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ABSTRACT

TikTok, a short video platform featuring content between 15 and 60 seconds long, has become a popular and rapidly growing social media application around the world. As a platform catering for light entertainment, TikTok champions virality and encourages memetic remixes. Meme videos, mostly featuring lip-syncs, dance routines, and skits, have become one of the defining features of the platform. These seemingly trivial videos have been utilised by young TikTokers to advocate for various causes. This paper uses #OkBoomer memes as a case study to examine the political culture of young people and Gen Z in particular. By analysing how intergenerational politics has been 'memefied', this study delineates how Gen Z imagines and expresses a generational sentiment towards 'Boomers' as the imagined other. They do so through short video cultures and practices on TikTok, drawing upon the networked experiences of their peers. Specifically, the paper considers the key controversial issues, meme forms and meme functions across the #OkBoomer memes on TikTok, and its eventual mainstreaming in society.

Introduction

(Boomer)
Back in my day, we walked uphill both ways /
(Zoomer)
Maybe because of you we won't have any more snow days /
Ok Boomer, time to meet the Zoomers /
Generation of humour, while you stay the accusers /

This is an excerpt of the lyrics from 'Ok Boomer', a rap song created by @james.bee, a Gen Z TikToker. The first line depicts 'Zoomers' mimicking 'Boomers' who often claim to be tougher than younger generations (i.e., 'walked uphill both ways'), and the next three lines reflect a snappy retort from 'Zoomers'. He uploaded this audio clip (@james.bee, 2019[1]) on TikTok in December 2019 and it has since been viewed a few millions times,

and also hailed by some as a 'generation anthem'. @james.bee's viral video was a milestone contribution to the #OkBoomer meme trend on TikTok, which was initiated by Gen Z, or the self-proclaimed cohort of 'Zoomers'. In general, 'Boomers' refers to people born during the post-World War II baby boom between 1946 and 1964, while Gen Z refers to those born between 1997 and 2012 (Dimock, 2019; Fingerman et al., 2012).

The tagline 'Ok Boomer' epitomises Gen Z's 'discursive activism' (Shaw, 2012, p. 2016) against Boomers—a strategy of using 'conflict or provocation' as a way to have 'productive' discussions, where a 'community is able to define itself in opposition to others' (Shaw, 2016, p. 9)—and the ideological tension between the two generations (Meisner, 2020; Parker et al., 2019). The phrase emerged as Gen Z's 'verbal dismissive eye roll' to the critical rhetoric that accuses their generation of being 'snowflakes,' delusional, and unable to grow up (Gerhardt, 2019; Gonyea & Hudson, 2020). It has also become an all-purpose retort used by young people to disarm the older generation when they dispense what is perceived as presumptive, condescending, or politically incorrect viewpoints (Roberts, 2019).

While it has been observed that Millennials are mostly allied with Gen Z in their advocacy for social change (Roberts, 2019), the #OkBoomer campaign on TikTok—deployed via the playful use of pop cultural references, digital paralanguages like stickers and emoji, TikTok vernacular like audio memes and canon gestures, and youthful parlance and lingo—should be understood as a quintessential part of Gen Z's political activism because it constitutes a significant 'cue to heightened generational awareness' for the cohort (White, 2013, p. 219).

#OkBoomer memes have been circulated in various contexts and media platforms, but it truly gained its memetic momentum on TikTok (Gonyea & Hudson, 2020; Roberts, 2019). TikTok has become a popular and rapidly growing social media application around the world, and memetic videos have become one of its defining features. These seemingly trivial visual formats should not be categorically overlooked as isolated social media artefacts, because 'visual social media content can highlight affect, political views, reactions, key information and scenes of importance' (Highfield & Leaver, 2016, p. 48). In this paper, we perceive such memes as manifestations of Gen Zs' politics—specifically a 'small p', 'everyday politics' where political interests, pursuits and discussions can be 'framed around our own experiences and interests' in the 'highly personalised spaces' of social media (Highfield, 2016, p. 3). In these modes, everyday politics are intimately expressed through highly personable and personalised ways, and are intertwined with the display of identity politics. Using #OkBoomer as an example, this study examines how the political identities of young people are constructed and communicated in the form of video memes. The analysis focuses on the primary issues and topics in which intergenerational politics are identified, the main meme forms through which Gen Z's generational sentiments are expressed, and the major communicative functions therein.

Literature review

Intergenerational politics and Boomer grievances

We define 'intergenerational politics' as the tendency of people from a particular cohort to form shared political consciousness and behaviours, and their corresponding tendency to clash with the political attitudes of other cohort groups (Braungart & Braungart, 1986;

Kagwanja, 2006). Based on this definition, our discussion of young people's intergenerational politics focuses on both their political culture and their cross-generational resentment toward older generations.

The intergenerational politics between Boomers and Gen Zs have a powerful impact on the framing of public debates about social injustice and inequality (Bristow, 2020; White, 2013). The perceived social and economic power of Boomers and their conservative viewpoints have contributed to 'anti-Boomer sentiment' in Western societies (Bristow, 2020; MacDonald, 2020). For instance, Boomers have been the subject of ire from younger generations who blame the cohort for ushering in several societal issues including Brexit and the election of Donald Trump in 2016 (Bristow, 2020), generational economic inequality (Meisner, 2020; White, 2013) and climate change (Lim, 2020).

We take a sociological approach to understanding 'generations' as a *symbolic* and *dynamic*, rather than a *biological* and *static*, existence (Bolin, 2017; Bristow, 2020; Mannheim, 1970). As a form of social identity, a 'generation' comes into being through collective identification (Turner, 1975), or through creating the 'generational we-sense' (Bolin, 2017, p. 92). Gen Z TikTokers' engagements with generational politics can be understood as their articulation of such a *we-sense*. In this context, the platform TikTok itself also plays an important role in fostering this collective identity. Firstly, TikTok was made for and dominated by teenagers and preteens, especially in its early days (Savic, 2021). This makes TikTok itself a 'formative component' (Bolin, 2017, p. 4) in these Gen Zs' collective identities. Secondly, TikTok also serves as a locale wherein the *we-sense* of Gen Zs is constructed. A group's collective self-representation is increasingly intertwined with, as well as facilitated by, their engagement with social media (Humphreys, 2018; Rettberg, 2018). Although collective identity, such as being Gen Z, mostly comes into being through an invisible process, social media makes it visible and tangible (Milan, 2015, p. 893). #OkBoomer video memes exemplify such tangible artifacts of Gen Z's 'generationing', wherein the process centres on collectively drawing 'generational borders'.

