



Cringe, Mockery, and Belonging: Generational Humor Between Gen Z and Millennials on TikTok

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Abstract

This thesis explores how humor and mockery shape the relationship between Generation Z and millennials on TikTok. Using qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews and analysis of popular TikTok videos and comment threads, the study investigates how each generation uses and responds to humor, and how these reactions influence group identity and connection online. The findings reveal that, for Gen Z, humor is often used as a bonding tool and a way to signal belonging, while millennials sometimes experience generational jokes as distancing or exclusionary. The research also shows that the boundary between playful teasing and feeling left out is subtle, with TikTok's fast-paced, algorithm-driven environment amplifying these effects. Despite the potential for division, many users, especially from Gen Z, embrace self-irony and openness, using humor to question stereotypes and invite others in. The study concludes that, when approached with empathy and self-awareness, generational mockery on TikTok can foster creativity, understanding, and genuine connection between age groups in digital spaces.

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1. Introduction

In the last decades, in which social media has become a major part of our lives, society seems to have switched to a more individualistic view on persona. Despite various forms of common ground, people tend to seek people similar to themselves, with shared interests. This can fill up a hole of loneliness, and people use it to create a sense of belonging to something. While some groups share what one could call ‘positive’ day-to-day interests, such as knitting or drawing, others find passion in more edgy pastimes, such as humour and satire.

As society becomes more and more digitalised, groups with shared interests have switched from the real world to online platforms, but this has also brought with it other changes. People who share common ground may have become anonymous entities hiding their identities behind nicknames and AI-generated profile pictures. Perhaps as a result, users tend to feel less of a burden regarding the consequences of their actions, making potentially confrontational messages and statements likely to go unpunished, thus taking the idea of freedom of speech to a next level.

A striking phenomenon of the recent past is the growing popularity of the social media platform TikTok. TikTok is a short-form video hosting service, popular all over the world, with the main idea that anyone can become famous due to the distinctive algorithms that instantaneously connect creators and viewers across hundreds of countries.

Crucial for this thesis is the development on this platform of rising inter-generational mockery, particularly between Gen Z and millennials. Small, everyday online habits are turned into material for public judgment and humor, revealing how each generation positions itself in relation to the other. A clear example is how Gen Z users often make fun of millennials for their

online behavior, like the way they pause awkwardly before speaking in a video, strike a particular pose before saying anything, or rely heavily on emojis and hashtags that are now seen as outdated. What may seem like simple jokes or trends often reflects something deeper about how generations relate to each other online.

Due to the constant communication between the generations, youngsters would have ample opportunity to notice patterns in millennials' behaviour, and the seeming awkwardness is a source of fun. This form of humor falls under what is often called *cringe culture*. Cringe refers to the uncomfortable feeling users get when someone posts or behaves in a way that seems out of place or outdated, often because they're unaware of how the conventions of online behavior have shifted. Calling something cringe is a way of pointing out that a person is not following the current social codes of the internet.

This raises the question: does this humor bring people closer together, or does it only highlight and deepen the gap between generations? Is it merely about having fun, or is it a subtle way of gatekeeping who "belongs" in certain online spaces more than others? Is it a way of excluding those who "belong" less?

While TikTok serves as the main study site for this thesis, similar behaviour can be seen on other platforms as well. Simply said, TikTok increases its visibility because of its youthful demographic and fast-paced format. The way users post, comment, and interact on other social media websites like Facebook, Instagram, and Reddit also demonstrates the gap between generations.

This broadly links to the idea of identity formation, how people come to understand themselves and others in online environments. People develop their sense of identity through

shared jokes, memes, and trends. When one group makes fun of another, the mockery itself becomes a part of what distinguishes "us" from "them," reinforcing generational identity.

In this thesis, I look into the processes of generational social media mockery, the emotions it evokes, and its implications for the state of online culture today. It raises the question of whether satire of this nature encourages a sense of community within a generation or drives an opposition between them, or both. Most importantly, it asks what this says about how people connect, exclude, or misunderstand each other in digital spaces. To explore this, I conducted semi-structured interviews with Gen Z and millennial participants and had them comment on examples of online mockery, to better understand how they experience and interpret such online inter-generational mockery.

1.1 Understanding the generational context

The terms “Gen Z” and “millennial” come up a lot online, often used casually or in a joking way. In this thesis, I use these labels as general reference points, mostly based on shared digital habits and life-stage experiences, not as fixed categories.

Millennials, in this context, refer to people born between roughly **1980 and 1995**. They witnessed the rise of the internet, but also remember life without it - when social media wasn't a daily routine and going online meant using a shared home computer. Gen Z refers to those born between roughly **1996 and 2010**, who grew up surrounded by digital, smartphones, and social media and messengers shaping the way they communicate, learn, and relate to others from an early age.

These generational boundaries aren't exact, and experiences can vary widely within each group. Still, for the purpose of this research, focused specifically on how millennials and Gen Z relate to each other in online spaces, these terms help illustrate the digital habits, humor styles, and cultural references that shape how these two generations interact, clash, and sometimes connect or even relate with each other.

2. Literature review

Before presenting the findings of this research, this chapter reviews the main ideas and studies that help explain how generational mockery and humor work online. The first section looks at the rise of cringe culture on the internet and how it is closely linked to the way different generations, like Gen Z and millennials, see themselves and each other. This is followed by a discussion of humor in digital spaces, focusing on how online jokes, memes, and playful teasing can be used both to build connections and to highlight group differences.

The final part of the chapter examines TikTok in detail, describing how the platform's unique features and trends influence the way users create, share, and respond to humor. TikTok is explored not just as a site where generational jokes happen, but as a space that shapes how people feel about themselves and others through digital interaction. By combining these perspectives, the literature review sets the stage for understanding the reasons behind generational mockery online and the possible meanings it holds for group identity and relationships in the digital age.

2.1 Cringe Culture in the Context of Generational Identity

Cringe has become one of those internet-native feelings that everyone seems to understand, even if it's hard to explain. It's that uncomfortable reaction you get when someone posts something that feels off - outdated, awkward, or like they've missed the social "rules" of the platform they're on. For Gen Z especially, calling something cringe isn't just a reaction, it's a way of showing that someone doesn't quite belong, or at least doesn't "get it" the way others do.

Although the word ‘cringe’ originally described an involuntary feeling of embarrassment or awkwardness, in online culture it has evolved into a label used to mark behavior that seems out of touch, awkward, or misaligned with current digital norms.

The online display of cringe culture is a way of a social act. What was once just an emotional response has evolved into a tool. Typically without expressing it out loud, people use it to indicate who belongs and who doesn't. Spiegel (2023), in his paper dedicated to the concept of cringe, talks about how cringe comedy has become more common in recent years, and how it works by highlighting what feels wrong, awkward, or out of sync. On TikTok this happens all the time, especially when younger users react to content made by older people (like millennials). The jokes often focus on how millennials talk in videos, how they pose, or how they use outdated slang or emojis. What might seem like a simple joke often says a lot more about how different generations view and judge each other online.

One of the more psychological takes on cringe comes from Jesus et al. (2022), who frame it as an emotional reaction that kicks in when we watch someone doing something socially awkward or “off.” They describe it as a kind of secondhand discomfort, rooted in empathy, we don’t just see what’s happening, we feel it. That feeling, according to them, can vary in intensity depending on how closely we relate to the situation or the person involved. In a way, it becomes a form of emotional processing: we respond to things that break social expectations by cringing, sometimes as a way to mentally distance ourselves from the discomfort.

This idea of cringe being used as a response to discomfort overlaps slightly with Spiegel (2023), although his take is more social than emotional. He writes, “*Cringing is what allows us to traverse this social tightrope: expressing disgust while remaining reasonably tolerant*” (p. 7).

What he means is that cringe works like a middle ground, it lets people show disapproval without fully rejecting the person or thing they're reacting to. It's not necessarily about being empathetic or understanding, but more about showing "this isn't for me", while still staying within the boundaries of what's socially acceptable online. While Spiegel frames cringe as closer to 'disgust' than shame, this may not fully reflect how it plays out in generational humor online. In many cases, especially on platforms like TikTok, mockery of millennials by Gen Z feels more playful or ironic than genuinely repulsed. Cringe here seems to function more as a form of subtle superiority or cultural distancing, rather than deep emotional rejection. Spiegel also point out: *"...the cringer-cringe relationship can be parasocial, meaning that the means of interaction between cringer and cringee are lopsided in a way that the cringer has limited or no means to interact with the cringee,"* which works well in the framework of online culture and social media, where, let's say one is a TikTok influencer while other side consists of multicultural users that leave comments under the post.

Looking at both perspectives, Spiegel's social and boundary-setting view and Jesus et al.'s emotional, empathy-based take, cringe clearly goes beyond just being a reaction. It becomes a way of positioning yourself in a digital space. When someone calls something cringe, they're not just responding to what they see, they're also saying something about who they are and what they think fits within the current online norms. Especially when Gen Z mocks millennials, it's usually not meant to be openly aggressive, but it still creates a kind of distance. It quietly suggests, "we've moved on from this" or "this doesn't belong here anymore".

In the context of this thesis, cringe plays a key role in how people sort themselves into groups online, often along generational lines. It's not just a personal reaction, but part of how users connect with others, or choose not to. Through humor, shared references, and subtle judgments,

cringe becomes a tool for forming group identity and deciding who fits in and who feels out of place.

2.2 Humor and Identity: How Generations Perform Themselves Online

The way people joke online often says more than just what they find funny. Humor, especially in the form of satire, parody, mockery, or even trolling, can be a way of showing who you are and where you stand. It's part of how people present themselves online. On platforms like TikTok, humor is one of the main ways younger generations, especially Gen Z, express what they value and what they want to distance themselves from. Humour can put people together as well as push them away from each other. Humour became a modern way of expressing and, potentially, showing off the sense of belonging.

Attardo (2023) writes about how the internet has created its own types of humor, shaped by constant scrolling, remix culture, and trends that change almost daily. Because of that, digital humor often relies on inside jokes or references that only make sense if you're part of the right group. If you get it, you're in. If you don't, the joke might be on you. This creates a clear divide between those who are seen as "in touch" and those who aren't, something that often plays out in how Gen Z treats millennial behavior.

It is also important to mention that not only the topics and ideas that people laugh at changed but also the ways how it is done. In the so-called 'Internet 2.0' users started to use a completely new language that never existed before. Attardo explains the concept of the new Internet (Internet 2.0) as while the earlier internet was about accessing static content (reading

news, browsing encyclopedias, or using forums), Internet 2.0 is about being seen, sharing, reacting, and performing, putting effort into fast-paced info receiving and content formation.

Attardo (2023) points out that such change is not only expected but also normal: *“Linguistic change, the invention of new expressions and the progressive adjustment of forms and meanings to reflect new realities that the speakers of the language want to talk about, is not only normal, but what makes a language a live one. The only languages that do not change are the dead ones.”* Internet language (e.g. currently: use of slang, communication through meme sharing, emojis, etc.) has gone through a drastic change in the last 5 to 10 years, meaning that users of earlier stages of the Internet may not be fully aware of the change, thus, seem not ‘up-to-date’, what makes them a great ground for youngsters to laugh or mock.

