

DIGITAL AGEISM AND INTERGENERATIONAL BLAME IN THE COVID-19 ERA: UNPACKING THE #BOOMERREMOVER NARRATIVE

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the rise of digital ageism during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on intergenerational conflict on platforms like Twitter. Employing mixed methods, it combines qualitative content analysis of 1,000 tweets under hashtags such as #BoomerRemover and #OkBoomer with 15 semi-structured interviews with youth (ages 18–24) across urban India. Thematic coding and discourse analysis were used to trace the emergence of age-based antagonism. The study draws on Realistic Group Conflict Theory, Moral Panic, and Intergenerational Discounting to analyse findings, while also probing why such discourse remained marginal in India. It concludes with inclusive policy recommendations for digital equity.

Keywords: digital ageism, COVID-19, intergenerational conflict, Twitter, India, #BoomerRemover, Realistic Group Conflict Theory, moral panic, digital divide, discourse analysis.

1. THE EVOLUTION OF HUMAN COMMUNICATION

Throughout history, the ways humans communicate have been shaped by technological and cultural evolution. One of the most enchanting scenes in Indian cinema unfolds when Bhagyashree's character in *Maine Pyaar Kiya* sends a love note to Prem (Salman Khan) via a kabutar (pigeon), echoing a tradition spanning centuries. Long gone, however, are the days of pigeons fluttering in the skies with secrets tied to their legs, of the postman pedalling down the idyllic *sadak* (street), bearing a letter from your father stationed in a faraway city, of the fax machine whirring to life, delivering essential documents in noisy hums and beeps. The digital revolution has rendered these once-essential practices relics of the past. Letters have given way to emails with digital signatures, and FaceTime, Zoom, or Google Meet have replaced phone calls. One of the most significant changes, however, has been the emergence of social media platforms, such as X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and Facebook, which have dismantled traditional forms of communication. People can now socialise globally in real-time and share their thoughts, opinions, photos, and videos digitally (Amelia & Balqis, 2023). The advent of COVID-19 led to an unprecedented surge in digital communication and collaboration (Schoch et al., 2022). As the coronavirus spread across the globe, everyday life was impacted, as schools, colleges, workplaces, markets, and other physical sites of human activity ceased to function and shifted to an online mode of operation. New technologies emerged to tackle the crisis and address the new challenges it raised, such as *digital learning platforms and telehealth services*. Social media platforms such as Twitter (now X), WhatsApp, and Instagram became the preferred platforms for daily communication and exchange.

2. THE RISE OF DIGITAL AGEISM DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

As more and more services began to be provided online, the number of Internet users increased exponentially. During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, from 2020 to 2022, India's Internet penetration rate increased from 43.4% to 48.1%, marking significant growth in users, with over 700 million active users by December 2022.¹

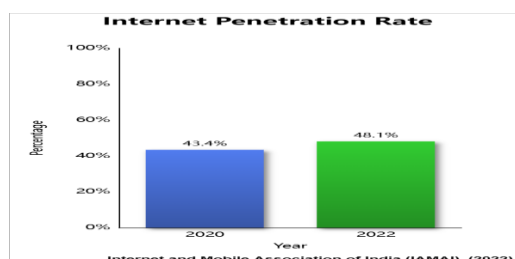


Fig. 1.1: Internet & Mobile Association of India

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¹Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI). (2022). *Internet in India 2022*.

However, although internet access continues to expand, bridging the digital divide remains a challenge, manifesting in discrepancies such as rural-urban and/or gender divides. However, one critical axis of discrimination often overlooked in the mainstream discourse is age-based digital exclusion. While younger generations adapt quickly to new technologies, older adults often face barriers to digital inclusion, leading to a growing phenomenon known as digital ageism—a form of discrimination where individuals are excluded or disadvantaged based on their age in digital spaces (Manor & Herscovici, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated digital ageism as the global shift to the online world deepened the technological barriers faced by older people. Essential services such as healthcare, grocery shopping, and banking shifted online, thereby sidelining a significant chunk of the population from availing these benefits. In the workplace, the work-from-home policy favoured tech-savvy employees, sidelining older workers and forcing some into early retirement. Social isolation also heightened, as younger generations maintained connections through digital communication while many seniors lacked the skills or access to partake. However, a particularly malevolent form of digital ageism emerged during the pandemic through memes targeting older adults, including variations such as *#BoomerRemover*, *#CoffinDodger*, and “*OK Boomer, time is up.*” This paper explores how COVID-19-related intergenerational conflicts on digital media platforms fueled the rise of digital ageism. We examine the emergence of these trends online, their spread during the pandemic, and their presence on Indian social media despite the country's emphasis on traditional, elder-respecting values.