By objecting to a perceived set of 'Boomer mentalities and ideologies', Gen Zs draw generational borders that can be ambiguous. As such, whether the TikTokers partaking in 'Boomer vs. Zoomer' banter are actually age-aligned members of each generation is secondary to our analysis, as we focus on how these TikTokers partake in self-identification and construct what it means to be a 'Boomer' and 'Zoomer' through cultural and political alignments.

We wish to note that, while highlighting the generational differences and tensions between Boomers and Gen Z, we do not intend for this comparison to commit 'generationalism', which refers to the oversimplified viewpoints on a generation that are then used to explain socio-political problems (Bristow, 2020; Purhonen, 2016). Rather than using the notion of a 'generation' as an *explanation* of societal issues, we consider young people's collective generational identification as a *symptom* of being subjected to specific societal inequities and oppressions. The generational tensions observed can be useful to explore how young people are constructing and contesting their everyday politics and identity politics, as a cohort who share generational sentiments, which they express and share through new communication platforms like TikTok. To this end, we utilise the #OkBoomer meme trend on TikTok as a case study, with our first research question being:

RQ1: What are the key controversial issues covered in #OkBoomer memes?

Political memes on TikTok

In the context of internet culture, memes are online artefacts that are circulated through imitation, competition and transformation (Ask & Abidin, 2018; Milner, 2016; Shifman, 2013). Despite often being dismissed as pointless and trivial, internet memes can have significant social, cultural and political merit. For instance, internet memes are effective communicative devices for alignment building and for stimulating socio-political discussion. Prior research has demonstrated that internet memes function as collective symbols for community identification around specific political causes, such as human rights advocacy (Vie, 2014), the #MeToo movement (Zeng, 2020) and anti-racism campaigns during COVID-19 (Abidin & Zeng, 2020).

Memes can take on varied formats, and the vast majority of existing literature about internet memes focuses on static images with humorous captions. More recently, short videos on TikTok have become another popular vehicle for political memes. TikTok memes are characterised by digital media scholars Kaye et al. (2020, p. 18) as 'circumscribed creativity'. Circumscribed creativities are creative potentials that are afforded, as well as restrained, by the features and logics of platforms. In the context of TikTok, the platform offers a technological infrastructure that celebrates and encourages memetic content.

For instance, content discovery on TikTok is largely algorithm- and trend-based. On its 'For you' page, the default interface where content is offered, users often scroll through a large volume of trendy videos that are automatically recommended to them, based on the platform's proprietary algorithm that generates tailor-made selections for each user. From the user's perspective, this continuous flow of videos across a variety of content genres and topics requires them to be attuned to very specific memes by quickly learning their templates and then being literate enough to recreate the memetic content in order to achieve visibility. However, there are often contestations around the primary reading and intonations of emerging memes on TikTok that often result in 'competitive ranking' and 'chart jacking' (Abidin, 2021, pp. 80–81), in part due to the multi-layered interpretations afforded by the intertextuality of 'audio memes' (Abidin, 2021, p. 80).

In terms of functionality, TikTok has introduced a variety of standardised templates and features that streamlines meme re-creation. For instance, TikTok's 'duet feature' allows users to directly respond to one another's videos by appending a new video to the left of the original. This function has become a widely used feature in the creation of meme videos (Zeng et al., 2021). Reusable special effects, sound clips and background sounds are other examples of affordances that facilitate seamless meme re-creation.

This meme-friendly and streamlined video production process, together with its young user base, makes TikTok a fertile ground for observing young people's creative engagements with various social-political issues (Hautea et al., 2021). By focusing on the popular TikTok meme #OkBoomer, we study how the circumscribed creativities of TikTok interplay with Gen Z's memefication of intergenerational politics through two further research questions:

RQ2: How are intergenerational politics expressed through #OkBoomer memes on TikTok?

RQ3: What are the communicative functions of #OkBoomer memes on TikTok?

Methods

To build our corpus of data, we used TikTok's online archive to retrieve videos hashtagged with '#OkBoomer' (Figure 1). In July 2020, we used a web-crawler to obtain publicly available metadata of the 1,755 unique videos published between August 2019 and July 2020 that were returned in this search. Retrieved metadata includes the video IDs, duration, caption, name of the background music or audio meme, publishing time and view/share/comment counts.

As shown in Figure 1, the #OkBoomer challenge became viral on TikTok in November 2019; around 50% of videos in the dataset were published during this month. In Table 1, the key metrics of all 1,755 videos are summarised.

We contextualise our analyses and understanding of these meme videos through both authors' long-term immersions as active users on TikTok, and through independent participant observations of TikTok culture from early-2019 to late-2020. From our corpus, we filtered out a random sample of 300 #OkBoomer related TikTok clips for closer study through content analysis. Our coding scheme was developed based on communications scholar Shifman's (2013) 'meme dimensions' and Zeng et al.'s (2021) analytical framework for TikTok 'meme categorisation'. We annotated all sampled videos according to three content levels: 'controversial issue', 'meme form', and 'communication function'.

We define 'controversial issues' as matters of shared concern wherein the intergenerational tensions between the old and the young are most visible. 'Meme form' refers to the content style through which memes are delivered in each video. In the context of TikTok, meme forms are largely shaped by the platform's technological features. 'Communicative function' refers to the explicit purpose that each meme video intended to convey. To study meme forms, we annotated each video's form according to three aspects: an audio feature, visual feature and performance feature. Complete categories are presented in Table 2. Subcategories under the 'controversial issues' and 'communicative function' dimensions were developed through multi-step open coding. In the first step, lower-level labels were assigned to randomly selected videos based on the aforementioned subjects and their meme functions. In the second step, all labels were organised into higher-
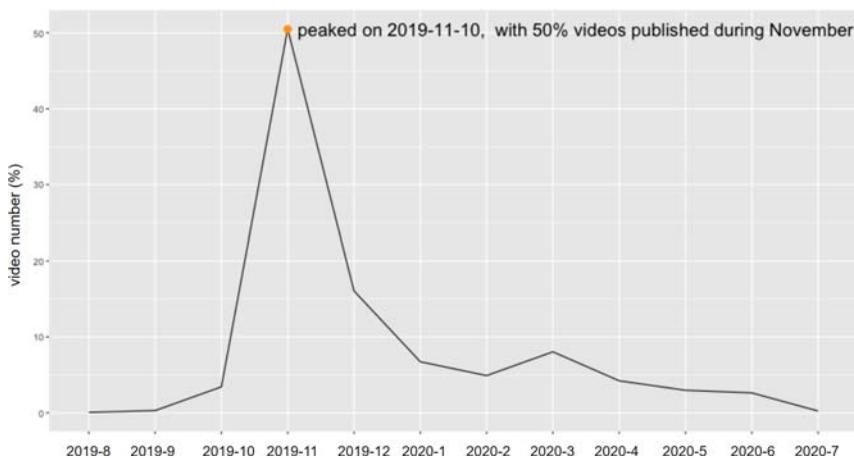

Figure 1. Monthly distribution of #OkBoomer videos.