Mocking how millennials behave on social media based on content they create might seem light-hearted, but it works as a quiet way of separating one group from another. It becomes less about the joke itself and more about what the joke does socially. Much of this humor also overlaps with what users describe as cringe, especially when it targets behaviors that feel outdated or overly performative. Jacobs (2024) adds another layer to this by focusing on the role of slang and digital language in shaping generational identity. In her work on Gen Z communication, she points out that language is no longer just a tool for conversation, it’s a way of showing which generation someone belongs to. The way people speak online, the words they choose, and even how they use emojis or formatting becomes a form of cultural tagging. This kind of communication can feel exclusive. If you understand the reference, you’re in. If you don’t, it becomes very clear, very quickly. In that way, slang works just like a meme or a reaction video, it quietly shows whether someone fits into the group or not. Causing cringe can even be

intentional, acting as a way to signal who understands the cultural code and who stands outside of it.

In the same way as humor, language becomes something we use to perform who we are. It's not just about communicating something, but also about signalling where someone belongs. When millennials use phrasing or emojis that feel out of step with how things are done online now, it can unintentionally highlight the gap between generations. This is where typically the mockery is rooted: small, to some people, unreasonable differences may lead to a bigger outcome. Humor and language, when combined, play a key role in how users draw invisible lines between generations online.

2.3 TikTok's Role in Shaping Digital Interaction and Emotional Response

TikTok is more than just a place to post videos - it's a space where humor, trends, and generational behavior are shaped and reinforced at high speed. Its short-form video format, algorithm-driven visibility, and viral culture all contribute to how content is created and interpreted. *TikTok, Boom* (Chamanadjian, 2024) explores how the app doesn't just host content, it actively shapes user behavior and identity by encouraging fast reactions, performance that may seem overly-dramatic at times and easy access to gaining visibility. In this way, TikTok becomes a stage where generational identities are created, tested and sometimes, well..., mocked.

Because the platform pushes rapid consumption and engagement, it often rewards content that is dramatic/extreme, visually polished, or easily understandable. This environment naturally favors trends that are short but high-impact, like a viral dance or a generational stereotype blown

out of proportion. For example, when Gen Z users mock millennials with exaggerated pauses or outdated emoji usage, TikTok's format supports that performance by making it quick, recognizable, and widely shareable. These fast-moving trends can become powerful tools for in-group bonding and out-group distancing.

But there's also an emotional side to this. Langlais et al. (2024) show that TikTok use affects how users feel and cope, whether through escapism, entertainment, or emotional connection. Entertainment is the most obvious: users scroll to laugh, relax, or pass time. Emotional connection can happen when people feel understood by others in the comments, form communities around shared interests, or develop parasocial relationships with creators. Escapism, on the other hand, often means using TikTok to temporarily disconnect from stress, boredom, or negative emotions - getting absorbed in light, fast-moving content as a way to avoid thinking about real-life problems, even if just for a few minute or, for some, a few hours at a time.

At the same time, Międzobrodzka et al. (2024) point out how frequent use can lead to self-control failure, bedtime procrastination, or stress, especially among younger users. These emotional dynamics become especially relevant when mockery is involved. On a platform like TikTok, where everything happens quickly and users are constantly overstimulated, joking about other generations can be an easy way to blow off steam or feel momentarily more grounded. Posting or laughing at generational stereotypes can function as a coping mechanism - an easy way to temporarily feel smarter, funnier, or more 'knowing' or 'with the flow' than others. It offers a moment of social clarity in a chaotic space, where identity often feels blurred, and people by their nature tend to look for ways to escape the bubble of 'no-control zone'. In that

sense, mockery isn't always meant to hurt, it can be a quick, instinctive way to relieve tension or feel less overwhelmed, especially when other parts of digital life feel overstimulating or unpredictable

On TikTok, the difference between performing and simply watching isn't always so clear. Most users may just be scrolling, but the design of the platform makes almost anyone a potential creator. A single video can end up on thousands of For You Pages, often reaching people who have never seen that creator before (or haven't in a long time). The algorithm is built to push content based on interest, not connection, so users constantly come across strangers from different age groups, countries, or subcultures. You might see someone dancing, storytelling, or trying a trend without knowing anything about them, yet still react instantly. Whether you laugh, cringe, or swipe past, those fast reactions help decide what's "normal" or what feels out of place. In that sense, even casual viewers are participating in shaping TikTok's norms. Everyone becomes both a viewer and a kind of silent judge; or, sometimes unintentionally, a performer.

In the context of this thesis, TikTok plays a central role not only because of its popularity, but because of how it encourages users to respond quickly, think visually, and judge based on short clips. It creates the perfect atmosphere for generational mockery to thrive, not as something deeply planned or malicious, but as a product of the platform's design, speed, and feel.

3. Methodology

This chapter describes the qualitative approach used in the research, focusing on semi-structured interviews with participants from both the millennial and Gen Z generations. It explains how the interview questions were designed to explore humor, mockery, and social media habits, and how participants were chosen to reflect a range of backgrounds and experiences. The section also outlines the process for conducting the interviews and recording responses. Finally, it briefly explains how the collected data was analyzed to identify common themes and patterns related to generational identity and digital culture.

3.1 Why Qualitative Interviews

To explore the meanings and effects of generational humor on social media, I conducted seven semi-structured interviews with participants of different ages and backgrounds. The interviews were designed to gain insight into how people interpret cringe, mockery, and generational differences online, especially between millennials and Gen Z. This method was chosen because it allowed for open conversation, personal stories, and emotional responses that would be difficult to capture through surveys or content analysis alone.

Semi-structured interviews are widely recognized in social research as a way to access the nuanced, lived experiences of individuals. As Kvale (1996) explains, the qualitative research interview aims to “*understand the world from the subjects' point of view, to unfold the meaning of peoples' experiences, to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations*” (p. 1). This approach is particularly valuable when exploring complex topics like humor, embarrassment, and belonging, which are deeply personal and can vary greatly depending on someone’s background

and online habits. By allowing participants to reflect openly and elaborate on their stories, semi-structured interviews provided the flexibility needed to capture the subtle emotions and interpretations that would likely remain hidden in more rigid survey formats.

3.2 Participant Selection

The sample includes seven participants: five from Generation Z and two from the millennial cohort. When selecting participants, I focused on people from my own contact circle, using age as the main criterion. It was important to include both those who are highly active on social media, posting and engaging regularly, as well as participants who use social media more passively or hardly at all. This variety allowed for a broader range of perspectives, from those deeply immersed in online trends to those who observe from the sidelines. My sample included two millennials and five members of Gen Z, which ensured that both sides of the generational “barricade” were represented in the case study. Among the Gen Z group, two participants were especially valuable as they study within the media, communication, and relations field, offering more informed insights into online culture. Helen, at 37, was the oldest participant and provided an important point of comparison for understanding generational trends and differences in digital knowledge. All participants were required to be proficient in English to ensure clear communication during the interviews. Gender was not considered relevant for this study, so it was not used as a selection criterion.

To ensure diversity of perspective within Gen Z, I intentionally included both early Gen Z (here: 1996-2000) and mid Gen Z (here: 2001-2005). While both fall within the same generational bracket, early Gen Z users often share more cultural overlap with younger millennials, whereas late Gen Z users are more embedded in newer online trends and behaviors.

This subtle difference became relevant when participants reflected on what they found cringe, how they interpreted satire, and whether they felt personally targeted or amused by generational jokes.

Similarly, I made sure to include both early Millennials (1980-1987) and late Millennials (1988-1995) within the sample. This internal division is relevant, as early Millennials typically have a more analog childhood and may approach social media as a later-life development, while late Millennials were teenagers or young adults during the social media boom. These subtle differences surfaced in how they described their relationship with online platforms, how often they felt out of place, and how they interpreted younger users' humor or criticism.

3.3 Ethics, Structure and Content

Ethical considerations played a key role throughout my research. At the start of each interview, I clearly explained the purpose of the study and asked each participant for their verbal consent to be recorded and to have their responses used for academic purposes. This included stating their name, the date, and explicitly confirming their permission. All participants agreed not only to be recorded, but also gave their consent for their first names and direct quotations to be used in this thesis.

My thesis supervisor, Albert Backus, has access to all participant names and transcriptions to support the academic process. However, only first names are used in the thesis to protect participant privacy. The original audio recordings were never published or shared outside the research context.

I emphasized that participation was entirely voluntary, and that anyone could withdraw from the study at any point without needing to provide a reason. Although participants allowed

the use of their first names and statements, I still took care to handle all data respectfully and to store recordings and transcripts securely, accessible only to me as the researcher and my supervisor. No interview material will be published or shared outside the context of this thesis. All procedures were carried out in line with the ethical guidelines of Tilburg University, ensuring that participants' rights and wishes were respected at every stage.

To give each interview a clear direction while allowing for flexibility, I followed a five-part structure. I began by asking participants about their general social media habits: what platforms they gravitate toward, how much time they spend online, and the kinds of content they typically engage with. This helped set the stage and made it easier for participants to open up. This section also included questions about when participants first started using social media, whether their habits had changed over time, and if there were specific life events that influenced their online activity.

Next, we discussed how different generations use social media. Here, I invited them to reflect on whether they noticed any patterns or differences between their own age group and others. This often led to interesting observations about trends, language, and even the pace at which new features are adopted. Additionally, I asked whether they had ever felt out of place or incompetent online because of their age, or if they had noticed this happening to others around them. This part was designed to surface feelings of belonging or exclusion related to generational identity.

The third section focused on the themes of cringe and mockery. I asked participants to share any experiences, either as targets or observers, of generational jokes or content that made them feel uncomfortable or amused. Sometimes this part of the conversation took unexpected

turns, as people recalled specific posts or memes that stood out to them. Here, I specifically encouraged participants to define what cringe meant to them in the context of social media, and to describe the types of content or behaviors they associated with this feeling. Finishing this part of the interview, we also discussed what factors make certain videos or posts feel more cringe than others, and whether mockery between generations felt playful or hurtful.

For the fourth part, I showed each participant four TikTok videos: two where Gen Z users poke fun at millennials, and two where the roles are reversed. I selected these clips because they were widely shared and seemed to capture the playful (and sometimes biting) humor that often characterizes generational exchanges online. Each video was chosen to represent a real-life example of generational humor, and participants were asked to describe what was happening, who was being mocked, and how the humor made them feel. This use of video stimuli allowed for immediate, authentic responses and grounded the discussion in concrete, relatable content. Watching the videos together sparked spontaneous reactions and deeper discussion about what makes something funny or offensive, and whether the line between satire and mockery is always clear.

