Is it Giving Gen-Z? A Survey on Knowledge of LGBT+ Slang Across Age Groups

Vincent N. Mariani (vmariani@udel.edu)

Background

- Age-based differences in language are well attested [1, 2, 9, 10, 17].
- Some factors driving age-based variation: Vernacular reorganization [11, 15], community pressure [4, 5, 8, 13], sociocultural situation [7].
- There have been few studies on familiarity with LGBT+ language based on age, and the most recent similar survey did not include those born after 1999 [14].
  - Morgan primarily dealt with Lesbian slang,

The Question

1. Anecdotally, I observe that individuals near my age (23) frequently use LGBT+-associated terms[1] like *slay* and *it's giving*.
2. As a member of the LGBT+ community, my POV may be biased.
3. Therefore, I decided to empirically test this observation:

  Research Question: Do younger individuals have more familiarity with LGBT+ language than older individuals?

Methods

- Data was collected with an online survey based partly on Morgan's (2017) study [14].
- Twelve terms were presented to respondents: *(it's) giving, tea, (serving) cunt, -ussy/bussy, slay, bottom, twink, icon, kiki, (throw) shade, femme,* and *butch*.
- Respondents were presented with the terms and asked to:
  1. Rate how familiar they were with the term (from "not at all familiar" to "extremely familiar")
  2. Provide a definition
  3. State where they may have seen/heard the term previously.
- Provided definitions were coded as a match or mismatch to commonly available definitions as of Jan 2024.[2]
  - Blank responses were coded as mismatches.
- Raw values for self-rate and definition-matched familiarity were analyzed using 5 (age group[3]) × 2 (LGBT+ identity) mixed effects models in R [16]
  - Self-rated familiarity was analyzed using a cumulative link model [6]; Definition-matched familiarity was analyzed using a logistic model [3].
  - Age was helmert coded (i.e., each contrast level compared a given age group to all older groups)
  - Random effects for participant and item were included with the simplest structure supported by the data [12].

Results

- The survey yielded 397 complete responses

Self-Rated Familiarity

- The 18-24 age group and 25-34 age groups rated themselves significantly more familiar than the groups older than them (18-24: OR = 3.25, SE = 0.54, z = 2.09, p = 0.036; 25-34: OR = 3.49, SE = 0.42, z = 2.97, p = 0.003) .
- LGBT+ respondents rated themselves as significantly more familiar than non-LGBT+ respondents (OR = 5.22, SE = 0.34, z = 4.84, p <.001)

Definition-Matched Familiarity

- The 25-34 age group had significantly higher match rates than the groups older than them (OR = 2.01, SE = 0.35, z = 1.99, p = 0.047)
- The 18-24 group had significantly *lower* match rates than older groups (OR = 0.51, SE = 0.32, z = -2.07, p = 0.039)
- LGBT+ participants had significantly higher match rates than non-LGBT+ respondents (OR = 3.78, SE = 0.31, z = 4.32, p <.001)
- Interactions indicate that LGBT+ respondents in the 35-44 and 45-54 age groups had a significantly higher difference in match rate when compared to the older groups (35-44: OR = 3.67, SE = 0.65, z = 2.00, p = 0.045; 45-54: OR = 9.64, SE = 0.93, z = 2.42, p = 0.015).

I find that there is a significant effect of age on self-reported familiarity for individuals born between 1990-2006, and a significant increase in providing readily available definitions for individuals born between 1990 – 2000 when compared to older individuals.

A Note on Race

- Much of the LBGT+ lexicon originates in Black communities such as ballroom, vogue, drag, etc.
  - As such, the sample's racial bias (88% White, 4% Black) may weaken the interpretive power of the results. Interviews with Black individuals were attempted, but recruitment failed.
- Participants were not explicitly told about the origins of many of the terms in AAE. Some participants did mention this origin:
  - Black English, culture, and communities were mentioned in approximately 1% (n=79) of definition and source responses, and about 10% (n = 43) of respondents mentioned this in the final "general comments" question on the survey.
  - *Giving*, *tea*, *cunt*, *-ussy*, *slay*, *bottom*, *kiki*, *shade*, and *butch* were identified as having Black origins; *Giving*, *tea*, and *shade* were most commonly mentioned (n = 12, 16, 22)