Table 1. Summary of key metrics from all 1,755 videos.

	Min	Median	Mean	Max
Length (sec)	3	15	20	62
Views	42,300	486,700	966,200	32,500,000
Likes	6,764	79,600	150,200	2,900,000
Shares	6	1,254	3,733	139,500
Comments	0	379	1,030	45,800

Table 2. Summary of results from content analysis.

CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES		
	n	%
Gen Z Lifestyle & Wellbeing	**120**	**40.0%**
Appearance	52	17.3%
Work	14	4.7%
Technology usage	33	11.0%
Mental state	23	7.7%
Conservative Politics	**59**	**19.7%**
Environment	19	6.3%
Immigrants/Racial issues	15	5.0%
Donald Trump	12	4.0%
Abortion	5	1.7%
Other political topics	6	2.0%
Gender & Sexuality	**31**	**10.30%**
MEME FORMS		
	n	%
Audio feature		
With sound template	135	45.0%
With original sound clip	165	55.0%
Visual feature		
Stickers	123	41.0%
Duet	17	5.7%
Greenscreen	16	5.3%
All other effects	13	4.3%
Performing features		
Lip-synching	109	36.3%
Acting skit	132	44.0%
Dancing	6	2.0%
Music sharing	8	2.7%
Craft in making	25	8.3%
Other	**50**	**16.70%**
MEME FUNCTION		
	n	%
Gen Z retort & Criticism	**210**	**70.0%**
Targeting Boomers in general	82	27.3%
Targeting parents	32	10.7%
Targeting grandparents	16	5.3%
Targeting other family members	9	3.0%
An encounter	63	21.0%
Other	8	2.7%
Boomer react	**34**	**11.3%**
Complaining	21	7.0%
Self-mocking	13	4.3%
Merchandising	**7**	**2.3%**
Informative Educational	**19**	**6.3%**
Other	**24**	**8.0%**

Note: subcategories under each coding dimension are not mutually exclusive.

level groups based on their semantic relationship. Through this process, a codebook was developed for further systematic content analysis by two coders. The average inter-coding reliability was .78, as calculated with Cohen's Kappa. A detailed explanation of the coding scheme with examples can be found in Appendix 1.

We wish to note that Gen Z's generational sentiments are situated in both historical and cultural contexts. This study of #OkBoomer memes on TikTok has likely reflected the spirit of Gen Z in an Anglo-centric context, with the predominance of White-presenting young people with American accents. As young people's engagement with politics on social media manifests differently across race and ethnicity (Auxier, 2020), and the mentality of Gen Z also varies by region (Kim et al., 2020), findings from the current study should not be generalised to understand Gen Z cultures in other non-White and/or non-Anglo-centric contexts.

Results and discussion

Results of the content analyses of the sample videos are summarised in Table 2. In the following sections, these findings will be discussed in relation to the three research questions of this study.

Controversial issues

The first aim of this study is to identify key issues around which the intergenerational discordance between Gen Z and Boomer intensifies. Through content analysis, we identified the three most mentioned controversial issues: young people's lifestyles and well-being, Boomers' views on gender and sexuality norms and conservative politics.

Young people's lifestyles and well-being

The first controversial issue that was widely featured in #OkBoomer memes was young people's lifestyles and well-being. Among the videos analysed in this study, 40% of content conveyed Boomer's criticisms on the way Gen Z live and look. Videos covering this issue are often paired with titles like 'what are the most Boomer things that you have heard' or 'some of my most Ok Boomer moments'. Some frequently criticised aspects of Gen Z include their preferred fashion styles, their lack of motivation and their being too soft or sensitive. Regarding the first aspect mentioned, TikTokers share stories of how they are admonished by Boomers because of their ripped jeans, unnatural hair colour or for wearing too much makeup. Another recurring topic is the older generation lecturing Gen Z for spending too much time on the phone and not having a job. In such videos, adolescent appearing TikTokers reenact conversations in which their parents or grandparents lecture them about how hardworking they used to be, and that young people these days 'are too lazy to get a job'. In some cases, the 'Boomers' dismiss young people's professions, such as tattoo artists or e-sport players, as not being 'real jobs' (Figure 2).

The mental health and well-being of Gen Z is another memetic topic in the #OkBoomer stories shared on TikTok. Content surrounding these topics often mentions depression, anxiety and other mental health issues that commonly afflict members of Gen Z, and how 'Boomers'—in most cases their parents—are dismissive of such issues.

Figure 2. Example of a 'Boomer aunt' commenting on gaming as a job.
Source: @overtimegg (2019).

In these videos, Gen Z TikTokers reenact how their parents attribute their mental health problems to stereotypical causes such as 'spending too much time on the phone', 'not drinking enough water' or 'sleeping too little'.

Early adolescence is a period of vulnerability for the development of mental health issues (McLaughlin & King, 2015). Although the use and presence of social media can be a source of mental health strain for young people (Hendry, 2020), it can also be used to express their struggles with mental well-being. In our data, many adolescent-appearing TikTokers convey feelings of insufficient support from their parents or feelings of complete neglect. As one TikToker wrote, 'It is our cry for help, but they never listen'. Through the use of TikTok videos, these young people channel their dissatisfaction from subpar mental health conversations with their parents and guardians into short comedy clips to which many of their TikTok peers can relate. For example, across various comment sections, young people often respond to relatable TikTok memes by sharing experiences with their own parents (Figure 3).
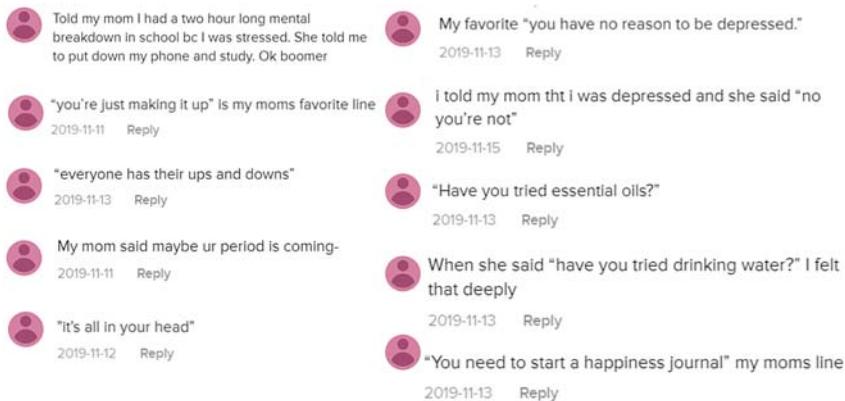

Figure 3. Examples of comments from TikTok users in response to 'depression' memes. User profile pictures and names have been omitted.