Finally, I wrapped up by asking for any final thoughts or stories that hadn't come up yet. This open-ended closing often led to unexpected insights or personal anecdotes that added depth to the earlier parts of the interview. In this reflection section, I also encouraged participants to revisit earlier topics in light of the video discussion, and to share any wishes or advice they had for bridging generational gaps online. Overall, this structure helped keep the interviews focused, but I made sure to let the conversation flow naturally whenever participants had more to say.

Although each interview lasted over 45 minutes, I felt that maintaining this length was important to give participants enough time to open up and share their genuine thoughts. In

hindsight, shortening the interviews might have made the process more efficient, but I was mindful that some questions may seem slightly repetitive in order to encourage deeper reflection and honest responses.

As a researcher, I am aware that my own background and experiences may have influenced both the interviews and the interpretation of the data. I am part of the same generational cohort as some of my participants and am also an active social media user. This shared context may have helped build rapport and encouraged open conversation, but it could also have shaped the kinds of questions I asked or the way I understood certain responses. Throughout the research process, I made an effort to remain aware of my own assumptions and to approach each participant's perspective with an open mind.

3.4 Data Analysis Procedure

Interviews were recorded directly using the voice recording app on my phone, without any special equipment. While this made the process more casual and flexible, it also introduced limitations in audio quality and accuracy of automated transcription. To address this, I used the voice-to-text function on my phone to produce a first draft of the transcription. The automated transcription, however, introduced both speakers as two separate entities, which was a great improvement rather than having plain text.

Nonetheless, since the automated result was often imprecise - missing context, punctuation, or entire words - I treated it only as a base and manually edited each transcript for accuracy by re-listening to the original recordings.

Since the sample size was small, with only seven participants, I did not use formal coding software or a structured coding scheme. Instead, I analyzed the data manually. After generating automated transcriptions of each interview, I carefully listened to the recordings and corrected the transcripts for accuracy. I then organized all responses into multiple Google Sheets documents, grouping answers by question, part and participant. This allowed me to read through each response side by side and identify recurring themes, patterns, and notable differences in how participants described their experiences. The analysis was carried out by me alone, using close reading and comparison rather than formal coding.

4. Analysis

This chapter explores how Generation Z and millennials interact with each other on social media, focusing on the role of humor and teasing in their relationship. The analysis uses interview responses to show what each group finds funny or cringe, and whether generational jokes and playful insults are seen as friendly or as something that can make people feel left out or frustrated.

Section 4.1 explains how participants describe and experience cringe moments online. Section 4.2 presents several TikTok videos as case studies, showing how generational humor appears in real posts and how people respond in the comments. The next sections (4.3-4.4) look at how humor can help people feel like part of a group, when it brings generations together, and when it makes differences feel bigger. These sections also discuss who feels targeted by jokes, the idea of parasocial relationships, and the difference between those who create cringe content and those who experience it. The final section (4.5) considers how TikTok's features and design affect generational interactions, what content becomes popular, and how users connect or feel pressure online.

Throughout the chapter, quotes and examples from interview participants are used to show how digital culture can create both conflict and connection between Gen Z and millennials. The full list of interview questions can be found in Appendix A.

4.1 Cringe as a Social and Emotional Reaction

Participants described *cringe* as a deeply social and emotional reaction, most often tied to feelings of awkwardness or secondhand embarrassment. For Berk, cringe was “*when something*

is embarrassing or when something is just too much that it becomes embarrassing and you feel a certain kind of second hand embarrassment or awkwardness” (QS12). Bibi thinks alike, calling it *“something that makes people almost feel awkward, like secondhand embarrassment,”* and pointed out that what is considered cringe can be very subjective and generational: *“some younger people find older things cringe, or certain ways people act that other people are completely different, and they're like, what the hell was that?”* (Q12).

Joey described cringe as *“something that just gives you the ick,”* linking it to social awkwardness and moments that feel out of place or uncomfortable, such as *“when a person is too drunk and a dog is walking them”* [context: instead of the person walking a dog] (Q12). Elina focused on the idea of not meeting certain social standards, describing cringe as *“experiencing humiliation and shame, not matching basic values, over something, being not on the certain level of experience or style.”* (Q12; translation from Russian).

Julia’s perspective highlighted the mismatch between intention and outcome: *“Sometimes I just think, oh, it’s such a cringe... like when someone tries to recreate a meme but does it badly, or when millennials try to talk like Gen Z and it feels unnatural, or when really young kids post content that feels too mature for their age-, it’s just a bit much”* (Q12). For Cris, cringe was *“something that I cannot stand to see but I tolerate it while I ‘have’ to see it”* (Q12), pointing to a sense of discomfort that one endures rather than outright offense.

Helen’s response was short but expressive: *“‘EW’, haha, Something that is out of norm, aka ‘I wouldn’t do that’”* (Q12). She expanded on this idea during our interview in Russian, explaining that people often find cringe in things that are outside their personal norms, and that both those who create such content and those who comment on it anonymously online can be considered “cringe.” She noted, *“Просто адекватный человек не будет на это смотреть и*

получать от этого удовольствие. Вот а неадекватный человек будет это смотреть, но опять таки только в том случае, если это вот где-то за компьютером, где-то вдали.”
[“*A reasonable person wouldn’t watch this and enjoy it. But an unreasonable person would, but only if it’s somewhere far away, behind a computer.”*] (Q14, translated from Russian).

When discussing whether cringe is about the content or the person, most participants saw it as a mix of both. Berk explained, “*If a post is cringe, it’s cringe, but sometimes the person who posts it does it for clout then it’s cringe... Sometimes the creator can be cringe, but sometimes individual posts can be cringe too*” (Q21). In this context, “clout” refers to a person’s influence or popularity online, especially on social media. Someone who is “doing it for clout” is usually seeking attention, validation, or a bigger following, even if it means acting in a way that others might find embarrassing or cringe.

Julia agreed, saying, “*It can be both. Sometimes it’s cringe because older people try too hard to follow trends, but even people my age can post really strange stuff. So it’s not just about generations - anyone can be cringe*” (Q21). Cris added that “it is mostly about the content,” *but if the person presenting it over-exaggerates, it would even make it cringier. And also embarrass the person presenting it*” (Q21).

Both Gen Z (Joey, Elina, Berk, Julia, Bibi) and millennial (Cris, Helen) participants described cringe as a reaction to social awkwardness, secondhand embarrassment, or behavior that feels out of place online. Gen Z tended to emphasize the “ick” factor and authenticity, often associating cringe with trying too hard, chasing trends, or seeking attention (“clout”). Millennials, while sharing similar feelings of discomfort, more often highlighted the mismatch

between intention and outcome, such as using slang or trends that don't fit their age or style, and discussed cringe in terms of generational divides and personal norms.

All participants agreed that cringe is subjective and context-dependent, with both content and the person behind it playing a role. Gen Z was more likely to mention clout-chasing, while millennials focused on discomfort from failed attempts to fit in. Generally, these responses support the idea that cringe is shaped by cultural standards and serves as both a personal and collective social signal.

These nuanced definitions and experiences echo the findings of Jesus et al. (2022), who argue that labeling something as cringe on social media is often a way for people to signal group boundaries and reinforce social norms. In their study, they show how calling out cringe content is not just about individual taste, but about marking what is considered acceptable or desirable within a particular online community. This means that what feels awkward or embarrassing for one group may be perfectly acceptable, or even celebrated, in another, highlighting the role of cringe in drawing lines between “in-groups” and “out-groups”.

Similarly, Spiegel (2023) describes cringe as a social emotion that emerges when there is a perceived mismatch between someone's actions and the expectations of their audience. Spiegel emphasizes that cringe is not just a personal feeling, but a collective response that involves both the person performing and those observing. The discomfort or secondhand embarrassment people experience is shaped by cultural context and shared standards, which means that cringe can serve as a subtle form of social regulation and judgment within digital spaces.

Overall, participants described cringe as a feeling that arises from witnessing social awkwardness, failed attempts to fit in, or actions that seem out of place or exaggerated. While it is rarely truly offensive, it reliably triggers discomfort, embarrassment, or the urge to look away. This supports the idea that cringe is both a personal and a collective response shaped by cultural context, as discussed by Jesus et al. (2022) and Spiegel (2023).

4.2 TikTok Video Case Studies: Generational Humor in Action

To provide a shared context for participant reactions, four TikTok videos were selected as case studies of generational humor and mockery. Each video was chosen for its popularity and its distinct approach to exaggerating generational traits, as reflected in their high engagement metrics and the volume of public commentary.

The first video, “POV: millennial does a grwm” by @biancascaglione, features a late Gen Z creator performing a hyperbolic parody of a millennial “Get Ready With Me” routine. The creator exaggerates millennial behaviors through a series of visual and verbal cues: she starts with the so-called “millennial pause,” uses outdated makeup tools like a triangle sponge from the early 2000s, and peppers her speech with quirky references to “starbies” (Starbucks), Harry Potter, and Target runs. The video is laced with mispronounced Gen Z slang and playful self-deprecation, such as calling herself “me” instead of “I” (*“me likes this just because it’s pink”*). These layered jokes gently mock the earnestness and nostalgia often associated with millennial online personas. The video’s resonance is clear, with 1.2 million likes, 8.6 million views, and 5,800 comments.



Figure 1. Viewer reaction agreeing the video is cringe, showing discomfort and amusement. Source: TikTok comments on @biancascaglione video, screenshot by author, 2025. (Copyright TikTok, used for academic purposes.)

Looking at the comments, several patterns emerge that help illustrate how audiences engage with generational humor on TikTok. Some viewers directly agree that the video is cringe, expressing a mix of discomfort and amusement. For example, one comment underlines how close to reality the parody feels, saying it “hurt to watch” but was spot-on. This kind of reaction is common on TikTok, where content that makes people cringe is often meant to walk the line between funny and painfully accurate.

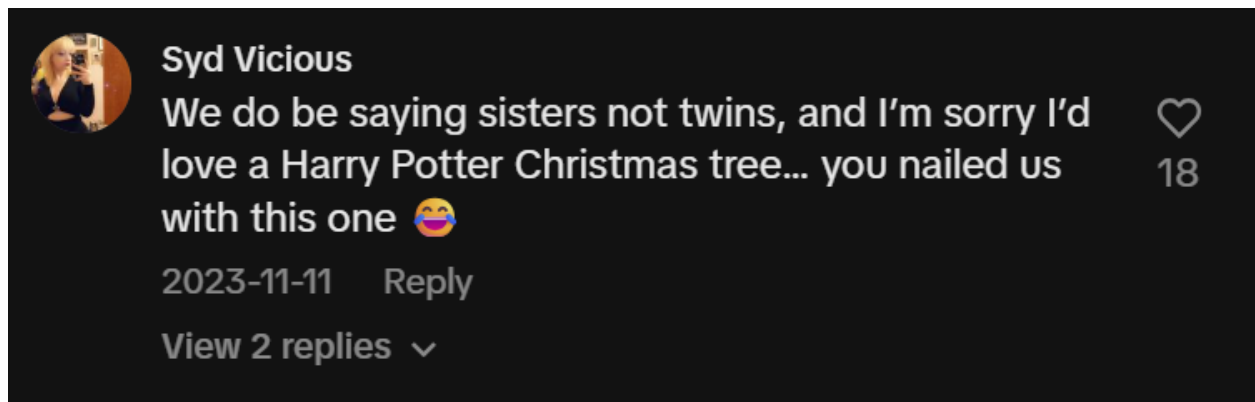


Figure 2. Millennial Syd Vicious acknowledging and joining the joke, showing self-awareness and pride. Source: TikTok comments on @biancascaglione video, screenshot by author, 2025. (Copyright TikTok, used for academic purposes.)

