OK Boomer: Structuring and Perceiving Millennials and Boomers as Online Communities

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Zagreb, 2020.

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Advisor: Dr. Marina Grubišić

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To my significantly older parents, who have always given me unconditional love and support despite the generational differences between us

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1. Introduction

The development of modern media has allowed for the creation of various types of identities and communities. Especially the last two decades have brought about a significant shift in the ideas about what constitutes a functioning community, because the more traditional, essentialist interpretation of identities and communities has shifted to a constructivist one, where these are seen as constructed, rather than as something one is born with. The Internet, on the other hand, has enabled the categories of time and space not only to gain an entirely new meaning, but has also completely changed how they function. First of all, this paper aims at illustrating how these changes in time and space have influenced the construction of online communities. Furthermore, three different theories will be incorporated into the theoretical part of paper in order to look at how online communities may resemble their traditional counterparts: Anderson's theory of imagined communities, different interpretations of speech communities, as well as communities of practice. These theories shall then be used in the practical part in order to analyse the activities of two different generations of people on the Internet, so as to see whether their online presence fulfils the criteria for creating independently functioning online communities as provided by these three theories. It is important to note that the two generations that will be observed – boomers and millennials – are above all shaped by contrasting experiences in regard to their digital competence, as they have grown up in vastly different times. It will be shown that boomers had to learn how to use digital media, while millennials are the first generation that has more or less grown up with it, which is why the former can also be labelled as digital immigrants, and the latter as digital natives. Moreover, this paper will demonstrate that these two groups operate almost exclusively in a relational fashion – their (online) identity strongly depends on the existence of the other group's identity. Because of this, this paper wants to look at how these two groups perceive and interpret the identities and actions of the opposing group. In order to do this, different excerpts from online conversations, memes and other types of Internet correspondence will be used.

2. The Influence of Globalisation and the Internet on Time and Space

Although other forms of mass media, such as newspapers, were the first to disrupt traditional notions of time and space – in much sense a reason why Gutenberg's press is said to have brought a revolution to the world of media and information (Weber 2006) – the Internet and the process of globalisation entirely changed how time and space are perceived. In order to understand such notions, relevant globalisation processes need to be understood first.

Globalisation is oftentimes talked about as a mere economic phenomenon (Slevin 2001, 198), but for this paper, its cultural implications are more important. Chen and Zhang point out that "the change of human society is especially reflected in the transformation of cultural identity due to the impact of the convergence of globalization and new media" (795–796). One of the crucial results of the cultural influence of globalisation is the importance of English. English first spread due to British imperialism and influence, but in the second half of the 20th century, it spread because of US influence in the fields of technology, meaning that most technological innovations that changed the world were first invented in the US. This may, among other factors, serve as an explanation as to why English then became the 'unofficial official' language of the Internet. Globalisation is more than the mere global presence of a product; it is "about the reordering of time and space facilitated by *action at a distance*" (Beck, Giddens and Lash 1994, cited in Slevin 2000). Slevin argues that globalisation is a very complex relationship which is dialectal because it is "evident in the reciprocity and interdependency, that connects the local and the distant" (Slevin 2000, 200). It is also a "major source of dynamism, [for it] reorders time and space" (Slevin 2000, 198). Moreover, time and space have with time become categories that can easily be "folded away" (Slevin 2000, 71). To understand what this means, Slevin paraphrases Giddens' words, stating the multiple processes of globalisation that rearrange the various aspects of systemic integration:

> Giddens attempts to capture the reciprocity and interdependency connecting the local and the distant in terms of globalization 'pulling away', 'pushing down' and 'squeezing sideways'. Globalization 'pulls away', for example, in the sense that the powers once held by agencies of state or large economic organizations have been weakened by global developments. Globalization 'pushes down' in the sense that it creates new burdens and new options for local identities and interaction. Finally, globalization 'squeezes sideways' in that it reorders time and space, cutting across old boundaries and creating new horizontal alliances. (Slevin 2000, 200)

For the sake of this paper, it is most important to understand the notions of 'pushing down' and 'squeezing sideways'. By 'pushing down', globalisation – alongside the Internet – has enabled interconnectivity of the world, which created the possibility of stepping away from what is in a sense familiar in order to find the new and the unfamiliar and utilise it for building up and creating a whole new identity. This process would not be a possibility without the presence of these two phenomena. Similarly, the described process of 'squeezing sideways' and reordering time and space has reordered how we view the people around us and the types of relationships we can cultivate. One of the most important traits of new media is "the power to bond people

from everywhere, in spite of distances or of the fact that they never met before in face-to-face conditions" (Grădinaru 2016, 185). It is no longer uncommon that a person may establish friendships with people they may never have met 'in real life', but regularly talk to through the Internet. They may even consider this far-away person to be one of their closest friends, thus crossing the boundaries not only of space, but also of time. In this sense, communications "facilitate action at a distance" – a process which is deeply interconnected with the intensification of globalisation (Slevin 2000, 200). There is no denying that this reordering of the time-space continuum has greatly influenced how people, especially younger generations, see and interpret the world.

In his book, Slevin references and explains Thompson's characteristics of mass communication. Coming to Thompson's third characteristic – *extension of availability in time-space* – Slevin explains the flexibility of the Internet in that regard. He compares it to television, where he explains that information needs to be interesting or newsworthy and televisable in order to air, while advertisements are required to purchase slots of airtime. However, the degree of visibility still depends on the time of day, as what is broadcasted is strongly bound to a short timeframe which not everybody can necessarily access. Furthermore, it is highly dependent on space, as most channels broadcast only to a limited area. On the other hand, the Internet "is upsetting established patterns of availability in this respect", for information stored on websites can be accessed around the clock, regardless of physical space, "establishing communicative relationships with interested users on a global scale even before they set foot outside their homes" (Slevin 2000, 75).

Since Slevin's book came out, a lot has changed once more – with tablets, smartphones, smartwatches and similar devices, people are allowed to step outside their homes without having to sacrifice the availability of information. Regardless of one's location and time, most people are constantly available; i.e. able to send and receive information in any form, be it emails, voice messages, instant messages, pictures, files, audio, etc. Ubiquitous access to information has in a sense become a basic right, where not having a connection is seen as a punishment – in the sense that many parents may take away their children's devices as a punishment for misbehaviour – and is feared by many, especially those who were born as so-called *digital natives*. This term, along with its pair, *digital immigrant*, was first introduced by Marc Prensky (2001). According to him, *digital natives* are people who belong to the generation that grew up surrounded by all types of technology and devices – a generation that

is the direct result of a *singularity*, i.e. "the arrival and rapid dissemination of digital technology in the last decades of the 20th century" (Prensky 2001). Prensky further explains the term *digital native*, claiming that this is a generation where everyone is a "'native speaker' of the digital language of computers, video games and the Internet" (2001). The other part of this dichotomy is built up by the so-called *digital immigrant*, a person who has not spent their entire life surrounded by technology, but has at some later point of life "adopted many or most aspects of new technology" (Prensky 2001). Apart from aiding in the understanding of the rapid pace of change which has occurred throughout the late 20th century, these two terms are ideal for describing the disparity between two generations of people whose activities on the Internet will be analysed later in this paper – *digital immigrants* or boomers*,* and *digital natives* or millennials*.* As will be shown, technology plays one of the biggest roles when it comes to stereotyping processes within these two generations.

3.   The Internet as a Community

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, new media in all its forms has influenced the world in such a great deal that if an ordinary person were to time travel from just 25 years ago to the present moment, they would have a very hard time catching up with all the changes in everyday life, especially those pertinent to the Internet and technology in general. Even though various ideas of establishing mutual connections between computers were slowly being brought to reality since the mid-1960s, the Internet as we know it today has only existed since the early 1990s. Moreover, it was not until several years later that its rapid expansion had kicked off. According to Internet World Stats (2019), in December 1995 only 0.4% of the world's population – or about 16 million people – were Internet users, by December 2003 it was 11.1% or 719 million. As of June 2019, the number of Internet users lies at around 59%, which equals to over 4.5 billion people. The percentages of the Internet's population penetration are even higher if we look at the statistics for North America and Europe. Over 87% of the European and over 89% of the North American population are Internet users as of 2019.