Gender and sexuality norms

Gender norms can be defined as expectations about the way males and females should behave, think and feel (Gilbert & Scher, 1999). In #OkBoomer memes, this topic appears in 10.3% of all coded videos within this study's corpus. Firstly, meme videos within this category challenge the gender-normative expectations of older generations about how 'boys' and 'girls' should appear and behave. As mentioned in the previous section, the fashion styles of young people are often commented upon by negatively the older generation, and such criticisms are closely linked to a larger generational disagreement about identity exploration and expression.

Along with ripped jeans and unnatural hair colours, a large number of Boomers' complaints regarding Gen Z's self-presentation are based on gender normative and binary views on 'what a girl or boy should look like'. For example, in videos featuring stories of Gen Z being 'dress-coded by a Boomer', some commonly found remarks from Boomers include hair being too 'short' for a 'girl', not 'sitting' like a 'lady' and looking too 'sporty' for a 'female'. However, such dress code condemnation was not exclusively made about 'girls'. Male-presenting Gen Z TikTokers also shared Boomer discourse on 'boys', and how they have experienced criticism for their long hair, and for wearing nail polish, jewellery and makeup (Figure 4).

Aside from boycotting Boomers' gender normative views on young people's appearances, young TikTokers also use the #OkBoomer trend to shed light on the older generation's conservative views on homosexuality and transgender issues. Review studies have identified the 'enduring significance' (Robards et al., 2018) of platforms and social media for queer young people to express their feelings, air grievances, and seek community. Unsurprisingly, this is similarly the case on TikTok where most videos on queer issues and topics are created by young TikTokers who self-identify as members of the LGBTQIA+ community. In these videos, young TikTokers reveal comments from their parents who deny, or even condemn, their sexual orientation and identity. These

Figure 4. Example of Gen Z being 'dress-coded' by a Boomer.
Source: @occultic (2019).

TikTokers recall experiences of being admonished by their parents for being 'too young to know' they are gay, that they are gay 'because of the internet', that being gay 'is a sin' or that they are simply 'going through a phase'. Transgender Gen Z TikTokers share frustrations that their identities are constantly being denied by others, including their parents. Although the vast majority of these videos are made to be humorous, they reveal a great sense of resignation. Through sharing and watching similar stories, these #OkBoomer video clips allow young TikTokers to commiserate with and console one another (Ask & Abidin, 2018).

Conservative politics

Approximately 20% of videos surveyed relate to the topic of conservative politics, which include comments about policies on immigration, abortion, gun rights and Donald Trump's election campaigns. However, the topic that generated the most intergenerational tension was climate policies and environmental conservation.

In most of the #OkBoomer memes that addressed environmental issues, the resentment expressed by Gen Z TikTokers highlighted the older generations' failures to respond to the climate crisis. Unlike conventional climate campaigns, Gen Z's climate activism is more than just environmental messaging, but also a fight against intergenerational injustice that 'catalysed public debate on what society owes to the young' (Thew et al., 2020, p. 1). For example, in @ditshap's (2020) clip, she acts out a dialogue with a judgemental 'Boomer' who comments on the holes in her jeans. However, she retorts by pointing out that Boomers are responsible for the 'holes in the ozone layer' (Figure 5).

In 2020, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the virus became another meme element in Gen Z's climate change jokes. In these videos, the pandemic was framed either as Earth's 'revenge' for the environmental damage caused by the Boomer generation or as a weapon for teenagers to 'punish' Boomers for long ignoring their requests for environment protection (Figure 6). In some clips, COVID-19 was even labelled as a 'Boomer remover'.

Figure 5. Example video of Gen Z commenting on Boomers' role in climate change.
Source: @ditshap (2020).

Figure 6. Example of TikToker joking about using COVID-19 to punish Boomers.
Source: @originalkontent (2020).

Meme forms

Having established the key controversial issues in #OkBoomer TikTok memes, the second objective of the study is to understand how these intergenerational tensions are memefied in short videos. As previously mentioned, the vernacular styles of videos on TikTok are shaped by both youth creativity and TikTok's platform affordances. Focusing on these aspects, this section assesses the meme forms in our corpus, comprising meme cues, reacts via duets and craft activism.

Lip-sync activism

Sound is a crucial element in the meme-making ecology of TikTok. Digital anthropologist Abidin has posited that sound is privileged over image on TikTok, serving as both a 'driving template' and 'organising principle' for content (2021, p. 80). In our corpus, lip-syncing was a prominent performance style across the #OkBoomer memes, and was featured in 36.3% of videos. The most widely used audio clip for lip-syncing is 20-year-old college student @peterkuli's (2019) remix 'Ok Boomer'. The sound clip is a two-minute-long rap that repeats the 'Ok Boomer' catchphrase throughout, while criticising Boomers for being condescending, being racist and supporting Trump.

After @peterkuli uploaded this audio clip to TikTok, it quickly went viral in October 2019, turning 'Ok Boomer' into a viral catchphrase on the platform (Noyes, 2019). In the most memetic format of this music's use, the song plays in the background as the creator acts out (with the help of text stickers) an anecdote involving a Boomer, with the punchline 'Ok Boomer' being timed to coincide with the performer's impression and lip-sync of angry yelling.

Inspired by the viral meme, more #OkBoomer-related original music was made by TikTokers and shared on the platform. This included @james.bee's (2019) version of 'OkBoomer', which was introduced at the beginning of this study. With its catchy lyrics, the audio meme was reused by thousands of TikTok content creators and inspired a series of meme sub-genres. One such niche is the 'Super Mario & Boomer' meme, wherein videos of Mario Kart characters riding over various obstacles are paired with a line from @james.bee's rap which goes, 'Back in my days we walked uphill both ways' (Figure 7). This line refers to the stereotype of Boomers dramatising and lording their hardships over younger generations who allegedly have it 'easy' these days.

