crisis (e.g., Smith et al., 2019), with the current study showing a mix of conflictive divides and prosocial pleas for connectivity. Posters used conflicts surrounding the moniker, the virus, politics, and generational stereotypes to distinguish generational differences. Such research falls in line with SIT, which posits the use of in-groups and out-groups—in this case, generational cohorts—as a mechanism for constructing identity. The results find coherence with intergenerational conflict scholars (Levy et al., 2013; Urick et al., 2017), who have suggested similar behavioral, values, and identity-based tensions may act as mechanisms in fostering generational identities. Such data also align with research (e.g., Joshi et al., 2010; Lyons et al., 2019; Mannheim; 1952; Urick et al., 2017) that views generational identity as multilayered and socially constructed. While posts laden with generational stereotyping inherent to the construction of generational identity (e.g., Urick et al., 2017) drove conflict, calls for unity acknowledged the conflict and attempted to bridge generations.

These findings add to the scholarship of aging as they further illuminate social media's power to perpetuate ageism and intergenerational conflict; however, the data also show that social

media can be spaces for generational connection. The pleas for connectivity add depth to previous scholarship regarding intergenerational conflict surrounding stereotypes via social media (Levy et al., 2013; Meisner, 2020). Ayalon et al. (2020) noted that it is behavioral scientists' "responsibility to stay alert" (p. 2) to intergenerational dynamics, especially in light of the pandemic, and this study answers that call by capturing these dynamics on social media. While these dynamics certainly existed prior to COVID-19, the results of this study show the pandemic has magnified, and perhaps extended generational stereotypes in a new context.

This research also yields practical implications for those working with older adults. This study may be useful for those in frontline jobs, including healthcare workers, especially as they assist those affected by the pandemic and navigate intergenerational dynamics amongst patients. Such results may further inform practitioners about negative perceptions of generational cohorts and their potentially harmful impact on self-image. This information may facilitate practitioners in recognizing common biases and stereotypes facing the aging population, as well as how their generational experiences shape identities and perceptions of younger generations. Practitioners may use this information to develop training programs to identify and challenge stereotypes with facts when working with clients.

Limitations and Future Research

Though the current study shines light on topics of generational identity and discourse through social media, it is not without limitations. First, the current study limited analysis to Twitter posts, leaving other social media platforms out of the data set. While Twitter was chosen because of its prevalence as a tool for discourse (Oz et al., 2018) and its role in hosting the trending #BoomerRemover hashtag, future research may consider broader examinations across platforms, which would capture a larger set of social media users. However, given the unique features of social media sites, these findings may not directly extend to other platforms (Alhabash & Ma, 2017). While social media platforms may share commonalities, such as the utilization of hashtags to organize

information, the tools and modalities associated with each platform shape the types of content users share. For example, content shared on Twitter revolves around short text messages, often about real-time events, including personal news and current news, and differs from other social media platforms, such as Instagram, that emphasize visuals (Waterloo et al., 2018). Second, though the study did highlight conflict and connectivity surrounding generational cohorts, the scope of the data did not include demographics about posters. Unless implied within posts, it is impossible to provide information regarding posters' ages, generational cohort membership, and how opinions may vary within generational cohorts. Future research may benefit from other methodologies that allow for collection of demographic data to provide context in understanding posters' motivations, as well to fully extend this work from expressions and stereotypes about generations to intergenerational communication. Finally, the exploratory nature of the study as a means to better understand discourse via social media was appropriate for inductive-heavy, qualitative methods. Still, future research should extend such findings to investigate and further quantify the prevalence of online discourses expressing generational conflict and connectivity.

Conclusion

This study extends scholarship regarding discourse surrounding generational cohorts (Urick et al., 2017), especially in the context of social media (Levy et al., 2013). It addresses conflict, often arising from generational stereotyping via these platforms, as well as pleas to connect and bridge divides. This scholarship suggests that the study of discourse surrounding generations via social media is more nuanced than indicated in surface reports by the mass media. While, on the surface, #BoomerRemover seems to be derogatory in nature, part of the discourse counters media reports, suggesting that conflict surrounding generational cohorts may not be as widespread or intense as believed. Instead, discourse under the hashtag often promoted generational solidarity. Such results provide valuable implications for the study of online and generational discourse, especially in light of crisis.