Several authors point out that the four main characteristics of the Internet are inter-linkage, non-linearity, interactivity, and global reach (Mangold and Faulds, 2009; Siomkos and Tsiamis, 2004, cited in Kavoura 2014, 491). Of these characteristics, interactivity and global reach may be the most important ones for establishing functioning and active communities regardless of the actual location of the person. Global reach enables the inclusivity of the

Internet – provided they have Internet access, and the community is not private or tailored to a very specific audience, anyone can in theory become a part of a community if they wish to. For instance, anyone can create a Twitter account and choose to be active or passive in their online presence, i.e. choosing whether they want to post or just follow other users to see what they post. The same is true for Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, DeviantArt and many other social networks.

Since the Internet – and especially social networks – would not be used without a social factor, i.e. a human factor, it is inevitable that some kind of communities will arise through regular communication. A further key factor is that people using social networks share similar interests in one way or another. Social networks originally intended primarily for communication and connecting with one's friends and acquaintances regardless of interests – like Facebook – use other means to establish connections between individuals with shared interests, such as groups or pages. Such features allow for communities being formed even among people who are not friends or acquaintances and who may live on the other side of the world. Other social networks are built on the idea of a shared interest – a good example of this is DeviantArt, "the largest online social network for artists and art enthusiasts" (DeviantArt n.d.). Furthermore, this platform was originally established for emerging artists with the aim of promoting and sharing their works with "an enthusiastic, art-centric *community*" (DeviantArt n.d., author's emphasis). Although smaller communities may be created within the primary one, for example according to the art style or motifs one uses and/or is interested in, it can be stated that the entirety of DeviantArt users form a community, just like the website claims.

Even though computer-mediated communication (CMC) was originally seen as a tool for communications transmission and information exchange, it is now more frequently viewed as a place of production and reproduction of social relations (Jones 1995, cited in Jones and Kucker 2001, 217). Grădinaru illustrates the importance of CMC for building communities, stating that "whenever CMC technology becomes available to people anywhere, they inevitably build virtual communities with it, just as microorganisms inevitably create colonies" (Grădinaru 2016, 185). Furthermore, as identity, which will later be more closely defined, is one of the crucial components of this paper, it is vital to note how strongly the afore described process of globalisation has impacted the sense of community, civic society and cultural diversity (Chen and Starosta 2000, cited in Chen and Zhang 2010, 796). The meaning of community was strongly redefined "with a new look at inclusiveness and collective sense of identity. The wall between traditional communities also collapsed due to the constant flush of

globalization" (Chen and Zhang 2010, 796). Among other factors, the presence and influence of the English language on the Internet has redefined culture, as trends of blurring national boundaries exist (Chen and Zhang 2010, 797), and culture and language are strongly interdependent. To sum it all up, Grădinaru argues that "[e]ven if online communities seem to be artificially constructed in comparison with the traditional communities, the common identity shared by members is enough to assure their functionality" (Grădinaru 2016, 188). The process of challenging the traditional sense of reality and the fact that the virtual space created by new media impacts how people develop their identities have led to new emerging communities and societies, often called *cyberculture*, *net nation* or *cybersociety* (Bailey, 1997; Baym, 1995; Jones, 1995; Silver, 2000, cited in Chen and Zhang 2010, 799).

With it said, the next chapters will analyse the different ways in which the Internet and its users can be seen as perpetually creating and maintaining communities from different community theories' standpoints. It is necessary to understand these frameworks in order to be able to further analyse smaller communities formed on the Internet and how exactly it is they function and reproduce their respective community's values through language and other means.

3.1. The Internet and Social Media – Imagined Communities?

Since its original publishing in 1983, Benedict Anderson's work *Imagined Communities* has remained one of the key works used in various disciplines to help understand and analyse not only nations, but the ways in which all kinds of social groups are structured and function. In his work, Anderson states that communities like nations can be *imagined*, for "the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson 2006, 6). Although for Anderson the nation is the primary point of interest and research, many of his definitions can be applied for other types of social groups, as well. It is important to note that he defines the nation as a community, stating that "regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (Anderson 2006, 7). While the notion of inequality and exploitation may not be as relevant for communities on the Internet as it is for nations[1], it follows from Anderson's definition that a community is a *deep, horizontal comradeship*. The same can be applied to the Internet and especially its communities. Kavoura points out that "[s]ocial media […] may

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[1] It is, however, possible to further discuss this point in regard to the degree in which it may or may not be relevant. For the sake of this paper and its primary topic, the author has decided to deem it irrelevant.

create an imagined online community similar to Anderson's imagined communities, which has specific characteristics that people share, comradeship prevails, a sacred language and written script exist and people share a common interest or idea" (Kavoura 2014, 494). Regardless of whether they gather around a shared interest, be it a person, a hobby or a thing, Internet communities most often consist of more or less anonymous users. Even on networks like Facebook, where only a fraction of the users hides behind fake names – though the network was originally created with the purpose of having your own profile under your real full name – communities are formed among people who do not know each other, wherefore full names take on the function of anonymous identities. Although full names, locations and other similar pieces of information available on a Facebook profile enable everyone to find out one's true identity much easier than it would be to find someone hiding behind a random username on Reddit, Tumblr, DeviantArt and other similar networks, the main point is that true identities in the construction of such communities rarely matter. Fox explains that "virtual communities provide a 'flexible' imagined environment but also present opportunities for identity shifting and even deception because the identifying cues that define one's identity in the physical world – such as gender, age, class, ethnicity, sexuality, and so on – are enacted in much more complex ways online" (Fox 2004, 52, cited in Grădinaru 2016, 189). The most important factor is that there is a *deep, horizontal comradeship* among users in a community because there is a common interest or goal. It can also be said that communities are often "caught between concrete social relationships and imagined sets of people perceived to be similar" (Gruzd, Wellman, and Takhteyev 2011, 1294).

Grădinaru (2016, 187) mentions the concept of *imagined audience* as one of the important features of new media. The adjective *imagined* in this case is once more retrieved from Anderson's work, referring to the notion that a person communicating or sharing on the Internet does not know who the audience will be. A content creator may have their target audience[2] which they want to reach, but it is inevitable that other audiences will eventually be reached. A good example may be YouTube videos, where a creator may post a video sharing their personal political opinions, aiming at finding people who share the same views, and trying to avoid 'unnecessary' discussions. However, the creator is at no moment guaranteed that they

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[2] Although it may be argued that an *imagined audience* is not necessarily equal to a *target audience*, since the target audience is more concrete and bound with predefined parameters, the given example serves to illustrate the range of the imagined audience – its true limits are unknown to the individual who is creating and/or sharing content.

will only reach people of shared ideas. Moreover, although unlikely, it is certainly possible that their video may exclusively be viewed by people of radically opposing views. Communication on the Internet inevitably includes the factor of the unknown and the imagined, especially because users can only speculate about the identities of all the members of their respective communities, as already explained above. Grădinaru furthermore states that, because they are a form of personal media, new media inevitably "deal with complex, indeterminate, and heterogeneous audiences" (Grădinaru 2016, 187). In addition, it needs to be acknowledged that Internet communities are different from traditional (i.e. real-life) communities in that they are constructed. However, as explained previously, they function because their members share an identity (Grădinaru 2016, 188) – they are, above all, all Internet users with a similar goal or interest. Furthermore, their community is built on communication, which is arguably also the key component of traditional communities. The interplay of communication, i.e. language use and communities will further be described in the next chapter, but it is important to note that Grădinaru defines conversation and interpersonal relationships as "anchors of community" (Grădinaru 2016, 188). Anderson based his theory of imagined communities on nations, and for many nations it is the national language that plays the most important role in establishing the nation itself, all while reinforcing its identity as an independent, valid and legitimate community which can continue functioning. It is then no wonder that communication is the building block for any functioning community. It can be argued that the Internet is based on communication – everything done online transfers a piece of communication to other Internet users, regardless of the form in which it is sent, i.e. if it is written language, code, a video, a sound clip or an image.