Figure 7. Screenshots of game-streaming videos using @james.bee's OkBoomer music.
Source: @xdnube(2020), @somestupidvideos (2020), @scoopydoop43 (2020).

Although most of the original #OkBoomer-themed music uses rap to express grievance through dismissive rhetoric, some TikTokers take a softer-toned approach. For instance, 22-year-old comedic pianist @mrbeardofficial (2019) introduced his 'romantic' version of an #OkBoomer song, which included a twist of the #OkBoomer slogan, and was titled '*Boomer, I'm not ok*'. The TikToker introduced it as 'a Boomer love song', with lyrical lines like 'Ok Boomer, why can't you hold me as close as you hold your belief that climate change isn't real/ Ok Boomer, why can't you carry me like you carry your handgun in public/'. TikToker @mrbeardofficial's remix describes a love story in which Gen Z begs for love from Boomers, with the latter refusing to return their affections.

Audio memes are central to the affective expressions of Gen Z TikTokers' memetic storytelling. Epitomising the cohort's collective generational sentiments, #OkBoomer-themed songs are the ambient spirit with which TikTokers create their own personal narratives. Like @peterkuli's 'Ok Boomer', many of these short audio clips only include an excerpt from the chorus featuring the phrase 'Ok Boomer'. This form of audio clip provides great interpretive flexibility for other TikTokers to fill the narrative gap. As Abidin (2021, p. 80) points out, the 'templatability' of sound is central to viral trends on TikTok and is one of the app's most novel features. In the context of discursive activism on Tik-Tok, such templatability enables users to have one united 'voice' to which they can creatively add their personal storyline and/or visual narrative. This synchronised yet personalised meme advocacy can be understood as 'lip-sync activism', which is not restricted to actual performances of lip-synchronisation but is extended as a metaphor to demonstrate the networked participation of users delivering a united message through individualised narration.

Reacts via duets

The 'duet' feature is one of the most popular features of TikTok, allowing users to 'react' or build on another clip by recording their own videos alongside the original as it plays (TikTok, 2020). This function has been widely and creatively applied to show TikTokers following tutorials (e.g., cooking receipt, experiments), to add to long chains of collaborative content (Abidin, 2021) and to react to meme content (Zeng et al., 2021). In the

context of #OkBoomer memes, the duet feature was most often used by Gen Z to respond to Boomers' condemnations of young people.

In early 2019, TikTok user @old_school_is_not_so_bad posted a video in which he proudly self-identified as a 'Boomer'. In the post, he called out the young generations for 'having Peter Pan syndrome', for not wanting to 'grow up' and for 'wanting to create a utopian society in which everything is equal'. In response to his criticisms of the entire generation, Gen Z TikTokers used the duet feature to refute this narrative. In these duets, some TikTokers responded with their thoughts on the Boomer generation, while others pointed out why young people defy these stereotypes and still others simply replied with 'Ok Boomer' (Figure 8). While this may not be the first time that the #OkBoomer retort was first introduced on the internet, this video is widely considered to be one of the triggers of the viral #OkBoomer content on TikTok (Adem, 2020; Lorenz, 2019).

In a similar example, another older user (@irishmanalways) was so offended by the #OkBoomer trend that he posted a TikTok video that expressed his irritation with the use of expletives. At the end of the video, he implied that young people were addicted to technology by challenging them to go one week without the use of common technological devices and services, like cell phones and the internet. In response to the video, some younger TikTokers dueted the original video with clips of themselves taking up the challenge, while others dueted back by proposing new 'challenges' back to @irishmanalways. Witty but hard-hitting proposals included trying one week with 'no racism, no homophobia, no transphobia, no misogyny, no xenophobia' (Figure 9).

Craft activism

The third form of #OkBoomer memes examined in this study is that of craft activism, which involves TikTokers displaying the process of making 'Ok Boomer'-themed objects or pieces of art. The majority of these videos are devoted to the object's creation process and culminate in the unveiling of the 'Ok Boomer' tagline. Often, the true nature of the objects being created is not clear until the final unveiling. Examples of such craft-making include in-progress clips of 3D printing, embroidery and laser cutting (Figure 10).

TikTok is known as a platform where young people share their DIY (Do It Yourself) projects and demonstrate their creative processes (Zeng, 2020), so it is not surprising to see young users responding to the #OkBoomer meme trend with art and craft videos. Craft is often associated with imitation and recreation, which reflects the core elements of meme production. What makes crafting videos on TikTok interesting is their dual function as both the creators' own form of artistic expression and a tutorial for other

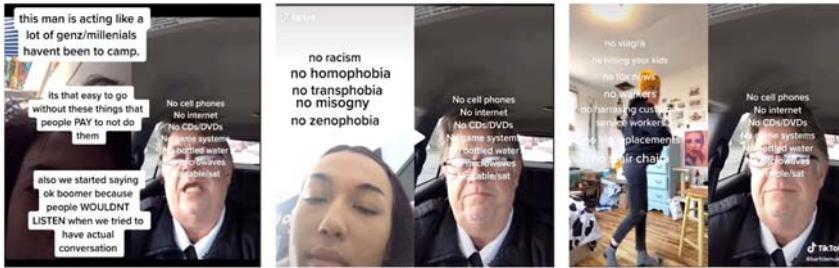**Figure 8.** Examples of duets to @old_school_is_not_so_bad's video.

Figure 9. Examples of duets to @irishmanalways's TikTok.

Figure 10. Examples of 'Ok Boomer'-themed crafts.

users. Unlike comedic content on TikTok that reaches virality through relatable humour, viral crafting videos on TikTok require a nuanced balance between skill and relatability. Therefore, the majority of viral crafting videos on TikTok focus on inspiring others by demonstrating craftwork that can be imitated and recreated, rather than solely impressing them.

The prevalence of crafting videos also signifies the inclusiveness and diversity of participants in the #OkBoomer memetic trend. As the examples of crafting videos demonstrate, participants in a memetic campaign on the platform are not limited to TikTokers with performative talents like dancing, singing and acting, but the scope of content also accommodates artistic talents and handiwork.

Meme functions

In the previous two sections, we discussed the prominent controversial issues embodied in #OkBoomer videos and how Gen Z creatively memefied them. As the third objective of the study, we explored how these memes were used to convey generational sentiment, or these memes' communicative functions. In this final section, #OkBoomer memes' communicative functions that have emerged from the corpus are considered, with the three main functions being retort and criticism; self-defence and self-mocking; and merchandising and bandwagoning.