3. BACKGROUND TO THE AGEIST DISCOURSE: *#BOOMERREMOVER* & INTERGENERATIONAL CONFLICT

One of the most prominent hashtags to trend on Twitter was *#BoomerRemover*. A quick analysis of online news reports and tweets on the platform will trace the emergence of the tag to early March 2020, when the coronavirus had just begun to make headlines. To provide background, a boomer² (short for baby boomer) is someone born during the post-World War II baby boom, typically between 1946 and 1964, although the exact years are still hotly debated. This generation is known for its large size due to high birth rates and economic prosperity after the war. The joke stemmed from the initial assumption that COVID-19 primarily affected older adults and posed a serious threat to their lives. However, this ageist viewpoint was later proven to be based on misinformation, as the virus gradually spread to affect individuals of all ages, including young and middle-aged people. In a similar vein, the “Coffin Dodger” meme became viral, referring to elderly individuals in a derogatory or humorous manner; it implied that an older person is “dodging” death or outliving expectations. The emergence of these ageist remarks can ostensibly be seen in the reason behind every Boomer v. Millennial & Gen-Z conflict, with the latter two terms again referring to specific age groups. As a popular news website succinctly argues, “...[These hashtags] signal that young people have had enough of the policies and politics that have gotten *us to this point. Boomers have handed younger generations a broken economy, an ailing planet, and nuclear weapons – but will not stop with the lectures.*”³

Viral catchphrases such as “*Okay, Boomer*” or “*#BoomerRemover*” are often used in discussions about generational conflicts, where they are associated with perceptions of a divide between older adults and younger generations, and with the idea that older individuals are resistant to change and/or dismissive of younger people. These sayings also reflect the resentment and anger of the younger generation who hold the elders responsible for the state of the world handed down to them: a frail world economy, rising inflation, housing market crisis, climate change, authoritarian politics, and cultural and social instability. Nevertheless, an analysis of tweets from March 2020 to June 2020, when the hashtag was trending in the US, UK, France, and other Western countries, shows that *#BoomerRemover* did not gain significant traction in India – a point which stands beyond the scope of the present paper, but is an interesting one to note. Nevertheless, the hashtag has persisted in the post-COVID landscape. Climate activism, the job market, or Budget analysis — all of these have been closely intertwined with the use of *#BoomerRemover* on X by Indian users. A surge in the use of the hashtag was seen with the rollout of the Union Budget, with the Indian side of Twitter being filled with

²Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). *Boomer*. In *Merriam-Webster.com dictionary*. Retrieved February 10, 2025.

³Choudhury, S. (2020, March 14). *COVID-19 a 'boomer remover'? Why millennials are angry and done with the older generation*. ThePrint.

these quips. Having established the prevalence of these ageist witticisms online, we must now examine the phenomenon through a sociological lens.

4. SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ONLINE ANIMOSITY DURING COVID-19

A series of semi-structured interviews was conducted with young adults aged 18 to 24 to explore the causes of heightened intergenerational animosity during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their responses aligned with broader macro-sociological theories, categorized below, and, not to mention, were corroborated by tweets on X. One prominent explanation pointed to tensions over resource allocation as a key driver of these conflicts. A particularly relevant framework for understanding intergenerational conflict in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic is the *Realistic Group Conflict Theory (RGCT)*. This social psychological theory argues that competition for limited resources can breed hostility and antagonism between groups. Brief et al. show that competition for secure positions between black and white employees strengthens racial group identification and out-group devaluation, fostering factionalism and communication issues that hinder organisational functioning. During the pandemic, the younger generation, already angered with the world inherited from older adults, felt further sidelined as scarce resources like oxygen cylinders, hospital beds, and medicines were monopolised by the elderly. This perception deepened existing generational tensions, reinforcing a sense of neglect and resentment among the youth, who believed they were once again bearing the consequences of decisions made by previous generations.