A good example of the above described phenomena is the Facebook group *Ženski recenziRAJ*[3], where Croatian women and women from other ex-Yugoslavian countries gather and participate. Although the group was originally founded by a blogger with the aim of creating a platform for women who would review and recommend cosmetic products to each other, it has over the years evolved to a kind of safe space for women, where they are able to talk about anything of interest, ask for recommendations and ideas for all sorts of problems and potentially shared interests. The common ground for this community is that its members are exclusively women. For instance, when someone asks for recommendations, the person that replies does not need strict references as to who they are and what their qualifications are to

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[3] En. 'women's review heaven' – author's loose translation, as the name of the group is a play on words, combining *review* ('recenzija') and *heaven* ('raj').

give the recommendation; they are trusted because they are part of the community. In other words, their identity provides them with credibility. It could be argued that the community could function just as well if its users were completely anonymous, as long as the common ground remained upheld, i.e. they were still women.

3.2. Speech Communities and Use of Language and Norms on the Internet

Contemporary sociolinguistics sees identity as dynamic, meaning that it is constantly being created and reproduced, mainly through language practices. Bucholtz and Hall define identity as "the social positioning of self and other" (Bucholtz and Hall 2010, 18), where the positioning will most often depend on the context a person finds themselves in. The two authors point out that identity should be viewed as a result of linguistic interactions instead of the source of linguistic and semiotic practices, which means that it is above all a highly social and cultural phenomenon (Bucholtz and Hall 2010, 19). According to George Yule, a speech community is "a group of people who share a set of norms and expectations regarding the use of language" (Yule 2010, 253). However, research focused on speech communities has always seen them as focused on demographic categories such as age, gender, ethnicity, and class. Furthermore, they are seen as almost always more or less geographically bound and relevant to a relatively small limited area. It should be taken into consideration that this theory emerged in the 1960s – a time where there was still no Internet and the present state of the globalised world was quite unimaginable. While original work on speech communities focused on smaller towns and communities, Labov made claims that a larger area, such as New York City, could also be seen as one single speech community; as opposed to various other authors, Labov focused on shared norms as the key part of speech communities:

> The speech community is not defined by any marked agreement in the use of language elements, so much as by participation in a set of shared norms: these norms may be observed in overt types of evaluative behavior, and by the uniformity of abstract patterns of variation which are invariant in respect to particular levels of usage. (Labov 1972, 120– 121)

However, since the Internet transcends traditional categories of time and space, this paper aims at using Yule's definition of speech communities and applying it to Internet communities.

If Yule's definition is taken into consideration as the primary definition used for this paper, it can be concluded that humans do not belong to a single speech community because it is long known and accepted that they adapt their language to the situation. The same speaker

can use different linguistic varieties and devices for different situations and different purposes (Trudgill 2010, 81). Switching between these varieties, also known as registers, is seen as a necessary skillset, as one would not use the same manner of speaking and the same vocabulary, i.e. the same register when speaking to their boss, their parents or their friends, and it is important to know what is appropriate in the given situation. The Internet has its own register that is learnt and familiar to users who want to participate in its activities. It may even be argued that there is a myriad of registers appropriate for use on the Internet, and they depend on what one is doing. These can be interpreted as norms that define the Internet community; potential members need to learn and conform to the norms indirectly prescribed by Internet communities if they wish to participate in them successfully. Crystal's work (2007) illustrates that the language people use when using e-mail, chat groups or virtual worlds varies. Moreover, language and register differences can be observed on different social platforms – the language used on Facebook differs from the language used on Twitter, especially because communication on Twitter is limited in length to 280 characters, while a Facebook post can easily be essay-like. On the other hand, many social networks support instant messaging, where the messages will generally be shorter, but often there are more of them sent in a row; whereas if one was to create multiple short posts or publish short comments in a short time span, it would be considered inappropriate and labelled as spam. In instant messaging, a single message often functions as single line of thought, and the meaning could be susceptible to change if a single message were analysed in isolation, out of context. The following is an excerpt from a WhatsApp conversation the author (A) had last summer with a friend (F), which demonstrates how the lack of quality and information transferred through a single message is compensated with message quantity in instant messaging:

A: [14:54] i want beer

F: [14:57] so do i

  but i have to study

A: \<sleeping emoji>

F: [15:01] i have 5 exams next week

A: u can do it

F: unless i melt

  but i have friends visiting for the weekend

  so itll be cool

  next weekend

A:		meeeh it's perfectly good
F:		not this
		i need to go swimming
	[15:02]	i need to float in cold water
A:		i'm going tomorrow
F:	[15:04]	jealous
A:	[15:06]	yeah well I have nothing to do
		I'm just in my flat all the time

Figure 1. Transcription of instant communication via WhatsApp (F, WhatsApp communication with author, June 26, 2019)

It can furthermore be established that most platforms have, in one way or the other, developed their own microlanguage or variety, pertinent to what may regularly be repeated and what is important for the platform in question. This is similar to how communities and social groups in reality develop their own language or how friends develop inside jokes – just on a larger scale as it includes more people. An appropriate illustration of this phenomenon is Reddit with its subgroups, called subreddits. Each subreddit functions as a relatively independent group of people partaking in the same interest or activity. Although Reddit abounds in more general language that is used and widely understood by (regular) users not only on Reddit, but also on other social platforms, many subreddits have their own smaller variety consisting of specific expressions and abbreviations that are relevant to the primary topic or activity of the subreddit. For example, OP is an abbreviation that stands for *original poster*; it is used on a variety of forum-like platforms where people communicate with each other, including Reddit, and it is widely understood. OP is in this context defined as "in forum-style collection of comment[s]; the first person to comment or post" (Urban Dictionary 2009). However, OP also carries the meaning of *overpowered* (Urban Dictionary 2009), a meaning which is usually found in online gaming. It is interesting that both of these meanings are exclusive to online presence and communities; however, they rarely get mixed up because they are highly context-dependent, and users learn them and use them through the various contexts. This goes to show that, while the Internet may form a speech community of itself, there are multiple smaller speech communities to be found as smaller units on the Internet. As mentioned before, there are also words that are exclusively used and found in these smaller communities and that rarely spread to a larger scale. A good example of such a word is the abbreviation ELI5, meaning *explain like I'm 5*, used almost exclusively on the subreddit *Explain like I'm five*. This subreddit

offers layman explanations of various topics requested by its members. It has become norm that the format of each question posted consists of two elements: *ELI5* and a question following it. All the questions posted to the subreddit strictly follow this format. The question is sometimes, albeit rarely, replaced with a statement, in which case the question usually follows in the post itself. In other words, the members of this subreddit may be defined as forming an independent speech community because there is a set of norms and expectations that they have present, which must necessary be followed when partaking in the subreddit, i.e. the community.
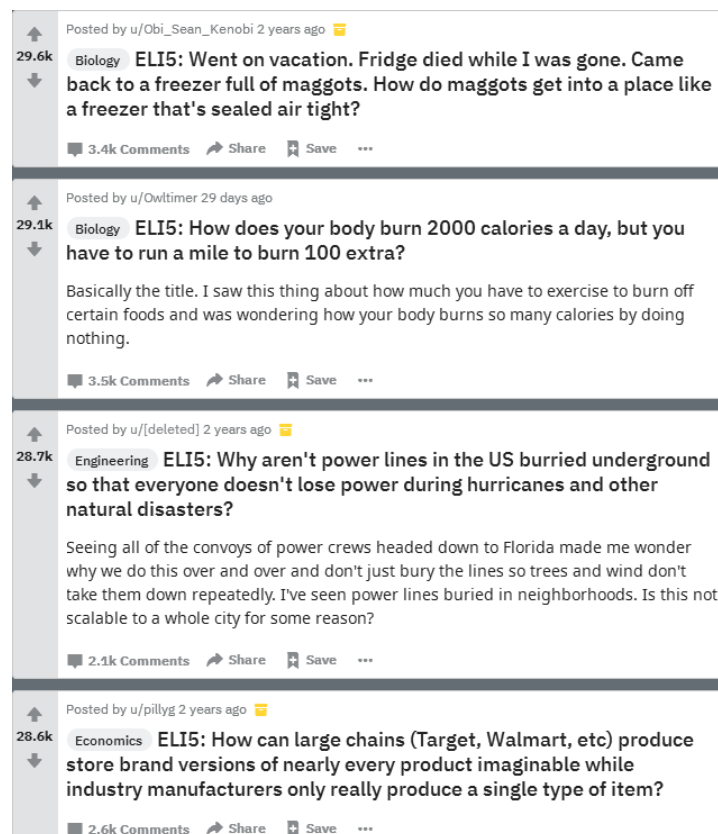