Retorts and criticism by Gen Z

Gen Z's use of #OkBoomer memes to rebut and criticise Boomers was evident in 70% of the videos sampled. In the analysis of this sample, descriptions of the perceived Boomer were annotated. 27% of videos were found to address the Boomer generation in general, while the majority of these rebuttals and criticisms targeted specific individuals in the lives of young TikTokers. In the coded sample data, 19% of videos featured young Tik-Tokers referring to a family member as a 'Boomer'. While grandparents were commonly featured, parents appeared twice as frequently in the sample. In 20% of the videos, Gen Z TikTokers categorised strangers that they encountered as 'Boomers', including customers they served at part-time jobs in various shops and eateries and strangers on public transport.

The ambiguity in young people's usage of #OkBoomer shows that they do not use 'age' as the qualifier to determine whether someone is a Boomer. A common refrain that was sighted was, 'It is not your age, it's how you act'. Gen Z TikTokers also qualified whether those they had encountered exuded a 'Boomer vibe', which was not exclusively applied to any specific generation but could apply to anyone of any age. From this study's content analysis, 'Boomer vibes' are detected when people appear to be patronising or express conservative viewpoints on socio-political issues. In other words, being a Boomer is not an age-specific phenomenon but rather a mindset. Furthermore, in the process of calling out 'Boomers', Gen Z TikTokers are simultaneously establishing their own shared identity. In creating and sharing memes of their own 'Boomer moments' or 'Boomer encounters', they are constantly and collectively perpetuating an image of what Boomers are and, in contrast, a vision of what Gen Z should be.

Self-defence and Self-deprecation by Boomers

The second function of #OkBoomer was to counteract young TikTokers' call-outs. Although content with this function only represents a small fraction of videos studied (11.3%), it demonstrates the less visible engagement of older users with the trend. Some popular videos from this category were made by TikTokers to share their experiences being 'Ok Boomered', and to respond in humorous ways. For instance, @tmdad14, a dentist who became famous on TikTok for his dancing videos, shared a video (@tmdad14, 2019) with his 2.2 million fans titled, 'Me realising "Ok Boomer" is actually an insult'. @Tmdad14 began the video by saying 'I am not 65, I am 45. Come on!', then responded with dance moves that he jokingly called 'Boomer Woah'. The 'Woah' is one of the most viral dance moves on TikTok and has also contributed to @tmdad14's Tik-Tok fame. Most of his fans responded kindly by telling him that he passed 'the vibe check'.

As demonstrated by the example of @irishmanalways mentioned in the previous section (Figure 9), there were Boomer TikTokers who were offended by Gen Z's callouts. However, as observed in this data, most Boomer TikTokers' engagement with the #OkBoomer memes adopted a self-deprecating demeanour. On the one hand, some self-labelled Boomer TikTokers have taken the side of Gen Z and acknowledged the various things that the older generation could have done better. For instance, @monw0102 and @billyvsco are two parents who have actively engaged with the #OkBoomer trend. Unlike most young creators who created #OkBoomer memes that were meant to resonate with their fellow Gen Z TikTokers, the content of @monw0102 and @billyvsco mostly

addressed parents on the platform. They share tips on how to not behave like a 'Boomer' in front of their children and offer advice to parents on how to be less controlling, to respect their children's private space and to foster better communication.

On the other hand, there are examples of Boomer TikTokers who try to showcase a different kind of 'Boomer' image to young users on the platform. Users within this group proudly adopt the label of 'Boomers' and often succeed in impressing young Tik-Tokers with their energy and sense of humour (Figure 11). By performing some of Gen Z's favourite dance routines, these Boomer TikTokers are well received by the Gen Z community on the platform, with some young people even jokingly commenting that they would grant them a 'Gen Z pass' because they were 'cool'. Similar accounts of elderly influencers who capture the hearts of young audiences by participating in stereotypically youth-oriented internet trends and cultures have been noted on YouTube (Moon & Abidin, 2020).

Merchandising and bandwagoning by TikTokers and brands

As previously discussed, one popular form of participating in the #OkBoomer meme was through the creation of 'Ok Boomer'-themed objects. Some of these objects have been commercialised as merchandise. TikTokers that contributed to such content included independent craft entrepreneurs who participated in the meme by making #OkBoomer artefacts, and who then provided links to Etsy or other e-commerce websites where their followers could purchase such items.

However, a large number of #OkBoomer merchandise creators on TikTok have been 'incidental entrepreneurs' whose art, handiwork or designs became highly sought only after the TikTokers experienced 'accidental celebrity' through virality (Abidin, 2018). A prominent example is @calibronia's launch of the 'Zoomer Sweater'. In December 2019, @calibronia dueted @james.bee's 'Ok Boomer' song with a design concept of a hoodie with a slogan inspired by his lyrics: 'Ok Boomer, time to meet the Zoomers' at the

Figure 11. Examples of Boomer TikTokers: @bearded_boomer, @gregrungetv and @tn_tonya.
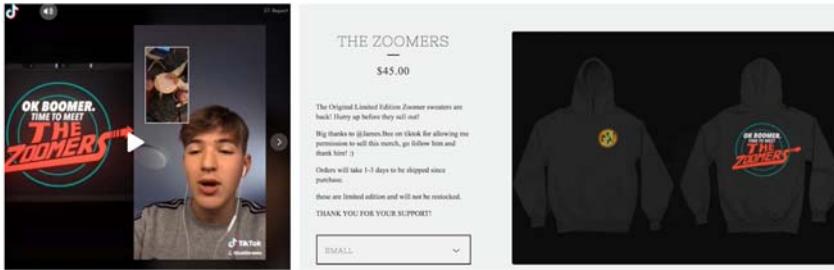
Figure 12. Screenshots of @calibronia's duet to @james.bee and the product page of the Zoomer Hoodie.

back and 'Gen Z' at the front (Figure 12). The duet went viral with over 2 million views, with many TikTokers commenting that they wanted to purchase the hoodie. Fans of this design include the original music video creator @james.bee, who then gave @calibronia permission to sell the Zoomer sweater.