Other commenters, including millennials themselves, respond with self-awareness and even pride. One millennial, Syd Vicious, openly agrees with the mockery, admitting to the habits being teased and even celebrating them. This kind of response shows how humor can become a way for people to bond over shared traits, turning what could be seen as teasing into a moment of connection and self-acceptance.

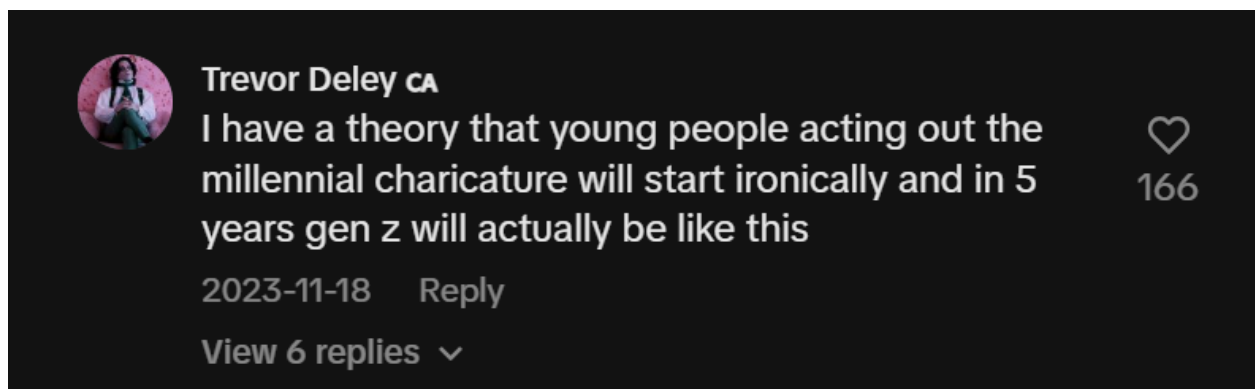


Figure 3. User reflecting on how Gen Z might adopt millennial traits in the future, showing the evolving nature of generational humor. Source: TikTok comments on @biancascaglione video, screenshot by author, 2025. (Copyright TikTok, used for academic purposes.)

There are also comments that take a step back and reflect on what these trends might mean for the future. For instance, one user suggests that Gen Z, by ironically performing millennial stereotypes now, might actually adopt these habits in a few years. This perspective highlights how generational identities and online trends are always shifting and can influence each other over time.

The second video, “TEACHING GEN Z SHAKESPEARE MACBETH” by @richardfrankcomedy, is a comedic skit in which a teacher attempts to explain the plot of Macbeth entirely in exaggerated Gen Z slang. The teacher opens with “*Let’s break down the plot of Macbeth with some straight up Gen Z vibes,*” and continues with phrases like “*chillin’ with his BFF Banquo,*” “*witchy gals with some sus vibes,*” and “*stay in your lane or get cancelled BRUH.*” The humor comes from the absurdity of translating classic literature into a language that is both recognizable and deliberately over-the-top, poking fun at the stereotype that Gen Z requires everything to be filtered through their own cultural lens. This video has attracted 145,000 likes, 1.2 million views, and over 3,500 comments.

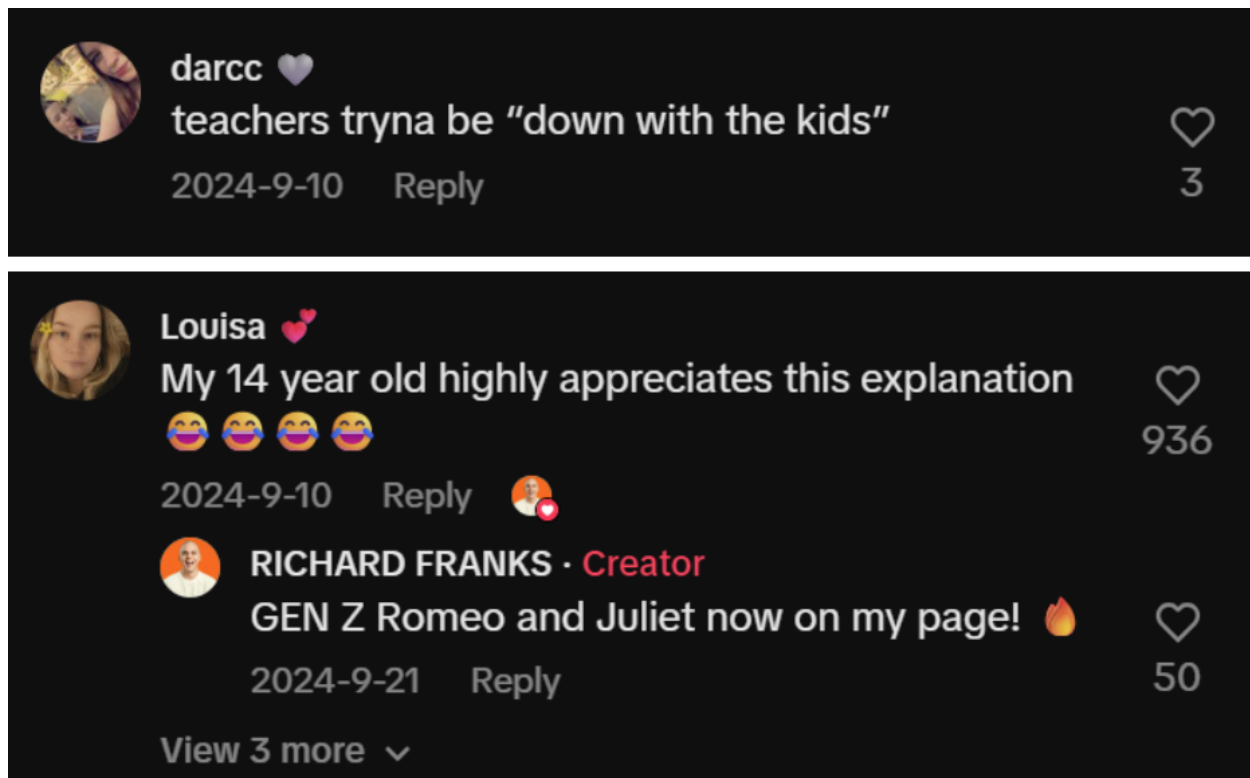


Figure 4. Comments highlighting the playful mockery of adults using Gen Z slang, but also showing that this humorous approach can genuinely help younger viewers understand classic stories. Source: TikTok, screenshot by author, 2025. (Copyright TikTok, used for academic purposes.)

The comments in this screenshot reveal the dual nature of the humor. On one hand, viewers are amused by the teacher’s attempt to use Gen Z slang, one user jokes about “teachers tryna be ‘down with the kids,’” clearly recognizing the exaggeration and playful mockery involved. On the other hand, the humor proves surprisingly effective, as a parent shares that their 14-year-old “highly appreciates this explanation.” This mix of gentle teasing and real educational value shows how generational mockery on TikTok can both entertain and bridge gaps, making old material feel fresh and relatable for a new audience.

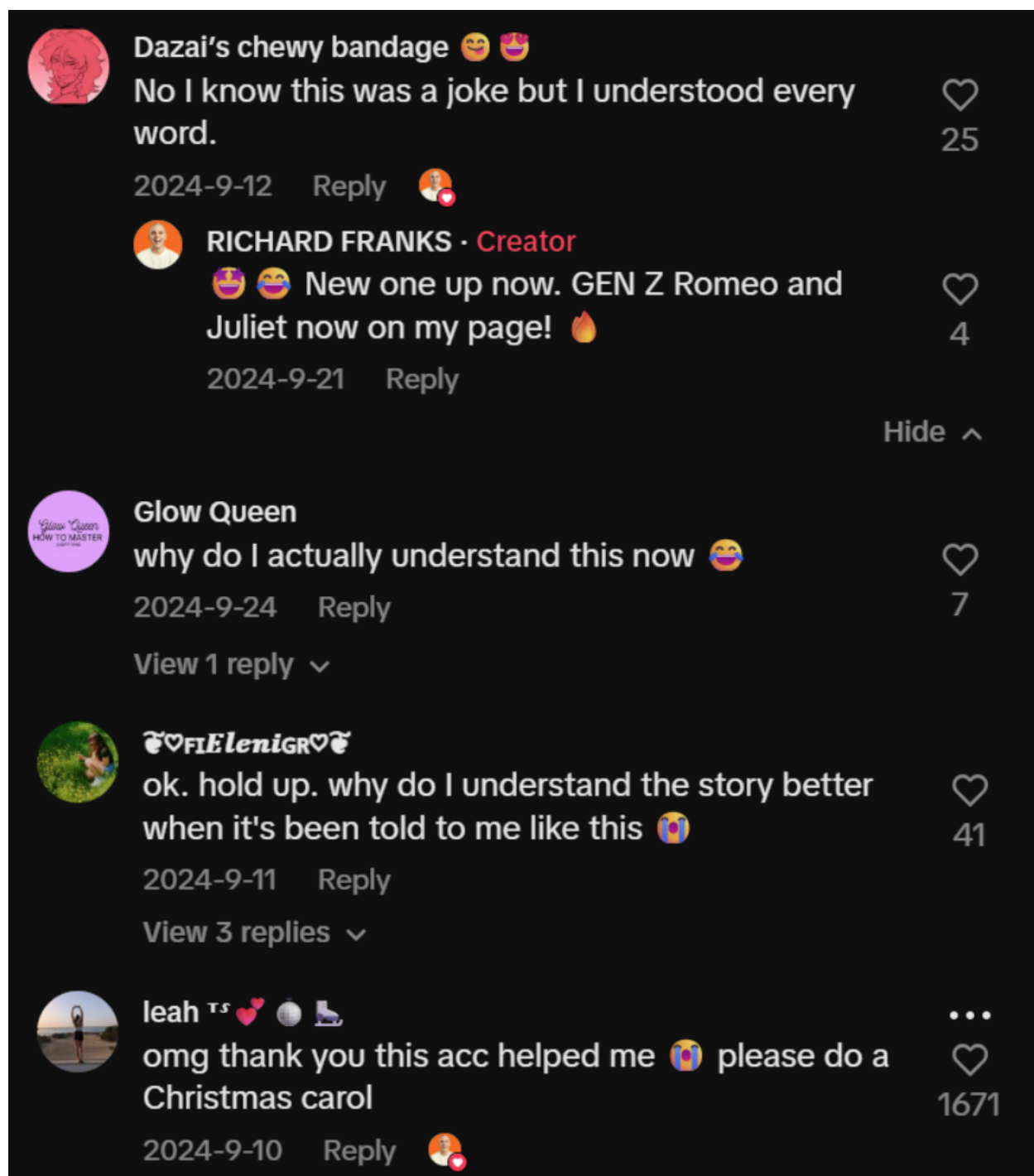


Figure 5. Gen Z viewers expressing that the video helped them understand Macbeth, with the creator engaging in the comments and promoting related content. Source: TikTok, screenshot by author, 2025. (Copyright TikTok, used for academic purposes.)