Figure 2. Some of the most popular asked questions, illustrating the described norm

For a long time, speech communities were one of the central focal points of sociolinguistics, where the language of minority groups was most often dissected and connected to other social factors. In his work, Ogbu (1999, 148) provides a summary of past research done on the English spoken in African-American groups among (younger) students. African-American students statistically received lower grades and did less well in school than other students, including students from other minority groups. Many assumed that the problem lay in the language they use and the fact that it vastly differs from the Standard English which schools would demand. African-American students were found to experience many more

problems than students of other groups whose native language is not Standard English. However, Ogbu notes that the following was found in the research:

> [D]isadvantaged children with standard English are caused not only by differences in dialects *per se* but also by nonlanguage factors, including language identity and cultural rules of language use. In the case of Black Americans, the problem lies partly in *miscommunication* because students differ from their teachers in social meanings and usage of English. These sociolinguists remind us that Black children and their teachers learn different structural rules for their respective English dialects (i.e., grammar, phonology, and vocabulary of Black English and standard English) as well as different cultural rules for using those dialects in their respective speech communities. *[Researchers] point out that within their own speech community Black children do not have the kind of language problems associated with them at school*, where they have to communicate with people from a standard English speech community. (Ogbu 1999, 148–149, author's emphasis)

The excerpt shows that speech communities function independently – the language used within a speech community and the community's norms are perfectly understandable for people belonging to the community, even if their they might seem completely unintelligible to others. As already mentioned, the Internet consists of a myriad of speech communities, and they will most often use English as their primary language, i.e. a *lingua franca*, provided the members do not share a native language. However, each of these speech communities gathers around different interests or activities, wherefore it is expected that the language they use will also vary and adapt to the specific interest or variety. This part will further be elaborated in the practical part of this paper, once it is applied to the online communities of millennials and boomers.

3.3. The Creation and Reproduction of Communities of Practice

Communities of practice are part of a newer tradition in comparison to speech communities, and it could be argued that they build on the neglected aspects of the speech community theory. Eckert writes of this difference between the two theories, claiming that the community of practice "offers a different perspective from the traditional focus on the speech community as an explanatory context for linguistic heterogeneity" (Eckert 2006, 683). It has already been stated that speech communities traditionally focus on a "geographically defined population [that is] structured by broad and fundamental social categories [such as] class, gender, age, race, and ethnicity", but communities of practice have decided to place their focus on "the fluidity of social space and the diversity of experience" (Eckert 2006, 683–684). To understand

this concept further, it needs to be clear that in social sciences, the term *practice* is used interchangeably with a variety of other terms, among them tradition, tacit knowledge, *Weltanschauung*, paradigm, ideology, framework, and presupposition (Turner 1994, 2). Furthermore, it needs to explained that in contrast to speech communities, which primarily focus on abstract characteristics shared by their members, communities of practice rely on *doing*, especially *doing* as a way of reinforcing membership in a particular community of practice (Davies 2005, 3). Communities of practice thus place focus on the individual and how they not only reproduce the practices of the group they belong to, but also act as individual agents that may bring about change to the community and produce individual style rather than just conforming to the norms of the group. However, Eckert suggests that the best approach for sociolinguistic analysis is a combination of the two described frameworks because they are both necessary and complementary (Eckert 2006, 685).

In order to be able to apply community of practice theory to the two Internet communities that will later be analysed, it needs to be defined first. The original definition, developed by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet in the early 1990s, stated that communities of practice are "an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavor. Ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations – in short practices – emerge in the course of this mutual endeavour" (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992, 464). However, Eckert later further developed this definition further:

> A community of practice is a collection of people who engage on an ongoing basis in some common endeavor. [They] emerge in response to common interest or position, and play an important role in forming their members' participation in, and orientation to, the world around them. It provides an accountable link, therefore, between the individual, the group, and place in the broader social order, and it provides a setting in which linguistic practice emerges as a function of this link. Studies of communities of practice, therefore, have considerable explanatory power for the broader demographics of language variability. (Eckert 2006, 683)

In other words, a community of practice is a group of people who are gathered to participate in the same or similar activities and usually have a shared goal. Language once again plays an important part in the creation and maintenance of such a community, for meaning is negotiated by participating in the endeavour; Eckert (2006, 683) calls this the process of "mutual sense-making", where the participants are trying to create meaning about their mutual enterprise, their forms of participation in this enterprise, their orientation to other communities, etc. This process of developing meaning is a combination of two factors; first, meanings are created "in

the course of local social practice" (McConnell-Ginet 1989, cited in Eckert 2006, 684) and then conventionalised "on the basis of shared experience and understanding (Lewis 1969, cited in Eckert 2006, 685). This framework is strongly in-line with modern theories about identity, according to which identity is a dynamic ever-changing entity which is built over time rather than something an individual is born with. In order to understand communities of practice, Eckert claims it must be accepted that "identity is not fixed, that convention does not pre-exist use, and that language use is a continual process of learning" (Eckert 2006, 685). Lastly, it is important to understand that the activities that produce communities of practice are also bounded in time and space (Wenger 1998, 63), so the way in which time and space function in cyberspace needs to be kept in mind at all times.

So, the question is how are Internet communities structured as communities of practice? Social networks have served as a frame where individuals developed their norms of how they should be used and interpreted in multiple ways. Apart from the language and the kind of language that has become the norm in a specific community, as already described, members of communities participate in activities related to the network in question either actively or passively. Active participation involves participating in the creation of content. So, for instance, on Instagram one shares pictures, videos and stories – which can be either pictures or videos – usually tagging them with the help of hashtags so that people can find them or creating short descriptions. A person has the freedom to choose if their profile is public or private. In the latter case, they would have to accept requests to be *followed*, so they can control who has access to their shared content. On the other hand, Twitter primarily serves to share brief thoughts and opinions in the form of written language rather than pictures, although pictures can be shared as well. There is no option for a Twitter profile to be private, so everything shared is generally available to the public. Additionally, Facebook can be observed as a combination of the two – where a user has their own profile where they can share content in the form of words, videos and pictures with their friends, i.e. a chosen audience, but they can also participate in public discussions and activities thanks to the existence of groups and pages or they can share content on their profile publicly and choose to allow other users to follow their profile without necessarily being *friends* on Facebook. YouTube enables users to create video content and share it with the world, and although there are no private profiles, videos can also be posted privately so that they can be accessed only with a link to the respective video or not accessed at all. Active users of these networks are aware of the kind of participation that is required by each network. As already mentioned, users can also be passive, but they are still part of the communities built on these networks. They may choose not to share any of their

own content, but still read, watch and follow other peoples' content. Passive participation is maybe best explained on the example of YouTube, where there are more passive users than active ones. In order to be able to *like* or comment on videos, subscribe to channels, a person needs to create their own profile, but they are not required to post their own videos. Eckert and Wenger (2005, 583) explain that what counts as competence and by whom is negotiated by the community over time. Thus, the community politicises the process of learning. Not even *digital natives* were born with the knowledge of competence in the context of social networking; it can be argued that these competences are developed with participation, be it active or passive. It is typical for online communication that a user first learns the norms of participation before attempting to actively participate in a community of practice by following the norms (Šimon 2019, 15). This process of learning is not simply imitation or being trained into correct performance; it requires "appropriate uptake, which involves some *understanding* of the performance to which one responds" (Rouse 2007, 509).