The overnight success of the Zoomer sweater was swiftly echoed in many craft videos featuring 'Ok Boomer' objects, which were subsequently mass produced to meet the demand from fans. Examples included keychains, T-shirts and stickers. Such merchandising marked a turning point for the 'Ok Boomer' trend, which rapidly evolved from being a subcultural TikTok meme to becoming a generational slogan emblazoned on commodities that young people could adorn to signpost their identity politics. While the mainstreaming of 'Ok Boomer' memes indicates the generational spirit of Gen Z, the rapid commodification also risks a dilution of the original political message, as 'Ok Boomer' merchandise is also adopted as a fashion accessory for virtue signalling. As is common in the lifecycle of internet memes and viral cultures, this eventual erosion of the 'Ok Boomer' meme's significance to Gen Z is also evidenced in the rapid decline of its popularity among internet users (see Figure 1 again), for whom the cooptation by corporations and opportunistic entities invoked their swift discarding of, and distancing away from, the catchphrase.

Furthermore, there were also more obvious commercially driven attempts to bandwagon on the #OkBoomer trend that further alienated the original intention of the meme. For instance, TikTok influencer Charli D'Amelio (@charlidamelio, 2020) participated in a commercial video for a food product which featured the #OkBoomer meme. As a teenage TikToker with the most followers on TikTok, (over 52 million followers at the time of writing), her #OkBoomer commercial video was the most watched (with over 22 million views) and most liked (over 2.9 million likes) video in our dataset. Such corporate brandjacking of what initially began as a young people's vernacular movement is a sad lament of how corporations co-opt socio-political sentiments and affiliations to generate profits.

Conclusion

This study has discussed the intergenerational politics between Gen Z and Boomers, specifically through the case study of #OkBoomer memes on TikTok. Both scholars and commentators have criticised the #OkBoomer trends on social media for expressing antagonistic stereotypes and discrimination against older people (Lorenz, 2019; Meisner,

2020). However, this study has demonstrated that it is more productive to understand #OkBoomer as a consequence of intergenerational discord, rather than a cause. Informed by this study's findings, Gen Z's #OkBoomer rhetoric is complex and multifaceted.

Firstly, rather than an incendiary remark, #OkBoomer is often used by Gen Z as a response to antagonism from Boomers. As the analysis revealed, in most personal stories embedded in TikTok videos, this catchphrase is most often employed by Gen Z when they are attacked due to their lifestyle, dress code or sexuality. Like most people in their youth, members of Gen Z value their freedom of expression and identity exploration. From hair colour to partner preference, they are averse to the lecturing and judgment of older generations. In this context, the creation of #OkBoomer memes offers a counter-reaction. However, apart from indignation, there is also a sense of desperation. As demonstrated by TikTokers' sharing of their mental health struggles, after failing to get help from their own 'Boomer' parents, they engaged with the #OkBoomer meme to bitterly joke about their shared experiences.

While inter-family tension is widely featured in #OkBoomer memes on TikTok, the intergenerational disparities in political issues are highly visible. Gen Z uses #OkBoomer memes to lambast various conservative political views that are, rightly or wrongly, associated with the Boomer generation. Perceiving the climate crisis as an intergenerational injustice, Gen Z conveys their anger at Boomers, even though controversial jokes about COVID-19 being a 'Boomer remover'.

Furthermore, this study has also shed light on how the platform affordance impacts Gen Z's collective identification and self-representation. TikTok's technological features and platform logics shape not only the vernacular styles of Gen Z's memefied political messages, but also how they form alignment. As earlier iterated, this is most evident through the duet feature on TikTok, that allows users to react through direct callouts and replies to others. Moreover, by using audio memes, TikTokers engage with what we call 'lip-sync activism', a form of platform-enabled advocacy (especially in the case of lip-sync culture on TikTok) that displays a united voice but tells personal narratives.

To conclude, through examining Gen Z's own narrations about their everyday politics and identity politics on TikTok, this study has identified the generational sentiment that encapsulates a widespread attitude and belief shared by this cohort of young users. The intergenerational politics between Gen Z and Boomers are engaged by the former to construct and imagine their own generational consciousness around various social issues, such as the rise of populism and the existential threat of climate change. This study has provided an analytical framework that focuses on the vernacular communicative style of short videos, the specificities of TikTok's affordance, and the particular digital culture of young people, which we hope will be useful for future research to examine the social and political significance of TikTok videos across various (sub)cultures and trends.

Note

1. All cited TikTok videos are listed as multimedia references in Appendix 2.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Table A1. Coding categories explained with examples.

CODING DIMENSION ONE: CONTROVERSY ISSUES		
	Definition	Example
1. Gen Z Lifestyle & Well-being	Video featuring Boomers' remarks about Gen Z on the following issues	
1.1 Appearance	Boomer complaining on Gen Z's look, e.g., clothing choices makeup, hair colour	https://www.tiktok.com/@beanieboi7879/video/6760358233694686469?lang=en
1.2 Work	Boomer commenting about Gen Z being lazy, not wanting to have a 'real job'	https://www.tiktok.com/@overtimegg/video/6759629753226906885
1.3 Technology usage	Boomer complaining about Gen Z's relationship with technology, such as spending too much time on the phone	https://www.tiktok.com/@themermaidscale/video/6780969338632555778?lang=en
1.4 Mentality	Boomer commenting on Gen Z's mental health, or criticising them for being too sensitive or soft	https://www.tiktok.com/@mineandhers/video/6760772051193089285?lang=en
2. Conservative Politics	**Videos featuring Boomer's conservative political views**	
2.1 Climate policies	Boomers' view on climate policies	https://www.tiktok.com/@stale.catfood/video/6749557149745122566
2.1 Immigrants/Racial issues	Boomers' view on immigration issues, or on race and ethnicities	https://www.tiktok.com/@haleyrosefergiee/video/6779728321115606278

(Continued)

Table A1. Continued.