Self Rate Scores by Comparison Group
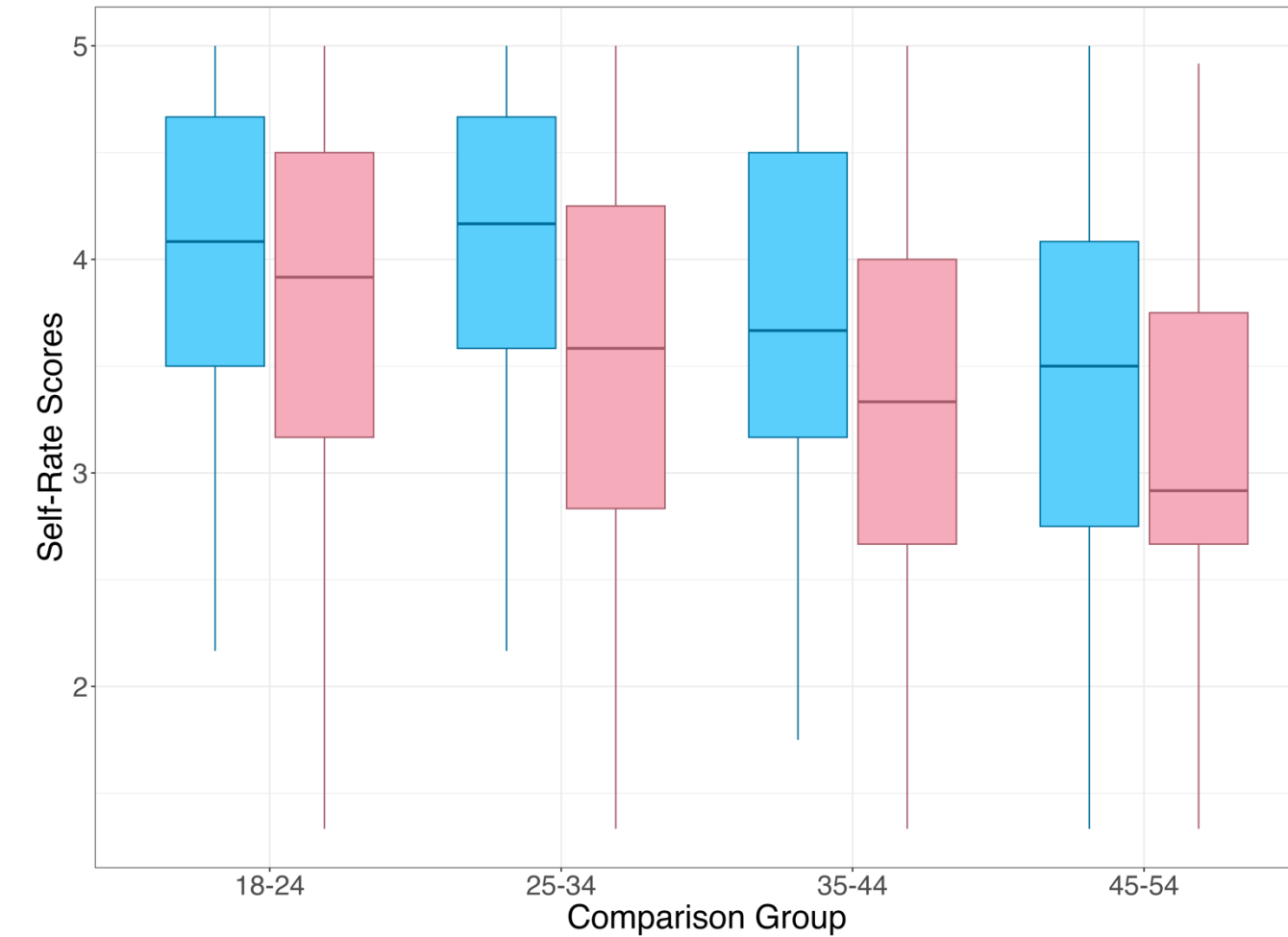
Match Rates by Age Group
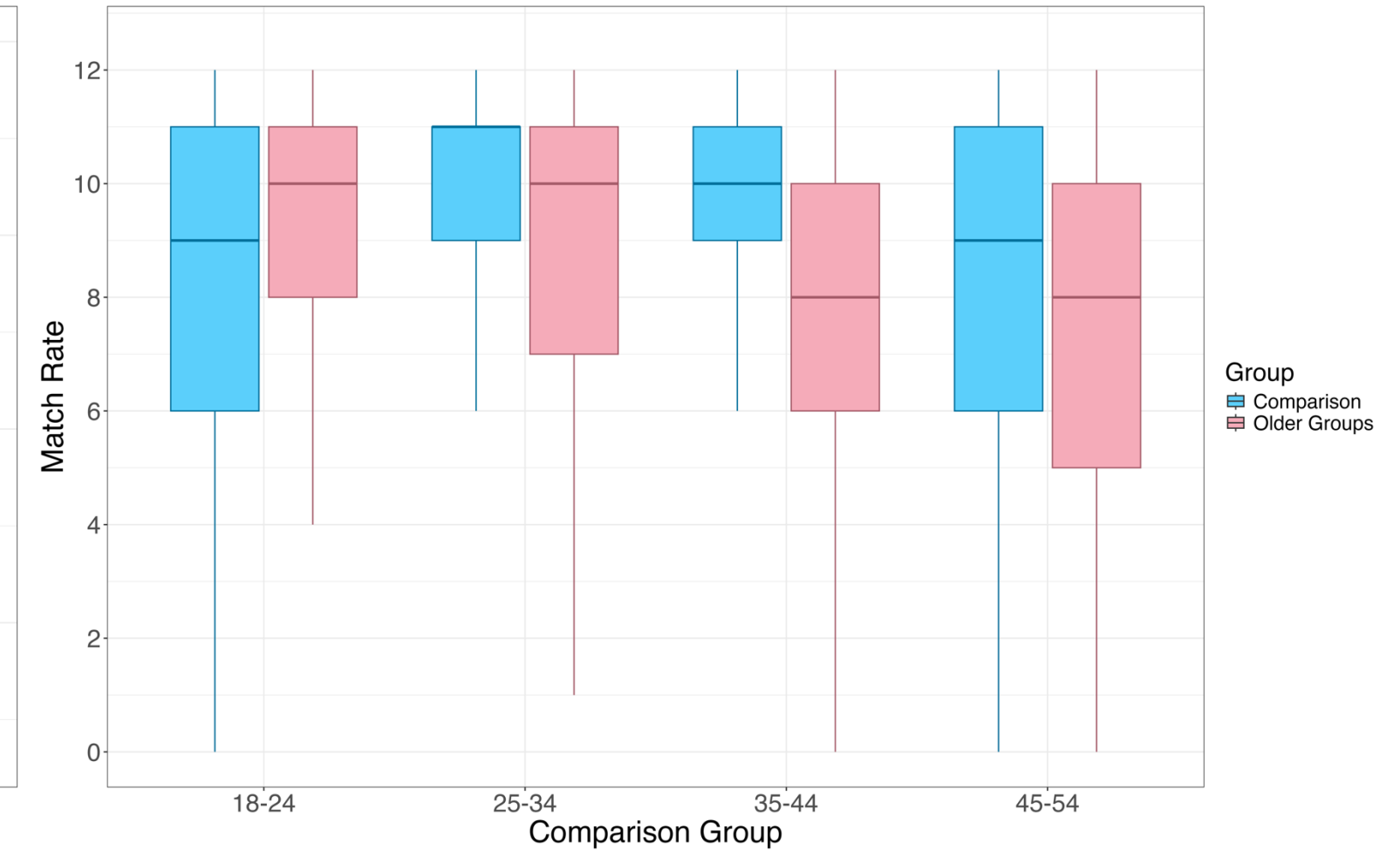
Discussion