4. Millennials and Boomers as Online Communities

In order to understand how millennials and boomers might be constructed and interpreted as independently functioning online communities, the reader should above all keep in mind the already explained reality that, while online communities "seem to be artificially constructed[,] […] the common identity shared by members is enough to assure their functionality" (Grădinaru 2016, 188). The basic identity of each of these two communities that is shared by its members is that they were born in, i.e. belong to the same generation. Baby boomers (boomers for short) are most often defined as the group of people born during the baby boom period following World War II, usually between 1946 and 1964. On the other hand, millennials – also known as Generation Y or Gen Y – are usually defined as people belonging to the generation born between 1981 and 1996, thus often being the children of boomers. It is by no means a new phenomenon that groups are formed and/or observed on the basis of the period people were born in, and boomers and millennials are not the only generations defined with a name and a specific period in time. It is expected that people belonging to the roughly same generation experience similar socio-economic and cultural factors at more or less the same age. Offline, boomers are often associated with civil rights movements and second-wave feminism of the 1960s and the 1970s, and while it is generally true that younger generations should be better off than their predecessors, the younger generations of today face more economic struggle than boomers ever did – they are no longer successively wealthier and not gaining

over time (Ellis 2007; Steuerle et al. 2013). While it is true that many of these factors are strongly influenced by the location factor, this factor will be eliminated for the purpose of this analysis, as was shown that the category of space loses its traditional characteristics and significance when communities in cyberspace are observed, especially since cyberspace functions as an independent and wholly complete space in itself.

When these two communities are observed as Internet communities, they are often seen as polar opposites. However, it should be noted that, just like group identities i.e. communities, they exist in relation to each other. This means that at the same time, there is sameness and difference established parallelly; these notions construct the identity of a group in relation to their own group and to the other group (see Joseph 2004). The primary group identity of millennials is on the Internet constructed as standing in stark contrast to the (often stereotypically interpreted and exaggerated) identity of boomers. The main distinction – and often the main point of ridicule, as will be shown – is the difference in technological prowess. Taking into consideration the years when the baby boomer generation was born, there is no question about them being digital immigrants. On the other hand, although early millennials may not have had much of today's technology growing up, they are generally seen as the first generation of digital natives, as they use digital technology at much higher rates than any generation before them (Junco and Mastrodicasa 2007), a trait which vastly distinguishes them from all the other generations that precede them.

4.1. Methodology

For the following interpretation, the space, discourse, as well as the communication will be observed and analysed in order to illustrate the different tools, language patterns and stereotypes established by each group when constructing the identity of the other group, all while also (often involuntarily) constructing the identity of their own group. It will be shown that boomers as digital immigrants and millennials as digital natives naturally prefer different media platforms for their performance; boomers generally prefer non-digital media such as print newspapers, especially in the forms of comics, while millennials have almost fully taken over the digital realm, fully using its resources to construct their own identity, as well as the identity of other groups. Although boomers participate to a degree in the creation of content on digital platforms, they often lack the knowledge of the currently popular formats, opting for formats that make it easier to spot them as *outsiders*. They do, however, often touch on the topic of digital media and platforms, criticizing millennials for spending too much time in the

digital world or being too influenced by it. Moreover, it is not surprising that digital platforms serve as the natural habitat of many millennials who have not only grown up with them or spent years learning and adapting to their required communication patterns, but also built them from the ground up. In that regard, millennials have a natural advantage on digital media platforms because it does serve as their natural content habitat. They can be interpreted as the natural builders of the smaller spaces within the large cyberspace, as the drivers and creators of the discourse and communication. So, it is above all important to keep in mind the disadvantage of boomers in regard to the discourse starting position.

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that many online communication patterns serve as a good example of digital media genres being just another adapted form of traditional media – for instance, comics – as will be seen in the analysed examples, their form and function is very similar, they merely differ in regard to the platform they have been shared to and the audience they are more likely to reach due to the platform used. These genres of online communication have developed as parts of online communities and necessarily reflect the communities' identity, cultural and communication patterns, but they also create completely new ones through different practices. This construction of new practices and identities is connected to the aforementioned process of mutual sense-building where meaning is negotiated by the members of a community by participating in their common endeavour, i.e. their mutual enterprise (Eckert 2006, 683). It will be shown that both boomers and millennials use different tools to negotiate and create meaning, mainly on the basis of shared experience and understanding – their experience of having lived through similar phenomena at similar ages, as well as their experience of belonging to this community because of their year of birth and thus being stereotyped by the opposing group. Since the discourse and the platform are both strongly controlled by digital natives, it will be shown that the fact that boomers are stereotypically not aware that their usage of technology and not knowing the norms and practices – i.e. 'the rules' – of the Internet makes them look incompetent in the eyes of digital natives, this has over time become a large part of their group identity.

The goal of this analysis is to show how millennials and boomers are constructed as online communities, rather than show what they are actually like. Since the initiator of constructing such identities is often the opposing group – in this case millennials, as they have more control over the digital realm – much of the process consists of stereotyping. These stereotypes may be portrayed as valid and true for the group as a single entity, but not necessarily for all of its members. Furthermore, as boomers are underrepresented on this medium, much of what will be analysed are the impressions of what boomers, i.e. digital

immigrants look like to younger generations which are in general much more technologically savvy.

The materials for the following analyses have mostly been gathered from Reddit and Facebook. The Facebook group which will primarily be used to retrieve stereotypical portrayals of boomer behaviour is *A group where we all pretend to be boomers* which was created in May 2019 for millennials and younger generations to participate in posting in the stereotypical manner of users from the boomer generation. Although the group was originally created by two then-20-year-olds, i.e. not millennials but Gen Z-ers[4], most of its members belong to "the 23- to 28-year-old millennial demographic" (Frishberg 2019). According to Frishberg, one of the group's creators said that he believes the group to be "a good chance to kind of mock and satirize some of the sociocultural constructs that cause [millennials] to be in this [bad socio-economic] position in the first place" (Frishberg 2019). The need for satirising this socio-economic position originates from the strong feeling that the boomer generation has run up a gigantic bill that is now borne by younger generations (Sheehan 2011), resulting in less spending capabilities and an ever-growing amount of debt. Reddit, on the other hand, has multiple subreddits where boomers are criticized and often made fun of. Some of those subreddits that will be used for sourcing materials are *r/boomershumor*, a subreddit where users post content that perpetuates boomer-like opinions, stances, and behaviour, often criticizing 'younger people', i.e. millennials. This subreddit serves as a good repository of content created by boomers or at the very least, people with perceived boomer-like qualities, especially as this content often belongs to other, older forms of media. Furthermore, another potentially high-quality source is the subreddit *r/oldpeoplefacebook*, a forum that consists primarily of screenshots of older people attempting to use Facebook – and sometimes other social media channels – but using it 'wrong', i.e. not following the 'rules' and standards widely accepted and understood by digital natives. Although no materials will be used from this subreddit directly, it is a good online repository of actual boomers using the Internet, so that millennials' reproduction of that behaviour is clearer.

In the following chapters selected content from these sources will be analysed in order to see how boomers' and millennials' online identities are constructed in regard to various aspects. As already mentioned, each of these identities will be looked at from the perspective of the opposing group, meaning that it will be analysed how one group perceives and interprets the identity of the other.

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[4] The generation succeeding millennials, usually defined as being born between the late 1990s to the early 2010s.

4.2. Millennials

In order to properly grasp how millennials are constructed as online communities, it is necessary to understand how they are constructed by other groups, in this case boomers. According to a prototypical boomer's perspective, millennials are too politically correct and too emotionally sensitive – they are portrayed as getting their feelings hurt far too easily; it is often said that they need to 'toughen up', all while mental health and going to therapy is seen as a sign of weakness. All of these beliefs stem from the rapid change of the world over the past few decades, where looking for help has slowly become the norm in a world where mental illness is talked about openly, rather than covered up and seen as a problem. On the other hand, while political correctness is strongly related to the idea that millennials' feelings often get hurt by 'mere words', it is interesting that it should be so strongly criticized by the older generation as it is a sign of progress in regard to human rights which many older people have fought for when they were younger, as described previously.
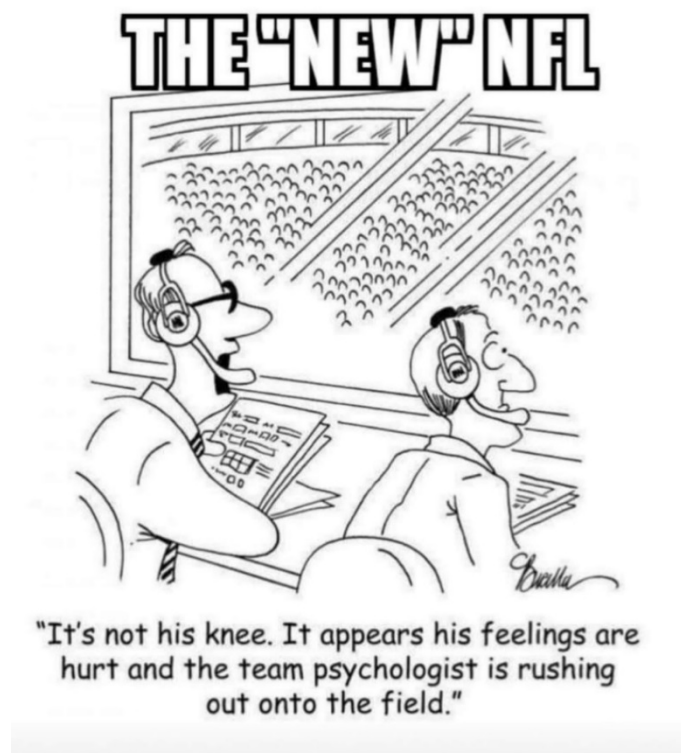