The second set of comments focuses on Gen Z viewers themselves, many of whom admit that they now “actually understand this” after watching the skit. Comments like “why do I actually understand this now” and “why do I understand the story better when it’s been told to me like this” highlight how the exaggerated Gen Z translation makes classic literature more accessible and memorable. The creator also actively responds in the comments, promoting his new videos and encouraging continued engagement. This interaction not only builds a sense of community but also reinforces the idea that humor and mockery, when used thoughtfully, can be powerful tools for learning and connection on platforms like TikTok.

It is also worth noting that this kind of joke might be taken so lightheartedly by Gen Z because of their generally softer approach to humor and preference for irony and playful exaggeration over harsh criticism. The way Gen Z users embrace and even celebrate the mockery suggests that their humor style is more about inclusion and shared amusement than about putting others down, which may help explain why these videos are met with such positive and open reactions

The third video, a compilation titled “millennial core” by @jimmycocoapuffs, brings together seven clips of millennials engaging in what Gen Z labels as cringe or “millennial core” behavior. The video’s in-caption, “millennial core,” signals to viewers that these are quintessential examples of millennial online personas. The compilation features creators acting “cutsie,” making exaggerated faces, using quirky voices, and misnaming things in an attempt to be funny or relatable. One notable segment shows a woman in her car excitedly mispronouncing “small girl” as “*SMOL GORL*” and “large boy” as “*LARGE BOIF*” while referencing Taylor Swift and Travis Kelce, a style of speech and humor often mocked as outdated by younger users.

Another clip features a woman with colorful hair and nails, performing a cooking tutorial and repeatedly calling butter sticks “*rectangular prisms*,” highlighting the self-consciously quirky and childlike humor associated with millennial content.

A particularly telling moment comes when a millennial creator attempts to participate in a Gen Z TikTok trend: she tries to recreate the “Biting-Lips emoji” and “Rizz face,” placing her index finger and thumb on her face in a pose meant to mimic flirtatious confidence. Her awkward execution, followed by a self-conscious “*Right?*” and laughter, underscores the generational gap in digital performance and trend adoption. The compilation closes with another millennial screaming in a low voice, “*I love my jooooob. But sometimes I need to love it from a distaaance,*” further making fun of the sincere, often overly positive and self-deprecating style that is common in millennial humor online.

The video’s gentle ribbing and spotlight on generational mannerisms have resonated widely, earning 660,000 likes, 6 million views, and over 8,000 comments.

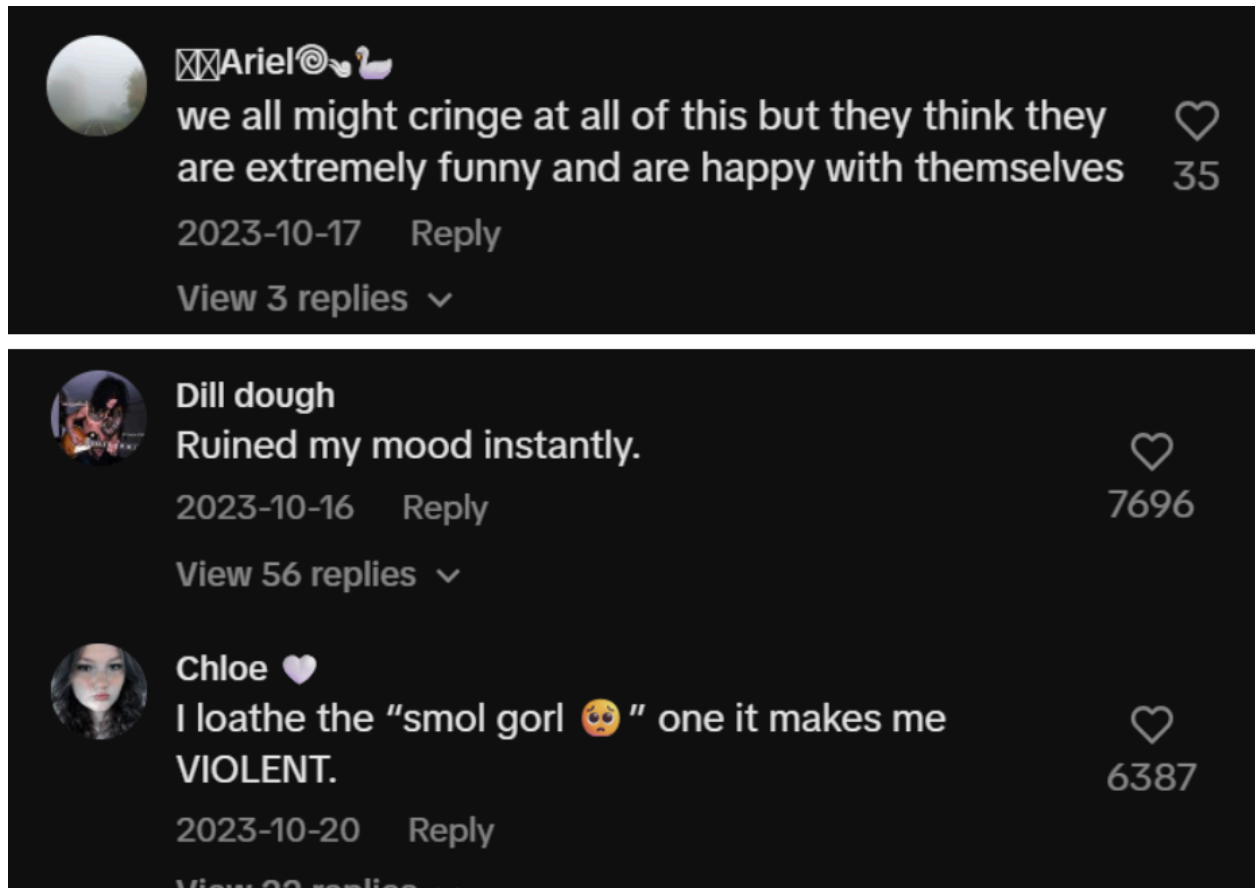


Figure 6. Comments showing viewers’ strong cringe responses to “millennial core” behaviors, with some expressing instant discomfort or even frustration at the style of humor. Source: TikTok, screenshot by author, 2025. (Copyright TikTok, used for academic purposes.)

The first set of comments highlights how deeply some viewers react to the millennial core compilation. Comments like “Ruined my mood instantly” and “I loathe the ‘smol gorl’ one it makes me VIOLENT” reveal that for some, these stereotypical millennial behaviors go beyond light teasing and provoke genuine annoyance or even secondhand embarrassment. Others, like “we all might cringe at all of this but they think they are extremely funny and are happy with themselves,” point to the disconnect between how millennials present themselves and how Gen Z perceives these performances. This intense discomfort underscores the generational divide in humor and self-expression on TikTok.



Figure 7. Comments mocking millennials’ attempts to adopt Gen Z trends, with users noting how millennials are “stuck in 2014” and how watching them is a source of entertainment. Source: TikTok, screenshot by author, 2025. (Copyright TikTok, used for academic purposes.)

The second group of comments focuses on the mockery and playful derision that drive much of the engagement with millennial core content. Viewers comment, “I love how they try to be gen z so hard but like also failing so hard,” and “Millennials are stuck in 2014 I swear,” capturing the sense that millennials are out of step with current trends and that their efforts to fit in are both visible and unsuccessful. The comment “watching millennials is such a fun hobby” further illustrates how this genre of content has become a form of entertainment, where generational differences are not just noticed but actively performed and enjoyed by younger audiences.



Figure 8. Comment reflecting on the future, suggesting that Gen Z will eventually be mocked by the next generation, highlighting the cyclical nature of generational humor. Source: TikTok, screenshot by author, 2025. (Copyright TikTok, used for academic purposes.

Finally, some comments take a more reflective approach, recognizing the cyclical nature of generational mockery. One user writes, “Am I the only one who likes millennials like that is going to be us getting made fun of by the new generation so I can’t make fun of them,” acknowledging that generational trends and jokes are always evolving and that today’s Gen Z will likely find themselves in the same position in the future. This perspective adds a layer of empathy and self-awareness to the conversation, suggesting that while mockery can reinforce group boundaries, it can also encourage reflection on the shared experiences that connect different generations over time.

The fourth video, “POV: gen z parents asking their kids about their day” by @peternugget, humorously flips generational roles by depicting a Gen Z parent who is more interested in hearing gossip, referred to as “the tea”, than in their child’s academic achievements. In contemporary social media slang, especially on TikTok, “tea” means gossip, juicy information, or the latest news about people’s lives. Phrases like “spill the tea” or “what’s the tea?” are commonly used to invite someone to share the latest drama or secrets. This term has become a staple of Gen Z and online communication, often signaling a desire for honest,

sometimes scandalous, conversation rather than formal or traditional exchanges. In the video, the parent's focus on "the tea" satirizes the stereotype that Gen Z values emotional openness and social intrigue over conventional markers of success, such as grades or discipline. The playful take on parental priorities resonated widely, as reflected in the video's 2.9 million likes, 13.2 million views, and 12,700 comments.