CODING DIMENSION ONE: CONTROVERSY ISSUES		
	Definition	Example
2.3 Donald Trump	Boomers' role in electing Donald Trump to be the US President	https://www.tiktok.com/@sawyermcd/video/6840578128507686149
2.4 Abortion	Boomers view on the legality of abortion	https://www.tiktok.com/@thenillawafers/video/6823834073954340101
2.5 Other political topics	Other opinions expressing political conservatism, such as gun rights etc.	https://www.tiktok.com/@mrbeardofficial/video/6751475347390270726
3. Gender & Sexuality	Boomer's viewpoints on gender/sexuality /transgender/homosexual	https://www.tiktok.com/@guitarguygizmo/video/6778210026940026117?lang=en
4. Other issues	The issue presented in the video is not clear or not listed above	https://www.tiktok.com/@chicken.shake/video/6804188954183732486
CODING DIMENSION TWO: MEME FORMS		
5. Audio feature		
5.1 With sound template	Videos using a sound template from TikTok	https://www.tiktok.com/@elisamson/video/6759907561182432518
5.2 With original sound clip	Videos using the creator's own sound clip	https://www.tiktok.com/@wasildaoud/video/6766754038554938629
6. Visual feature		
6.1 Stickers	Videos with text stickers to add captions to the clip	https://www.tiktok.com/@lowlifemaya/video/6757539988918766853
6.2 Duet	Videos using the duet function to respond to another users' clip by adding a new screen next to the original screen	https://www.tiktok.com/@lexaprofag/video/6764681817497881861
6.3 Green Screen	Videos using the special effect on TikTok that allows users to set a background picture.	https://www.tiktok.com/@jnetmoore22/video/6784922262907800838
6.4 All other effects	Other video creation effects not listed above	
7. Performing features		
7.1 Lip-synching	Video using a background soundtrack to do lip synchronisation; the sound can be music or a dialogue	https://www.tiktok.com/@sophie.helton/video/6796027191248325894?lang=en
7.2 Acting skit	Creators performing a comedy skit or role-playing a conversation	https://www.tiktok.com/@raw.dawg.ryan/video/6749557149745122566
7.3 Dancing	Creators showing dance moves in the video	https://www.tiktok.com/@rusty.fawkes/video/6814375694739524870
7.4 Music sharing	The creator plays music or shares an original song from themselves	https://www.tiktok.com/@mandystroyer/video/6803485122294238469?lang=en
7.5 Craft in making	Video showing the process of making 'Ok Boomer'-related objects	https://www.tiktok.com/@arrizonagt/video/6758808625189260549
7.6 Other	Other video content style	
CODING DIMENSION THREE: MEME FUNCTION		
8. Gen Z retort	Videos serve to criticise boomer generation's behaviours or viewpoints; videos presenting Gen Z's respond to Boomer's judgemental remark on them	
8.1 Targeting Boomers in general	There is no specification; Ok Boomer is used to address the Boomer generation or older people in general	https://www.tiktok.com/@originalkontent/video/6807494385803070725?lang=en
8.2 Targeting parents	'Boomer' refers to either mother/father/both	https://www.tiktok.com/@elisamson/video/6759907561182432518
8.3 Targeting grandparents	'Boomer' refers to grandparents in the video	https://www.tiktok.com/@harleec55/video/6777793905426435333
8.4 Targeting other family members	'Boomer' refers to other family members such as uncle/auntie, or refers to 'family' in general	https://www.tiktok.com/@whyyyyler/video/6756351514865978630?is_copy_url=1&is_from_webapp=v2

(*Continued*)

Table A1. Continued.

CODING DIMENSION ONE: CONTROVERSY ISSUES		
	Definition	Example
8.5 Targeting a stranger	A specific person the creator encountered, e.g., stranger, customer, neighbour	https://www.tiktok.com/@haleyrosefergiee/video/6779728321115606278
8.6 Other	Refers to other people, or when it is not clear	https://www.tiktok.com/@piper.scout/video/6777844118577024261
9. Boomers react	Videos featuring Boomers respond to Ok Boomer memes	
9.1 Complaining	Videos from Boomers who complain about being called 'Boomer'	https://www.tiktok.com/@24_hr_grandma/video/6779680224549342469
9.2 Self-mocking	Videos from Boomers who label themselves as Boomer in a joking or self-deprecating manner	https://www.tiktok.com/@heardeverything/video/6801287192070098181
10. Merchandising	Videos featuring an Ok Boomer-themed objects that is available to buy from the creator	https://www.tiktok.com/@missnorooz/video/6767076738410269957?is_copy_url=1&is_from_webapp=v2
11. Informative Educational	Videos providing informative facts about the Boomer generation	https://www.tiktok.com/@jeeshthepeesh/video/6777509195605396742
12. Other	Videos- Function cannot be identified or cannot be placed under items listed above	

Appendix 2

Table A2. List of cited TikTok videos.

@bearded_boomer (2020, August 16). '#inverted #masterroshi #dragonball #dragonballz #dbz #kamehouse #turtlehermit #okboomer'. Available at https://www.tiktok.com/@bearded__boomer/video/6861612104126942469

@calibronia (2019, December 10). '#duet with @james.bee i was inspired … '. Available at https://www.tiktok.com/@calibronia/video/6768669881924685061

@charlidamelio. (2020, January 30). '#SuperBowlLIV? Ok, Boomer, see you there! … ' Available at https://www.tiktok.com/@charlidamelio/video/6787720248645684485

@ditshap (2020, July 18). 'COMBACKS'. Available at https://www.tiktok.com/@ditshap/video/6850588271311998213?is_copy_url=1&is_from_webapp=v1

@gregrungetv (2020, February 28). 'The kids in the bus were going nuts when I was leaving'. Available at https://www.tiktok.com/@gregrungetv/video/6798528401436216582

@james.bee (2019, December 18). 'It is now a sound you can USE!!!'. Available at https://www.tiktok.com/@james.bee/video/6767856644232629509?is_copy_url=1&is_from_webapp=v1

@mrbeardofficial (2019, December 13). 'Boomer, I'm not ok … '. Available at https://www.tiktok.com/@mrbeardofficial/video/6770034516816841990?lang=en

@occultic (2019, November 13). 'basically my life … '. Available at https://www.tiktok.com/@occultic/video/6758929445685415173

@originalkontent (2020, March 23), 'Based on a true story … ' Available at https://www.tiktok.com/@originalkontent/video/6807494385803070725?lang=en

@overtimegg (2019, November 20). '#whirlpool these BOOMERS … '. Available at https://www.tiktok.com/@overtimegg/video/6759629753226906885

@peterkuli (2019, October 31). 'thank you all keep fighting every boomer you see'. Available at https://www.tiktok.com/@peterkuli/video/6754074622305635590

@scoopydoop43 (2020, January 20). '#fyp #boomer #foryoupage #smb1 #tas'. Available at https://www.tiktok.com/@scoopydoop43/video/6783993690881903878

@somestupidvideos (2020, January 18). 'Im stuck in 800 followers … ..' Available at https://www.tiktok.com/@somestupidvideos/video/6783315323555695878

@tmdad14 (2019, November 11). 'Ok boomer' woah. Available at https://www.tiktok.com/@tmdad14/video/6754729234222042374

@tn_tonya (2020, March 5). 'When there's a new version … 'Available at https://www.tiktok.com/@tn_tonya/video/6800553841965223173

@xdnube(2020, January 19). 'He do be kinda speedy doe'. Available at https://www.tiktok.com/@xdnube/video/6783622702478445829