Figure 3. Millennials as emotionally sensitive

The upper part of the picture "the 'new' NFL" is used as the title, and serves to criticize the present through the lens of the past. The creator of this picture portrays the current generation both as emotionally too sensitive and too politically correct. Although not directly criticized in this comic, political correctness is often perceived as intertwined with the notion that people

get offended easily and that it is easy to hurt their feelings. "It's not his knee" delivers an unexpected element to the picture, as it would usually be typical that a sportsperson gets physically injured during a match. It also serves as the foundation for humour in the photo due to that unexpected element. The picture uses exaggeration methods to deliver a humorous punchline, basically stating that being offended and looking for professional help, in this case a psychologist, is nowadays seen as equal to a physical injury, wherefore this kind of situation would not be atypical or unexpected. However, the situation portrayed and the phrasing actually criticizes the current state of the world through humoristic means.

Figure 4. Criticizing affirmative action and emotional sensitivity

Figure 4 uses similar means to Figure 3 in that it attempts to use humorous methods to criticize how easy it is to offend younger generations, in this case students, as evident from the picture's title. The frame of the situation is once again placed at a location where feelings would regularly be considered secondary, as it is a gameshow where facts are looked for. The picture depicts the gameshow's title "Facts don't matter", thus once again delivering the unexpected element. The portrayed situation implies that students – or the younger generation – rank facts as secondary and choose to ignore them in case someone's feelings might be hurt. Furthermore, this situation may also be seen as a subtle criticism of affirmative action, where oppressed and discriminated groups get favoured in order to bridge inequalities. The stance that millennials

are easily offended in comparison with other generations was also the topic of the following Tumblr conversation transcribed in Figure 5 and led by several millennials, which can here be used to see their opinion on this very topic. It can be concluded from this exchange that millennials do not perceive themselves as being all too easily offended; on the contrary, they believe that other generations can get more easily offended than them and they will much soon ascribe their offense to being offended by "violent racism":

pixie-tot:	why are non-millennials so personally offended by everything? like if i'm still wearing my jacket indoors, it's because i'm cold, not because i disrespect your home/your classroom !! if somebody has got your order wrong, it's because they're very busy and simply made a mistake, not because they're trying to jeopardise your meal !! if somebodies phone rings during a meeting/lecture, it's because they accidentally forgot to put it on silent, not because they want to disrupt your speech !! just calm down, sharon, not everything is about you
thelittlemerms:	my personal favorite is when you yawn and they're like "am I boring you?" like bitch i'm running on five hours of sleep and chronic anxiety
queenixx:	its funny how you say non-millennials as if millennials aren't offended bei every little tiny thing that could possibly happen
faunigraphic:	being offended by wearing a coat inside is very different to being offended by violent racism but sure enjoy your tea

Figure 5. Transcription of a Tumblr conversation about different generations taking offense

These two comics serve as a good example of the already-mentioned fact that digital platforms are not a natural realm for boomers, which means they have to put in extra energy to adapt to their surroundings when creating content. Both of these comics – as well as the ones that will be analysed later in this chapter – consist of similar elements: a comic-like drawing that looks as if it would fit just as well in traditional media, e.g. newspapers, and (an optional) caption that delivers the joke, which is located either above or under the picture or on both sides. In a way, the usage of such formats serves to deepen the impression from millennials' perspective that boomers are digitally incompetent. This is because they use traditional media formats on digital platforms, instead of adapting to the built-in resources that digital platforms offer. A millennial would rarely spend their time creating digital content in this format in order to criticize the other, because they are familiar with the required format of the practice to be a

natural part of the community. Both groups are thoroughly aware of the required actions that need to be done as a means of reinforcing membership in their respective community. It can be argued that the used format further discredits the message boomers are trying to convey, because they have entered millennials' territory – the digital realm – and failed to reproduce the negotiated format.

Furthermore, millennials are often portrayed as lazy, constantly looking for excuses to avoid responsibility in terms of school and work (Schwantes 2018). This view stems from the impression that boomers are self-made – they lived in a different economy and were much better off from the start, but presently often ascribe their success to hard work and place the blame for the economic situation millennials are in on millennials as a group. This impression is often connected to other activities, which are then used as an excuse for labelling millennials as lazy.

Figure 6. Avoiding responsibility through climate change protests

The currently very relevant protests for climate action are often criticized by older generations on the Internet. The reason for that is that the protests have been started by the teenager Greta Thunberg, who decided to skip school on Fridays to strike against climate change and for climate action. After a while, many young students followed suit, skipping school in order to strike. Although these young people are not technically millennials, but rather Generation Z, the same qualities are ascribed to them. The comic in Figure 5 aims to show that younger generations are obsessed with Thunberg – her caricature can be seen on the wall, while her famous words *how dare you* are written on poster on the wall. The mother in the comic implies

that because "the world hasn't ended yet", her daughter needs to stop being lazy and go to school. It also implies that the opinion of young people is not to be trusted because they are young and delusional, especially because they blindly follow Thunberg's words and actions.

The last ascribed trait that can be observed as a reoccurring theme in boomers' criticism of millennials, i.e. the younger generation is just what was described before – their obsession with technology. As already mentioned, technology is possibly the greatest point of difference between boomers and millennials, especially if they are observed as the last generation of digital immigrants and the first generation of digital natives. Because the differences in technology use and proficiency are astounding in real life, this notion is strongly reflected in the construction of both identities. Millennials are seen as obsessed with technology, especially with their phones, while boomers are seen as incompetent, a statement that will further be illustrated in the following chapter. It is noteworthy that all of these characteristics are strongly exaggerated – to a degree where the light-hearted mocking and stereotyping turns to deep-rooted prejudice. Actions which were originally the result of joking around with perhaps a dash of bitterness can easily be turned into actual hate speech lined with possibly dangerous prejudice. This will also be illustrated in the following chapter, where millennials stances toward the digital competence of boomers are strongly exaggerated in the above-mentioned Facebook group.

Another aspect that should be analysed hand-in-hand with technology is the criticism towards the use of language which is strongly influenced by the use of technology.

Figure 7. Technology and language use

Kincaid's comic in Figure 7 is a good example of the typical criticism of millennials on the basis of technology obsession and language use. Although Kincaid herself by no means belongs to the baby boomer generation[5], her comic demonstrates how millennials and younger people in general are often perceived by older generations. It shows the two flight attendants ignoring passengers in order to spend time on their phones. The display above their heads announces that the flight has been delayed – it might be a stretch to assume that they were happy about the delay or that they delayed the plane on purpose because it enabled them to spend more time on their phones, but it is nevertheless an interesting perspective; if this were a real-life situation, it would not be surprising if somebody had commented on that very possibility. The second aspect of the comic is the criticism of the language used by millennials, which has heavily been influenced by their use of technology. It is known that ICT has brought about substantial linguistic changes, mostly due to message length limitations and communication efficiency. These reasons have already been briefly explained in previous chapters. Young people will often resort to using the same language they use in online communication when having a face-to-face conversation with their peers, because it allows them to transfer more information in a briefer amount of time. The comic in Figure 7 demonstrates how this may be perceived by the older generation. Intensifiers are often a vital part of such language use, especially among teenagers; a fact which can be observed by the usage of *totes* and *legit* in the comic. *Totes* stands for 'totally' and *legit* is often used for emphasis in the meaning of 'really' or 'actually'. To older generations, this kind of language is confusing – often due to the fact that it evolves so rapidly, wherefore it is hard to follow. This phenomenon can strongly be connected to language use within speech communities, as this is related to language developed in an independent space. In this case, while it's not geographically bound as it typically is within speech communities, the Internet functions as a whole space that has over time enabled the evolution of Internet registers, which could in this context also be perceived as microlanguages. As digital immigrants are not native to the cyberspace, these microlanguages seem unintelligible to them and are therefore deemed incorrect and inappropriate, and are often used as an argument to discredit the actions of digital natives. A parallel to the above-cited example of prejudice against African-American children based on their language use can easily be established, because millennials are also often labelled as semi-literate due to the impressions these kinds of microlanguages leave on the older generation.