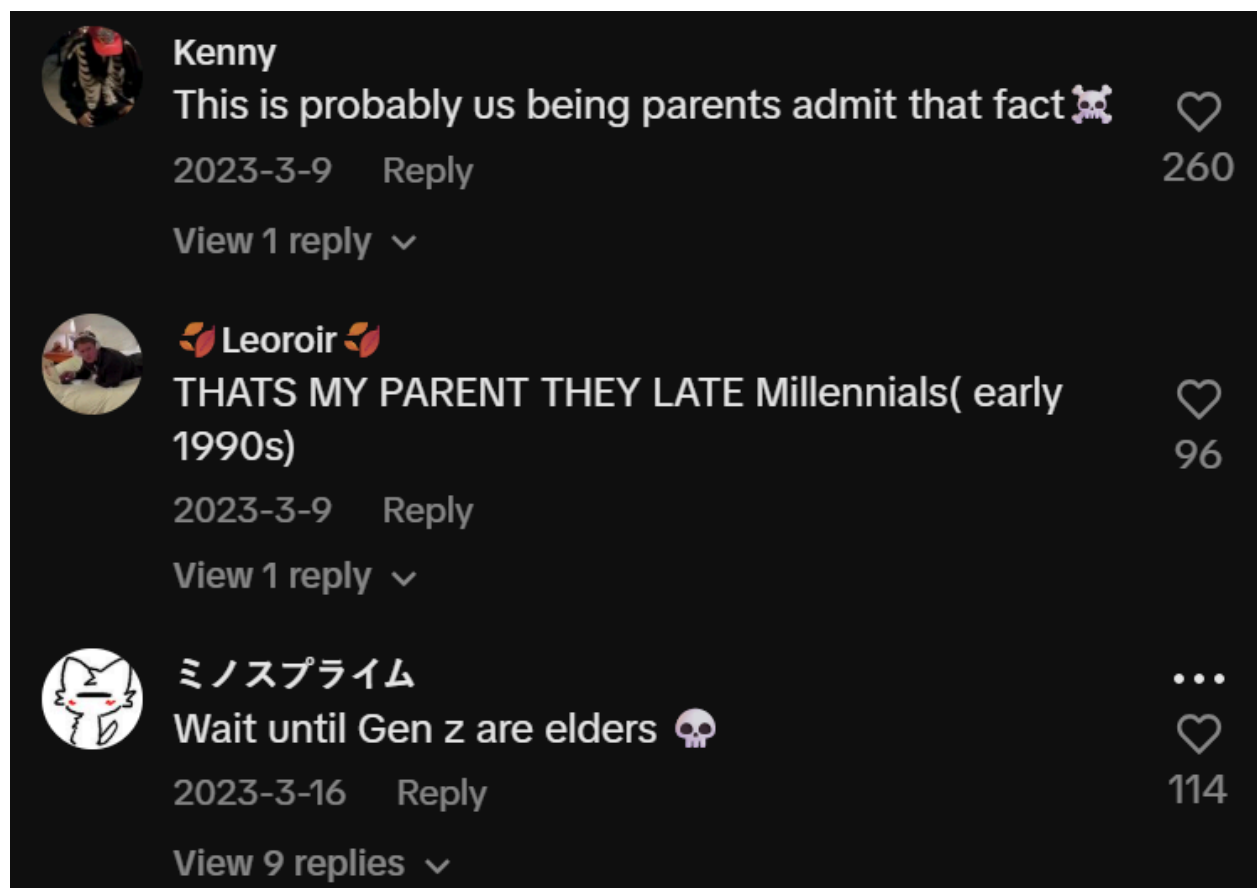


Figure 9. Comments where viewers recognize themselves or their parents in the video, and anticipate Gen Z becoming parents. Source: TikTok, screenshot by author, 2025. (Copyright TikTok, used for academic purposes.)

The comments reveal how viewers relate to the video both personally and generationally. Some, like Kenny and Leoroi, point out that the video is an accurate reflection of late millennial

parents, while others humorously anticipate what it will be like when Gen Z are elders themselves. These reactions show that viewers are not only laughing at the current stereotype, but also reflecting on how generational traits and humor might carry forward as Gen Z becomes the next generation of parents.



Figure 10. Comments expressing excitement or pride in the Gen Z approach to parenting, with users joking about valuing “tea” over grades and being cool parents. Source: TikTok, screenshot by author, 2025. (Copyright TikTok, used for academic purposes.)

Other comments, like those from Jade, Ismail, and Bela, embrace the Gen Z parenting style depicted in the video. Jade jokes that she doesn’t care if her kids are failing as long as she gets the tea, while Ismail and Bela express enthusiasm about being “cool parents.” This playful attitude suggests that many Gen Z viewers see themselves in this new, more open and

emotionally connected parenting role, and are happy to lean into the stereotype for the sake of humor and group identity.

These different reactions, raging from discomfort to self-acceptance to thoughtful reflection, demonstrate the complex ways that generational humor and mockery work on TikTok. The comments not only react to the videos but also help shape the ongoing conversation about what it means to belong to a particular generation online, showing how humor can both reinforce and challenge generational boundaries. At the same time, these interactions illustrate how TikTok humor not only entertains but also sparks reflection on generational change. Viewers recognize the evolving nature of social roles, such as parenting styles, and how each generation puts its own twist on what it means to connect with others. The willingness of Gen Z to laugh at themselves and embrace new priorities, like valuing openness and shared stories, highlights how digital culture continues to shape expectations for identity, relationships, and the future of family life.

4.3 Humor as a Tool for Group Identity

4.3.1 What Participants Found Funny or Exaggerated in Generational Content

Most participants found humor in the exaggerated stereotypes shown in the TikTok videos, especially when creators played up well-known generational quirks. Several, including Joey, Julia, and Bibi, pointed to the “millennial pause,” outdated slang, and over-the-top references like “starbies” and “Hogwarts Express” as funny because they were “so obvious they’re playing it up.” Julia and Joey both described these moments as “funny but also kind of cringey,” highlighting how the humor came from recognizing familiar behaviors taken to the

extreme. This echoes Attardo's (2023) observation that internet humor often relies on amplifying stereotypes to create instant recognition and group belonging.

The use of exaggerated Gen Z slang in the Macbeth video made Elina "giggle," and others, like Cris and Berk, also found it amusing but sometimes "awkward" or "annoying" when it felt forced. Bibi and Berk described the humor as "almost secondhand embarrassment," especially when older generations tried too hard to fit in or mimic trends.

Helen stood out for finding the exaggeration mostly cringe and awkward rather than funny, saying, "*EW... something that is out of norm, aka 'I wouldn't do that'.*" Elina, meanwhile, noted that the humor in these videos often relied on stereotypes, which could feel "strange" or distancing, but also recognized that it brought together those who shared the target group identity.

Overall, participants agreed that the humor worked best when it highlighted recognizable generational traits in an over-the-top, self-aware way. However, the line between funny and simply awkward was thin, and several noted that the same exaggeration could easily tip into discomfort or embarrassment, depending on personal perspective.

4.3.2 When Humor Feels Bonding vs. Distancing

Participants' responses made it clear that generational humor on TikTok can either foster a sense of connection or highlight social divides, depending on who is watching and how the joke is delivered. For instance, Elina, reflecting on both the millennial parody and the "millennial core" compilation, commented that this type of humor "*pushes away different age groups but*

brings together the target group and the group who feel offended". In her view, these jokes can unite those who are in on the joke but may also leave others feeling singled out or excluded.

Joey, considering the overall trend, suggested that "*making fun of each other brings people together,*" as long as it's done playfully and everyone understands it isn't meant to be hurtful. However, he also warned that if the humor crosses into negativity or "*just hate,*" it can deepen generational divides rather than bridge them.

Julia and Bibi both described having mixed feelings. Julia, in response to the Gen Z parent skit (See Video 4, Chapter 4.2), said, "*It's funny because it's true, but it's also poking fun at how we're obsessed with drama.*" She acknowledged that while the humor can be relatable and create a sense of shared experience, it can also feel "*a little painful to watch*" when it reinforces stereotypes too strongly. Bibi emphasized that what's funny or bonding for one group can easily feel awkward or alienating for another, since "*cringe is very subjective, so it really depends also on generations.*"

Cris and Berk both observed that humor is most likely to bring people together when it's light and not intended to offend. Cris, for instance, said that exaggerated or forced jokes, like the teacher using heavy Gen Z slang in Video 2, can sometimes "*just feel forced,*" making them less effective at building connection (see Chapter 4.2). Berk added that some people might laugh at second hand embarrassment, but for others, it just feels uncomfortable.

Helen, on the other hand, often found these generational jokes more distancing than bonding. She described much of the behavior in the videos as cringe or "out of norm," and made it clear that this type of humor didn't make her feel included.

4.3.3 Humor as a Marker of Generational Belonging

Gen Z participants in my interviews often described humor, especially memes and TikTok trends, as something that brings people together, while millennial participants were more likely to see this humor as distancing or even alienating. This generational difference is rooted in how each group relates to internet culture and the role humor plays in their daily lives.

Several Gen Z interviewees explicitly pointed out that their generation is less likely to take humor personally or feel offended, because “*memes and stuff became a big part of our lives, especially with common modern dark humour.*” For Gen Z, growing up fully immersed in online spaces has led to a culture where irony, absurdity, and even nihilistic or dark jokes are seen as coping mechanisms and social glue, rather than as personal attacks. As one participant put it, “*Gen Z finds it funny as well,*” even when the joke is at their own expense, because not taking things too seriously is part of their online identity.

In contrast, millennial participants were more likely to say that generational jokes can sometimes make people feel excluded or reinforce stereotypes. Some millennials felt that jokes directed at their generation often rely on ‘overly generalized’ or outdated references, and that what Gen Z finds funny or ironic can sometimes feel awkward or even a bit insensitive to them. Since millennials experienced both life before and after the rise of the internet, their sense of humor is often more self-deprecating and connected to specific memories or cultural moments. Because of this, jokes targeting millennials can feel more personal.

This difference in attitude highlights a broader shift in humor between the generations. Gen Z’s humor is shaped by growing up constantly online, with fast-changing memes and a comfort with absurd or dark topics. Millennials, allegedly, on the other hand, tend to prefer humor based on nostalgia, self-reflection, and relatability. As a result, Gen Z often sees humor as

a way to bond and build group identity, while millennials may be more aware of how these jokes can sometimes make generational gaps feel larger.

This generational divide is also visible in online discourse, as shown by a viral collection of TikTok comments shared by Junkee (2020). These comments highlight the kinds of jokes and stereotypes Gen Z uses to mock millennial habits, such as references to 'Harry Potter houses,' 'adulting' memes, and wine-drinking jokes.



Figure 11. Gen Z TikTok comments mocking millennial humor and habits, as collected and shared by Junkee. Source: Junkee, 2020. (Copyright Junkee, used for academic purposes.)

The patterns observed in these interviews closely align with Attardo's (2023) analysis of internet humor, which he describes as fast-paced, stereotype-driven, and often intentionally 'cringe', not only to entertain but also to signal in-group membership and test social boundaries. Attardo argues that the rise of meme culture and dark humor has made digital-native audiences more comfortable with irony and exaggeration, using these tools to bond and to cope with discomfort. Jacobs (2024) further explains that as comedy evolves, so do the boundaries of what is considered acceptable or offensive. Her work highlights how humor can both include and exclude, depending on who feels represented or targeted, and underscores the importance of context, intent, and shifting social norms in shaping how jokes are received. The generational differences in my participants' responses, Gen Z's resilience to mockery and preference for irony, versus millennials' sensitivity to exclusion and nostalgia, reflect these broader trends in digital humor and the ongoing negotiation of group identity online.

4.4 Generational Mockery and Perceived Offense

4.4.1 Who Feels Targeted? Participant Responses to Generational Mockery

Across the interviews, most Gen Z participants emphasized that they rarely felt personally offended by the generational jokes or mockery in the videos. For example, Elina repeatedly stated, *"Someone maybe, but not me,"* and, *"I don't think so, nothing seems like bullying,"* when asked if these jokes would offend her or someone she knows. She further explained that because the jokes *"make fun of some other people I have no correlation with, it seems like no harm is being done, rather just a funny video compilation."* Joey echoed this

relaxed attitude, saying, “*Maybe, but I think Gen Z finds it funny as well,*” and only saw potential for offense if the humor turned into “*just hate.*”

Julia and Bibi, while generally not offended themselves, acknowledged that someone could be. Julia said, “*Someone maybe, but not me,*” and Bibi noted, “*I think it depends on the person. I’m not offended, but I could see how someone might be.*” This suggests that while Gen Z tends to be less sensitive to mockery, they recognize that humor is subjective and not everyone reacts the same way.