Intergenerational conflicts can also be seen through the lens of *Moral Panic Theory*, given by sociologist Stanley Cohen in his seminal text “Moral Panic and Folk Devils”, which argues that societies react to perceived threats with heightened fear and scapegoating, often targeting specific groups as “*folk devils*”—outsiders blamed for social problems. During the COVID-19 pandemic, older adults were seen as “helpless victims” requiring constant care and a social and economic burden on their families. A *moral panic* was therefore created around their supposed inability to function in a rapidly digitalized world, and online rhetoric (the *#BoomerRemover*) led to the scapegoating of older adults, portraying them as obstacles to progress rather than as a vulnerable group requiring support.

A closer examination of online intergenerational conflicts reveals that the term “*generation*” is *socially constructed and lacks a fixed*, universally agreed-upon definition. Generation, therefore, is *socially constructed*, not based on birth year, but rather a *social construct* shaped by shared historical events, cultural experiences, and societal norms that shape individuals during their formative years, leading to a sense of collective identity and distinction from other generations. This was Karl Mannheim’s social construction of generation theory, in which the “Boomers” were seen as an out-group relative to Millennials and Gen Z because of their political views, technological adaptability, and differing views on public health measures. There was a considerable backlash, as expected, from older adults, who too called the younger population out for their lavish lifestyles, ridiculed the elders, and endangered their lives with risky behaviours, such as frequenting clubs or bars during the lockdown.⁴ Therefore, a broader theoretical framework for understanding the intergenerational conflict spurred by the pandemic is the theory of *intergenerational discounting* — or, more precisely, two-way intergenerational discounting.

Intergenerational discounting refers to the tendency of individuals or societies to prioritize the needs, interests, and well-being of the present generation over those of future or past generations; it has been used in discourses related to economic policies, environmental sustainability, and social justice, where decisions made today disproportionately disadvantage younger or future generations. On Twitter, the discounting occurred in both directions: younger people were criticised for not taking COVID-19 seriously, engaging in risky behaviours, and thereby jeopardising the health of older generations. Meanwhile, older generations were accused of dismissing climate change and prioritizing short-term benefits over the future well-being of younger people. Digital spaces, such as Twitter and Instagram, therefore become platforms where public discourse is shaped on prejudicial lines and is vulnerable to group stereotypes and negative perceptions. During the COVID-19 pandemic, with the closure of

⁴The Telegraph. (2020, March 23). This generation must start thinking of others to stop the spread of coronavirus. The Telegraph.

schools, offices, and other work and recreational spaces, these digital platforms became our only source of communication and entertainment, thereby amplifying their influence.

5. ADDRESSING DIGITAL AGEISM: POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR AN INCLUSIVE DIGITAL FUTURE

Sociologists have always been wary of offering policy recommendations or concrete strategies to tackle social issues, fearing that doing so would jeopardize their objective role as scholars of such issues. However, precisely because of their in-depth understanding of societal problems, sociologists are well-placed to recommend the way forward. Therefore, to tackle digital ageism in the post-pandemic era, the following recommendations have been formulated, drawing on insights from leading sociologists and one's own practical understanding. One concrete step is to include the elderly in the research and design of digital technologies. Older adults have frequently been viewed as a homogenous group and as more rigid in thought, less motivated, less dynamic than their younger counterparts, frail, ill, dependent, and incompetent.⁵ Their involvement ensures that digital tools are accessible to all ages, reducing the 'grey digital divide' and countering ageist assumptions.

Digital literacy programs for older adults will also help them access essential services such as telemedicine, e-banking, and online shopping; old-age homes across the globe can implement these programs. Intergenerational solidarity should also be promoted through awareness programs, and paternalistic attitudes towards older adults should be curtailed, allowing them an independent and dignified identity of their own. Instead, older generations should be empowered by encouraging the use of modern communication and information technologies to help bridge the digital divide, cultivate autonomy, and promote greater involvement in society.

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⁵Mannheim, I., Schwartz, E., Xi, W., Buttigieg, S. C., McDonnell-Naughton, M., Wouters, E. J. M., & van Zaalén, Y. (2019). Inclusion of older adults in the research and design of digital technology. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 16(19), 3718.