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[5] Kelly Kincaid is a cartoonist and full-time flight attendant who created her series of single-panel comics entitled *Jetlagged* in 2012 (Jetlaggedcomic.com n.d.).

The comic furthermore shows the use of an emoticon and several emojis. Emoticons and emojis are frequently used as intensifiers to express emotion through textual means, although they can take on other functions, as well, which are at the moment irrelevant for this very analysis. The use of emojis in this comic may imply a general misunderstanding of their actual function in online discourse, as it seems the author is of the impression that due to overuse, emojis have lost their expressive function over time.

Many of the above described phenomena can also be used to understand how these comics portray millennials as imagined communities. In order for an imagined community to function, its members need to share a specific set of characteristics – for millennials, the main shared characteristic – apart from their age – that sets them apart from other communities is their digital competence. Especially Figure 6 has illustrated how all younger generations tend to be thrown into the same category as millennials, even if they technically belong to younger generation groups, such as Gen Z. Furthermore, in order to function as an imagined community, the community needs to have "a sacred language and a written script" (Kavoura 2014, 494). In this case, the language of the Internet takes on that functions, where knowledge of required registers appropriate for different platforms is necessary in order to fit in.

4.3. Boomers

Through constructing the other group's identity, a group inevitably influences its own identity. It can thus be concluded that boomers perceive themselves to be everything that millennials are not and vice versa. However, just as the previous chapter did, this chapter will deal only with the perceived boomer behaviour, meaning how millennials perceive boomers and construct their group identity. As mentioned before, the subreddit *r/oldpeoplefacebook* can serve as a good repository of how boomers actually act on the Internet, but for the sake of this paper, the Facebook group *A group where we all pretend to be boomers* will be the primary source in order to analyse boomer behaviour reproduced by millennials. It is expected that boomers are most often criticized for their digital incompetence, as that is a significant part of the group's online identity. This digital incompetence is the main shared characteristic that defines boomers as imagined communities within the cyberspace.
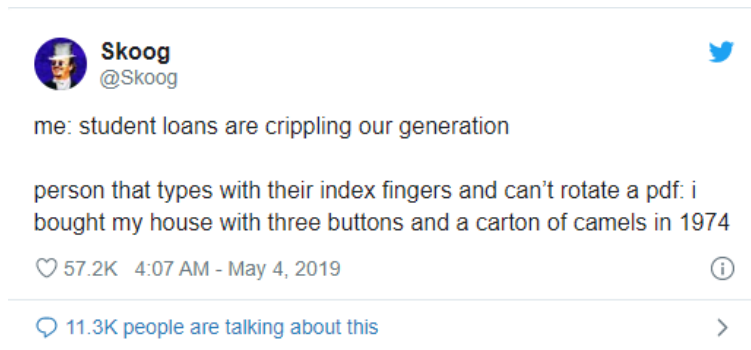
Figure 8. Lectures and the change in economy

The above tweet illustrates a highly exaggerated situation where the – presumably millennial – poster criticizes boomers in a humorous way. It is written in the form of a dialog; the first line illustrates something a millennial might say, i.e. an experience which is relatable, especially due to the shared economic situation that millennials widely experience. In the second line, boomers are directly made fun of by being described as people who "[type] with their index fingers" and who "can't rotate a pdf". The author of the tweet uses digital incompetence as an argument against boomers talking about the economy. The reason for this is most likely the impression that boomers are annoying because they frequently try to correct and lecture younger people, as they are older and thus more experienced. Buying a house "with three buttons and a carton of camels" is an exaggeration which serves to show how drastically the economy has changed, but it also to discredit the boomer's statement because it invalidates their experience by using humorous devices. Moreover, this tweet is a sarcastic attack against the aforementioned, frequently used statement that millennials could afford just as much as boomers once did if they were not so lazy and just worked harder.

But the primary question is what impression the presence of boomers on the Internet gives off and how millennials perceive this presence. From the examples used in the previous chapter, it can be concluded that boomers – and older generations in general – usually resort to using older types of media in order to create and spread content; often comics, especially in newspapers, but some memes can be found as well, albeit in older forms that are no longer that popular among younger generations. Because of this, millennials equate the online identity of boomers as a group with digital incompetence. As was seen from the previous example, this fact is often used to discredit the possible validity of a statement or to make any personal opinions invalid if they come from a boomer. In other words, if one is digitally incompetent, they cannot/should not have a voice. There are different kinds of perceived digital incompetence that would construct a person's identity as a boomer.

28

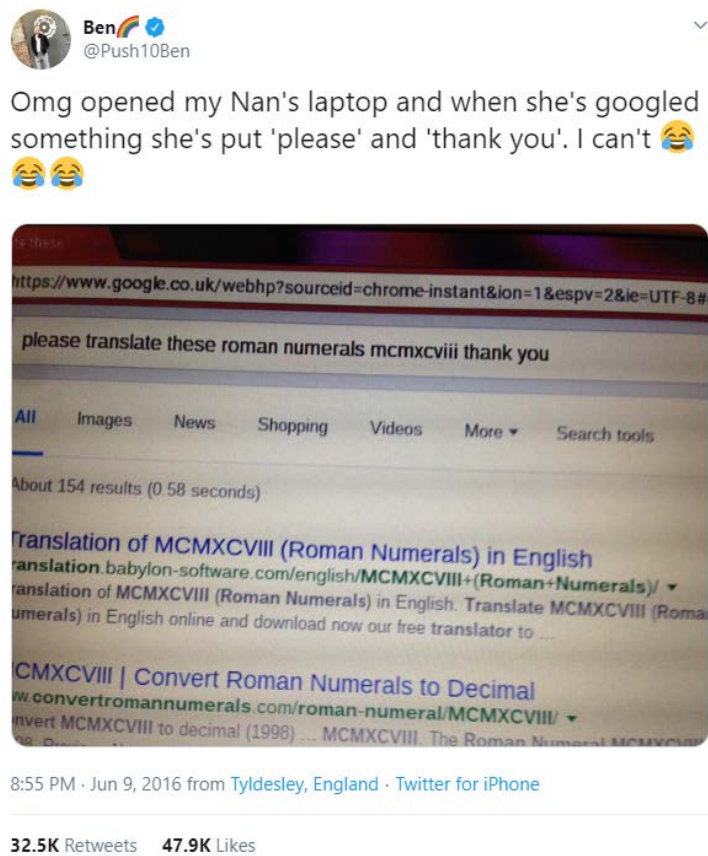**Figure 9.** Believing everywhere is Google

Figure 10. Addressing Google with *please* and *thank you*

Figure 9 combines multiple frequently-addressed elements about how boomers are perceived online and what their digital incompetence looks like to digital natives. First, there is the impression that they seem to believe everywhere is Google. To younger people, this looks like they have heard of this 'omniscient Google' and decided to try it out for themselves, but do not know how. The *thank you Google* statement is also a particularly interesting imitation, as Figure 10 displays an actual Tweet from 2016 where a grandson reported his grandmother using *please* and *thank you* when addressing Google in order to be polite, probably not understanding that Google is a machine, and that there is no human being behind it. That Tweet got media attention back in 2016 to the point that Google themselves have tweeted the grandson to express that the grandmother has made them smile and to thank her back. When the grandson asked her grandma why she did it, she said that she thought "it was the norm" (@Push10Ben 2016). So, although boomers are generally seen as digitally incompetent, this shows that they are aware that some norm must exist on the Internet, although they do not know what this norm is. In a sense it is this unfamiliarity of norms that is the shared characteristic which allows boomers to function as an independent online community.