Much of the humor discussed relied on exaggerating generational stereotypes, and misunderstandings could arise when these exaggerations were interpreted as personal attacks rather than playful satire.

Cris and Berk both described the humor as mostly harmless, but pointed out that it could become uncomfortable if the exaggeration felt forced or if the joke was too pointed. Cris said, “*Not really, unless it’s really mean-spirited,*” and Berk added, “*It depends on the context, but usually not.*” Both highlighted that intent and delivery matter more than the content itself.

Helen, in contrast, was more likely to feel put off by the humor, describing it as cringe and ‘out of norm’. She made it clear that this type of mockery did not make her feel included or amused, and could easily cross into being offensive or alienating.

4.4.2 Parasocial Relationships and Mockery on TikTok

A key aspect of generational mockery on TikTok is the way viewers relate to influencers and “types” of users through parasocial relationships, one-sided connections where audiences feel they know or understand the creators, even though the relationship is not mutual. Many participants recognized that the jokes and parodies often target familiar online personas, such as

the “millennial mom” or “Gen Z parent,” rather than specific individuals. Julia noted, “It’s not about me, it’s about a type,” suggesting that the humor feels less personal and more like a commentary on a shared, recognizable character.

Bibi echoed this, explaining that “these jokes are about the stereotype, not the person behind the screen.” This sense of distance can make mockery feel lighter and more communal, as if everyone is in on the joke about online trends or influencer behaviors. Joey and Elina also pointed out that they rarely felt personally attacked by these videos, as the content was aimed at broad categories rather than individuals.

Another important dynamic is that viewers often build parasocial relationships with large creators, which can influence their own behavior on the platform. Many viewers are inspired to repeat trends and recreate videos that popular creators have filmed. However, when these trends are repeated by everyday users, the results can be unprofessional, poorly filmed or edited, or simply feel out of place, especially when these videos receive only a handful of views compared to the millions that big creators attract. This can lead to a different kind of cringe or secondhand embarrassment, as the gap between influencer and ordinary user becomes more apparent.

Additionally, the strength of a viewer’s parasocial bond with a creator can shape how they interpret mockery or cringe moments. If a creator you like does something awkward or embarrassing, you may be more forgiving or see it as endearing, whereas if you already dislike or distrust a creator because of their past videos or statements, you may interpret the same behavior as more negative or offensive. This personal bias can influence whether mockery is received as playful satire or as exclusionary and mean-spirited.

The feeling of cringe experienced while watching TikTok videos can often be intensified by reading the comments section. Sometimes, a viewer may not initially find a video particularly cringe-worthy, but after seeing others label it as cringe or provide additional context or background information, their perception can shift, making the content feel more awkward or embarrassing. Comments can act as social cues that influence individual reactions, reinforcing or amplifying feelings of secondhand embarrassment. This social amplification highlights how online community responses shape personal experiences of humor and discomfort on platforms like TikTok.

For example, a comment thread might point out a subtle reference or past controversy that a casual viewer missed, suddenly making the video seem much more awkward or problematic.

In other cases, seeing hundreds of users mock a creator's style or delivery can create a "bandwagon effect," where even neutral viewers begin to interpret the content as cringeworthy. The bandwagon effect is a psychological phenomenon in which people do something primarily because other people are doing it, regardless of their own beliefs (Investopedia, 2025). On social media, this means that when many users label something as cringe, others are more likely to adopt the same view, even if they didn't originally feel that way, because they see it as the popular or accepted reaction.

Overall, participant reflections suggest that parasocial relationships on TikTok can both soften and intensify the impact of mockery. When viewers see influencers as distant 'types', the humor is more likely to be received as harmless satire. But when the line between stereotype and

self blurs, or when personal feelings toward a creator are strong, mockery can feel more exclusionary or personal.

4.4.3 The Cringer-Cringe Relationship on TikTok

The idea of the “cringer” and the “cringe,” described by Spiegel (2023), is important for understanding how mockery works on TikTok. Spiegel explains that cringe is a social feeling that happens when someone (the cringer) watches another person (the cringe) do something awkward or outside social norms, especially online where people often don’t know each other personally.

Several participants described feeling secondhand embarrassment while watching certain TikTok videos. For example, Bibi said, *“It’s almost secondhand embarrassment, especially when a millennial, or like the older generation, is doing something acting all ‘cutsie’ in a video.”* Berk also said that sometimes it *“becomes embarrassing and you feel a certain kind of second hand embarrassment or awkwardness.”* Even if they weren’t the target of the joke, they still felt uncomfortable for the person being mocked.

This reaction is more than just personal discomfort, it also shows how people recognize what is ‘normal’ in their group. Spiegel (2023) points out that cringing can bring viewers together, as they share the same sense of what is acceptable or funny. Some Gen Z participants said they laughed at exaggerated millennial or Gen Z behaviors, feeling like they were sharing an inside joke. But for others, like Helen, the same jokes felt more hurtful or made her feel left out.

In short, the cringer-crigee relationship helps explain why generational mockery on TikTok can make some people feel included and others excluded. It depends on whether viewers see themselves as part of the group sharing the joke, or as the one being laughed at. This was

clear in the interviews, where participants had mixed feelings about cringe humor and exaggerated generational content.

4.5 TikTok as a Stage for Generational Dynamics

4.5.1 Platform Dynamics: Format, Algorithm, and Visibility

TikTok's platform design, short videos, rapid scrolling, and a powerful recommendation algorithm, shapes both the content that gets seen and the ways users present themselves. Participants noted that the fast pace and high visibility of TikTok encourage creators to exaggerate behaviors or trends to capture attention. As Bibi explained, *“a lot of people of the older generation are not on TikTok,”* and *“my parents are now catching up a little bit more to like how we're using social media, but like they're like, 5 years behind at least, you know, like they're using it, how we used it 5 years ago.”* This generational gap means that the platform's trends and humor are especially tailored to younger users who are already comfortable with rapid, visually-driven content.

Bibi also described typical behavior for her generation online as *“doom scrolling, I would say, doom scrolling as number one.”* She elaborated, *“it's just scrolling and liking, scrolling until they find something that suits their personal bubble of interest, and then like and go onto the next thing...sometimes not even give it 3 seconds and be like: “Nope, not for me.””* This observation directly supports the idea that TikTok's format encourages fast, selective engagement and rewards content that is immediately eye-catching.

The algorithm was frequently mentioned as a key factor in what becomes popular. Participants described how content with bold visuals, catchy sounds, or exaggerated humor is

more likely to be promoted and widely shared. Some noticed that videos using popular filters, music, or editing styles tend to get more attention, which can make the platform feel competitive and fast-changing.

These observations are supported by Langlais et al. (2024), who argue that TikTok's structure rewards immediacy, spectacle, and the ability to quickly capture attention. They highlight that the platform's design encourages users to create content that is visually striking and emotionally engaging within the first few seconds, as this is crucial for retaining viewers and gaining algorithmic promotion. Międzobrodzka et al. (2024) further emphasize that TikTok's recommendation system does not just amplify what is already popular, but actively shapes trends by repeatedly exposing users to certain aesthetics, sounds, and humor styles. This creates powerful feedback loops where specific types of content, often those that are exaggerated, relatable, or easily recognizable, rise to the top, while more subtle or unconventional videos struggle to gain visibility. Both studies suggest that TikTok's technological and cultural environment pushes creators to adapt quickly, favoring those who can anticipate or respond to the ever-changing demands of the platform.

In summary, TikTok's format, algorithm, and visual culture create an environment where exaggerated, attention-grabbing content thrives. This not only shapes what is popular but also influences how users express generational identity and humor on the platform.

4.5.2 User Experience: Pressure, Connection, and Performance

TikTok's fast-moving and very public environment creates a space where users deal with feelings of pressure, connection, and performing for others. The way the platform is set up

pushes people to show themselves in ways that grab attention quickly, which often makes them more self-conscious and feel like they have to follow popular trends.

Some users see TikTok as a place to connect through shared jokes and generational identity, but others feel pressure to perform and worry about being seen or judged by others. This mix shows that TikTok acts both as a social space and as a stage where people perform for an audience.

Differences between generations also affect how people use TikTok. For example, younger users usually pick up on trends faster and use the platform as part of who they are, while older generations are often less active or use TikTok in other ways. This can be explained by Bourdieu's idea of cultural capital, the non-financial skills and knowledge, like being good with technology, knowing what's trending, and understanding how to behave online, that help people do well in certain social settings (Bourdieu, 1986). On TikTok, people with more digital cultural capital, those who understand the platform's style, humor, and rules, are more likely to get noticed and feel comfortable, while others might feel out of place or left out.

Julia pointed out that using social media can be a way to escape and connect, but it can also make you feel awkward or judged. She talked about times when content felt cringe or unnatural, showing how hard it can be to balance being yourself and performing for others. Joey stressed that the intention behind jokes matters; playful humor can bring people together, but if jokes become mean, they can push people away.

TikTok works as a lively stage where users constantly balance being seen, meeting audience expectations, and dealing with generational differences, trying to find connection while also feeling the pressure of being online.

5. Discussions

5.1 Reinterpreting Cringe and Generational Mockery on TikTok

This research aimed to find out how humor and mockery, especially the idea of cringe, shape the relationship between Gen Z and millennials on TikTok. The main question was: How does TikTok's platform influence the way generational mockery and cringe humor are created, understood, and shared among Gen Z and millennials?

TikTok's special setup, fast-moving videos, a smart algorithm, and popular visual trends, makes it easy for generational jokes and mockery to spread. Unlike older types of generational humor, which were often slower and more private, TikTok's speed and wide reach make cringe moments quickly visible to many people. This means TikTok is not just a place where these jokes happen, but it actually helps create and spread them.

From the interviews, it became clear that cringe is both a personal feeling and a shared cultural signal. Both Gen Z and millennials feel cringe when someone breaks social norms or tries too hard to act like another generation. But because TikTok's algorithm pushes content that gets strong reactions, these awkward or embarrassing moments are seen by more people, talked about, and turned into inside jokes or stereotypes about certain age groups.

Participants said that TikTok's design encourages users to exaggerate generational habits for laughs, which can make it hard to tell if a joke is friendly or mean. For example, when millennials try to use Gen Z slang or copy trends, Gen Z users sometimes call it cringe, which can make the gap between generations feel bigger, even though it also creates chances for

interaction. This kind of teasing happens on other platforms too, but TikTok's features make it happen faster and more publicly.

The interviews also showed that some people see cringe humor as a way to connect, by laughing at awkward moments together or making fun of their own group, while others feel left out or even hurt by it. The same joke can feel friendly to one person and mean to another, depending on who is watching and how they feel about their group. This mix of feelings is a big part of TikTok's culture, where humor, identity, and group lines are always shifting and are made even stronger by the platform's algorithms.