The findings extend beyond the case study of the hashtag itself. Instead, the virus and its resulting #BoomerRemover hashtag acted as a vector for discourse surrounding generational cohorts. As Vittadini and colleagues (2013) noted, "generations are not only constituted by their actual social practice, but also by reflections upon it—certainly, scientific reflections, but also wider reflections within public discourse" (p. 13). This study reflected this idea, illustrating a counter-narrative to discourse surrounding COVID-19 and generational cohorts on social media.

Author Note

[1] To preserve the integrity of the post, tweets are quoted here in their original form without correction to grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

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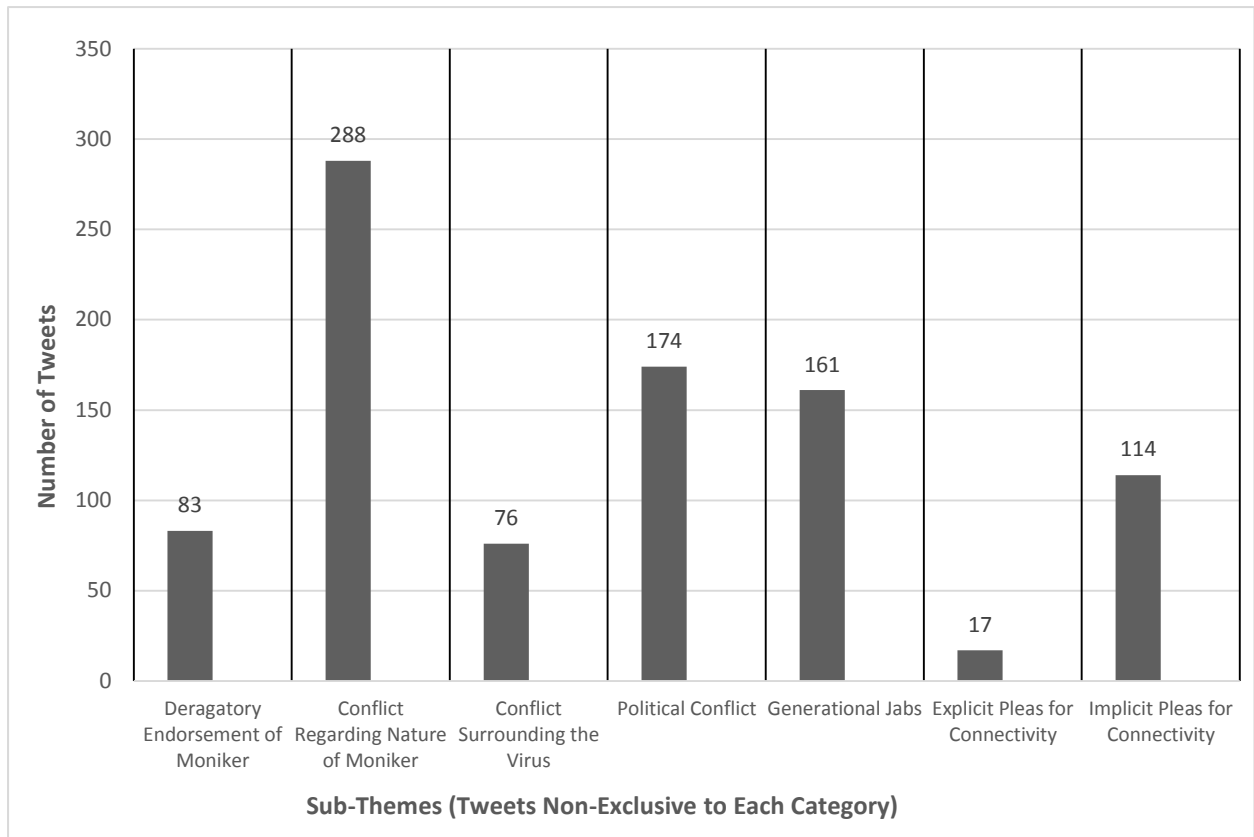
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Figure 1

Number of Tweets Per Sub-Theme