The reactions and the social media coverage show that although technically digitally incompetent and breaking the norm of what is considered correct, the Internet community approves of boomers' way of using the Internet when there is no ill intent behind the mistakes. This goes to prove the assertion that although boomers are often made fun of on the group level, no inherent offense is meant to the individuals belonging to the group. However, what may be called digital incompetence is still one of the biggest topics of ridicule when millennials illustrate boomers' Internet usage. Two other features of boomers not knowing the norms of the Internet are wonky capitalisation – mostly in the forms of all caps which is most frequently considered shouting and therefore impolite (see Figure 11) – and not using correct interpunction. It is noteworthy that in the screenshot used as Figure 11 is not a millennial pretending to be a boomer (Sue), but rather an actual older person. On the other hand, Juanita is most-likely a younger person who tries to explain Internet norms to Sue, stating that using all caps is considered shouting. However, both wonky capitalisation and not using correct interpunction are features that are illustrated in Figure 9 to some degree – the poster mocks the boomer posting way by using commas instead of dots. It is interesting that older people on the Internet often replace punctuation such as commas, full stops and even question marks with an ellipsis. By using commas, Paige exaggerates this fact in a mocking fashion. Although she does not use all caps to signify wonky capitalisation, words such as *SMART* and *HA HA* are capitalised in order to show emphasis. The post itself takes on a humorous effect because the

user pretends to want to Google what *being in peaches* means, referring to 'impeachment', once again trying to create a humorous effect by playing dumb. Another good example of not being aware of netiquette is that boomers may sometimes sign their names when it is not necessary – this sometimes happens both in SMS and on social media platforms where the name of the author is already displayed.
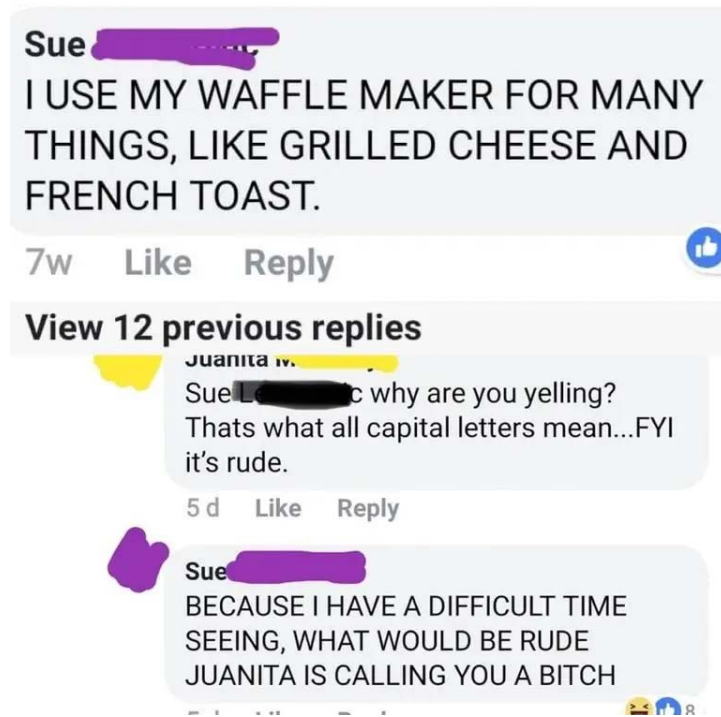

Figure 11. Using all caps is considered yelling and therefore rude

Groups such as *A group where we all pretend to be boomers* emphasize the difference in mentality and world view between boomers and millennials. Similar to how boomers will often depict millennials as too politically correct or too sensitive, millennials will depict boomers as very conservative and overly religious. It is interesting to observe these two communities in such detail in regard to the multiple perspectives they take on, because it then becomes evident that they do not only differ in digital competence, but as constructed online communities seem to hold fundamentally opposite opinions regarding most things. Their practice on the Internet acts as a directional force towards the other group – thus in a way structuring both groups as separate communities of practice – aiming to diminish their worth by means of sarcasm and generic mockery using different multimodal approaches to do so; from direct comments on social media to comics, memes, and so on. Although cyberspace is not the natural domain of boomers and other digital immigrants, the degree in which they have established a presence on

the Internet is fascinating, especially as it is to a degree where millennials and younger generations – who feel at home in the digital world – developed an urge to fight back. While this fighting back may not be meant in a literal physical sense, actions like these are certainly used for reinforcing membership in the group. The individuals in this Facebook group have learned custom behaviour patterns – first by observing boomers, and then by observing their own patterns of mockery and learning to successfully reproduce them in order to achieve a humorous effect. By reproducing the practices of the group they belong to, and acting as agents that may introduce change and produce individual style, these millennials have turned the Facebook group in question into a fully functioning community of practice, whose goal it is to mock boomers.

5. Conclusion

The online identities of boomers and millennials – or of digital immigrants and digital natives – are constructed to differ in a much stronger degree in comparison with their real-life identities. The reason for this significant difference is mainly that their online identities are structured relationally, meaning in such a way to be the (exact) opposite of what the other group's identity is. This paper has shown the multiple ways in which these identities are constructed by the opposing group, highlighting the different means and practices used for the process of structuring the identities. The identities of both groups are structured on the group level, where no particular attention is given to individuals belonging to one of the groups, unless they project behaviour expected according to the already-set stereotype. Boomers are above all constructed as digitally incompetent, but also as cultivating conservative values. Conversely, millennials are constructed and perceived as too sensitive, too liberal, too politically correct and far too dependent on technology, to the degree that their language use has seemingly deteriorated. The two groups use different types of media to express their frustration and criticize the opposing group; while boomers prefer more traditional forms of media, millennials will rely on media introduced in the digital age, the so-called new media. It has furthermore been shown that although boomers, who are in this context above all digital immigrants, do not constitute the majority on the Internet, they are still well-represented as a group in one way or the other.

The Internet, as a separate space where traditional time is irrelevant, enables these two groups to be constructed as communities in multiple ways: as imagined communities because they belong to the Internet, because their members are unaware of each other's existence, but

nevertheless still function as a community with a deeply ingrained feeling of comradeship and with an imagined audience. Moreover, these imagined communities are built on Anderson's idea of a sacred language and a common script; for boomers it is the same language they use in everyday situations, but often marked by signs of digital incompetence (e.g. caps lock), which instantly marks them as boomers, while millennials stick to following the norms of ICT and its different registers, while being easily discovered by boomers and often criticised for their 'poor language'. In other words, language used on the Internet unifies this sense of community. In millennials, the expected norms of language are a given and are widely understood, while boomers are often seen as experiencing problems with following the same norms, which in turn characterises them as a group. Furthermore, it has been shown that virtual communities provide a flexible imagined environment where such an identity can successfully be constructed. The members of the two described imagined communities share an identity – above all, a generational one. In regard to speech communities, although the Internet is not a geographically localised space, it does function as a space that allows these two groups to be structured as speech communities. Millennials are once again familiar with different online registers and possess the knowledge about when to use them appropriately, while boomers experience problems not only with understanding and producing the language, but also because they ascribe negative characteristics to language use on the Internet and make fun of it. Lastly, both of these communities function perfectly well as communities of practice because they rely on doing – their main described purpose as a functioning community is to (subtly) criticise the other, usually through humoristic means. For this, they have deep-set patterns of behaviour and action that is learnt by observing and negotiating meaning, and then successfully reproduced.

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Abstract

The omnipresence of the Internet in present times has inevitably led to the construction of different communities, which can be observed in the same fashion as all real-life communities. The flexibility of time and space on the Internet allows the already-existing sociolinguistic theories to be applied to Internet communities just as successfully. This paper incorporates Anderson's theory of imagined communities, as well as theories of speech communities and communities of practice in order to show how two generations of people shaped by completely different experiences in regard to digital competence are constructed as online communities. Furthermore, it will be shown that these two communities operate almost exclusively in a relational fashion – their group identity depends on the existence of the other group's identity. Because of this, it is important to analyse how the respective groups perceive each other and structure each other's identities. In order to do this, different excerpts from online conversations, as well as memes and general Internet correspondence will be used.