In short, these findings show that TikTok's design and culture turn cringe from a simple feeling of embarrassment into a strong tool for both bringing generations together and pushing them apart. The platform doesn't just show content, it shapes how people act, joke, and see themselves and others in the online world.

5.2 From Psychological Reflex to Cultural Practice

The feeling of cringe often starts as a quick, automatic reaction when we see something awkward or embarrassing, especially on social media. This reaction is a natural part of being human, a kind of 'social pain' or secondhand embarrassment that we feel even though we are not the ones directly involved. For example, when someone on TikTok tries too hard to fit in or acts in a way that seems out of place for their age group, viewers may instantly feel uncomfortable, grimace, or want to look away. This is a bottom-up response: our brains and bodies react before we even think about it.

But on TikTok, this personal feeling quickly turns into something bigger: a shared cultural signal. When many people react to the same video and comment that it's cringe, it becomes a way to draw lines between groups, like Gen Z and millennials. What starts as a private feeling is turned into a public label, helping people decide who is "in" or "out" of the group. This is reinforced by TikTok's design: the platform's algorithm pushes content that gets strong reactions, whether it's laughter, embarrassment, or even shaming. As a result, videos that make people cringe are more likely to go viral, and the idea of what is cringe spreads quickly within and between generations.

Research shows that cringe is closely linked to empathy, we feel it more when we can imagine ourselves in the other person's shoes, and it can even help us understand others better. However, when cringe is used as a way to shame or exclude, it can also lead to cyberbullying and reinforce negative stereotypes, especially against people who are seen as different or outside the norm.

In summary, on TikTok, cringe moves from being just a personal, automatic feeling to a powerful cultural practice. It helps shape group boundaries and influences how generations see and treat each other online. The platform doesn't just show us cringe moments, it helps create and spread them, turning a simple reflex into a social tool that can both connect and divide.

5.3 The Ambiguity of Humor: Bonding and Distancing

Humor on TikTok plays a complex role in shaping relationships between Gen Z and millennials. Many participants said that generational jokes and playful teasing often help people feel like part of a group, especially when they understand the references or share similar

experiences. Laughing together at exaggerated stereotypes or awkward moments can create a sense of belonging and mutual understanding.

However, this same humor can also make others feel excluded or uncomfortable. What one group finds funny, another might see as forced, awkward, or even insulting. For example, when Gen Z users make fun of millennial trends, some millennials may feel targeted or misunderstood, rather than included in the joke. This thin line between bonding and distancing is a key feature of humor on TikTok, where content spreads quickly and reaches large, mixed audiences.

Participants described moments where humor brought them closer to others who shared their views, but also times when it highlighted differences and reinforced group boundaries. The exaggeration and mockery that make these jokes entertaining can also risk deepening stereotypes and creating tension between generations. As demonstrated in Jesus et al.'s (2022) study of cringe psychology, this ambiguity is what makes humor about generational differences so compelling and sometimes uncomfortable: it can invite empathy and self-awareness, but it can just as easily underline division and misunderstanding.

Overall, the findings suggest that humor on TikTok is a double-edged sword. It has the power to bring people together through shared laughter, but it can also push them apart when jokes cross the line from playful to personal. This ongoing tension is central to how both Gen Z and millennials experience and negotiate their identities on the platform.

5.4 Cringe Humor as a Bridge: Openness and Empathy

The results of this study show that cringe humor on TikTok is not only about making fun of others or drawing lines between groups. While it often highlights differences and can make people feel left out, it also has the ability to help users see that generational stereotypes are often exaggerated. When people approach cringe humor with self-awareness and an open mind, it can actually help bridge gaps between Gen Z and millennials rather than widen them.

Some participants noted that sharing and laughing at awkward moments together can help people realize that everyone, no matter their age, sometimes feels out of place online. This shared experience can build understanding and show that generational differences are often more about trends and habits than real divisions. Research supports this idea, suggesting that cringe can move from a simple reaction to a social tool that encourages empathy and connection (Jesus et al., 2022).

If more users and creators on TikTok used cringe humor to invite others in and question stereotypes, the platform could become a space for more open conversations and genuine connections. Instead of reinforcing barriers, humor could help people see what they have in common. This more positive approach to digital humor could help create a culture of respect and understanding, making TikTok a place for both fun and learning about each other.

5.5 Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides meaningful insights into how humor and mockery shape generational relationships on TikTok, several limitations should be considered when interpreting the results.

One of the main limitations is the sample size and composition. The number of participants was small, and the group was not evenly split between Gen Z and millennials. Most of the interviewees were from Gen Z, which may have led to results that are more representative of this generation's perspectives and less so of millennials. A more balanced sample would have allowed for a clearer comparison between the two groups and might have revealed different patterns or attitudes.

Another important limitation is the sampling method. All participants were people I already knew personally, rather than being randomly selected. This introduces the possibility of selection bias, as I may have chosen individuals who I thought would be willing to participate or who I expected to have certain views on the topic. Additionally, because the interviews were conducted within my own social circle, participants may have felt less inclined to share negative or controversial opinions, or may have been influenced by their relationship with me as the interviewer.

The length of the interviews may also have affected the quality of the data. Some interviews were quite long, which could have led to participant fatigue or less thoughtful responses toward the end. Shorter, more focused interviews or the use of follow-up questions in a second round might have helped maintain engagement and gather richer data.

A further limitation relates to the selection of TikTok videos used in the interviews. I chose four videos based on my own perception of what was mocking or cringe-worthy, although

I did try to select videos that had comments or reactions from other users agreeing with my view. However, my personal sense of what is cringe may not be universal, and there is a risk that my own tastes and biases shaped the direction of the interviews and the responses I received. Including a wider range of videos, or asking participants to bring their own examples, could have provided a more diverse set of perspectives.

The scope of the research was also limited by time constraints. The project was conducted from January to June, which restricted the number of participants I could recruit and the amount of data I could collect and analyze. With more time, it would have been possible to conduct a more extensive digital discourse analysis, examining broader trends and conversations about generational mockery and humor across TikTok and possibly other platforms.

Another limitation is related to my academic background. As my main field of study is not psychology, my understanding of the psychological aspects of cringe, embarrassment, and group identity is limited. While I tried to engage with relevant literature, my interpretations may lack some of the depth or nuance that a researcher with a psychology background could provide.

Despite these limitations, this study opens several promising directions for future research. First, future studies should aim to recruit a larger and more balanced sample of Gen Z and millennial participants, ideally using random or stratified sampling methods to reduce bias. It would also be valuable to include participants from a wider range of backgrounds, including different countries, cultures, and social groups, to explore how experiences of cringe and generational humor vary across contexts.

Further research could also expand beyond TikTok to examine whether similar patterns of generational mockery and bonding appear on other social media platforms, such as Instagram,

YouTube, or Reddit. A longitudinal approach, following changes in generational humor and attitudes over time, could provide insights into how digital culture and group identities evolve.

Finally, collaborating with researchers from psychology, sociology, or media studies could deepen the analysis of the emotional and social effects of cringe humor. More extensive digital discourse analysis, perhaps using computational methods to track trends and viral content, would also help to build a fuller picture of how generational mockery is produced, shared, and received in online spaces.

By addressing these limitations and exploring these new directions, future research can build on the findings of this study and contribute to a richer understanding of humor, identity, and connection in the digital age.

6. Conclusion

This thesis set out to understand how humor and mockery shape the relationship between Generation Z and millennials on TikTok. The findings reveal a digital landscape where jokes, memes, and playful teasing do far more than entertain, they actively build and redraw the boundaries of generational identity. For Gen Z, humor is a tool for bonding, a way to signal belonging, and a coping mechanism for the fast pace and chaos of online life. Millennials, meanwhile, often find themselves both the subject and the audience of these jokes, sometimes laughing along, other times feeling pushed to the margins by stereotypes that no longer fit.

The research demonstrates that cringe and mockery online are not only about making fun of others, they play a significant role in how individuals form connections, establish boundaries, and interpret one another within digital environments. On TikTok, the distinction between playful teasing and feelings of exclusion is often subtle, and the same humorous content can either foster a sense of belonging or contribute to the generational gap, depending on the audience and their interpretation. Due to TikTok's quick content and algorithm-driven exposure, these generational jokes and trends become increasingly prominent and become of a greater influence than ever before.

However, the findings reveal that the story is not solely about separation. Insights from interviews, TikTok video analysis, and comment trends indicate that many, especially within Gen Z, actively use self-irony and openness, employing humor to question stereotypes and welcome others into the conversation. When generational mockery is approached with self-awareness and empathy, it has the potential to serve as a bridge instead of a barrier, allowing people to

recognize the shared humanity beneath online trends and to appreciate the unique qualities of each group.

Ultimately, the shape of the digital world depends on the choices and attitudes of its users. As TikTok and similar platforms continue to change, so will the ways different generations communicate, joke, and define themselves online. The real challenge and opportunity lie in using humor not just as a tool for defense or criticism, but as a language for understanding, growth, and meaningful connection. **If people can learn to laugh together rather than just at each other, the generational divide might transform into a space for creativity, empathy, and collective joy.**

Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Questions

Part 1: General – Getting to Know the Participant

- Age, background
- Do you use social media?
- What platforms do you use?
- What do you use social media for?
- How often/for how long at once?
- When did you start to use them? Was there any fluctuation in your trend, maybe you used it less/more during a specific period of time or life status?
- Did you notice that the way you use social media has changed?

Part 2: Topic of Generations

- Do you feel like people from your generation use social media differently than others?
- Can you describe what you think is “typical” behavior for your generation online and how it might differ from younger or older users?
- Have you ever felt incompetent or stupid in comparison to other Internet users?
- Have you ever felt out of place online because of your age or the kind of content you like or share? Or did you ever notice that others around you experience that?

Part 3: Topic of Mockery

- How would you describe the term ‘cringe’? [in the context of social media]

- Have you ever come across videos that made you cringe or feel second hand awkwardness? Can you describe what kind of content that was?
- What do you think makes one video cringe over the other online?
- Have you ever seen content where one generation is being mocked by another (like Gen Z making fun of millennials)? What did you think about it?

Part 4: TikTok Video Examples

Video 1: [\[TikTok Link 1\]](#)

Video 2: [\[TikTok Link 2\]](#)

Video 3: [\[TikTok Link 3\]](#)

Video 4: [\[TikTok Link 4\]](#)

- What is happening in the video? What's your first reaction to this video?
- Who do you think this video is speaking to, and who is being made fun of?
- Does it feel like this kind of humor brings people together or pushes people apart?
- Would this kind of joke offend you or someone you know?

Part 5: Reflection

- Have you ever felt judged or excluded online because of your age or content preferences?
- When someone calls something cringe, do you think it's more about the content or about who's posting it?
- Do you think the gap between generations online will grow, or will people find new ways to connect across those differences?

- What's one thing you wish people from other generations understood better about how you use the internet?

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