- From the data collected, I conclude that younger participants are more likely to feel more familiar with the 12 terms, and that participants between the ages of 25 and 34 are more likely to provide definitions that are consistent with those found online in early 2024.
- I interpret this as a change in attitude regarding LGBT+ terms, with individuals between the ages of 18-34 reporting increased familiarity with the terms.
  - The lower match rate for the 18-24 group may indicate that commonly found definitions as of early 2024 are inconsistent with the terms' meaning in the youngest age group
- In addition to numerical results presented here, the open-ended responses from the survey provide a large corpus of commentary on the LGBT+ lexicon and how Americans come into contact with these terms.

Notes

1. An anonymous reviewer pointed out that *slang* can carry a negative connotation. The original study title referred to these terms as slang, as it is a category familiar to respondents, but I avoid such characterization elsewhere.
2. In no way is this meant to imply that these definitions are "correct" and that other usages are "incorrect".
3. Participants originally chose from 6 groups. The 55-64 and 65+ groups were combined due to small sample size.

Acknowledgements

References

[1] Bailey, G. (2004). Real and Apparent Time. In J. K. Chambers, P. Trudgill, & N. Schilling-Estes (Eds.), *The Handbook of Language Variation and Change* (1st ed., pp. 312–332). Wiley. [2] Bailey, G., et al. (1991). The apparent time construct. *Language Variation and Change*, 3(3), 241–264. [3] Bates, D., et al. (2015). Fitting Linear Mixed-Effects Models Using **lme4**. *Journal of Statistical Software*, 67(1). [4] Cedergren, H. J. (1989). The spread of language change: Verifying inferences of linguistic diffusion. In P. H. Lowenberg (Ed.), *Language Spread and Language Policy: Issues, Implications, and Case Studies* (pp. 41–59). [5] Chambers, J. K. (2003). *Sociolinguistic theory: Linguistic variation and its social significance* (2nd ed.). Blackwell. [6] Christensen, R. H. B. (2024). *ordinal—Regression Models for Ordinal Data* [Computer software]. [7] Dubois, S., & Horvath, B. M. (1998). Let's tink about dat: Interdental fricatives in Cajun English. *Language Variation and Change*, 10(3), 245–261. [8] Holmes, J., & Wilson, N. (2022). Gender and age. In *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics* (6th ed.). Routledge. [9] Labov, W. (1963). The Social Motivation of a Sound Change. WORD, 19(3), 273–309. [10] Labov, W. (1966). *The social stratification of English in New York City*. Center for Applied Ling. [11] Labov, W. (2001). *Principles of linguistic change: Volume 2: Social Factors* (Vol. 2). Wiley-Blackwell. [12] Matuschek, H., et al. (2017). Balancing Type I error and power in linear mixed models. *Journal of Memory and Language*, 94, 305–315. [13] Milroy, L. (1980). *Language and social networks*. B. Blackwell. [14] Morgan, T. (2017). *Lesbian lingo: Slang terminology in English and Spanish spoken by lesbian communities in the United States*. DePaul University. [15] Payne, A. C. (1980). Factors controlling the acquisition of the Philadelphia dialect by out-of-state children. In W. Labov (Ed.), *Locating language in time and space*. Academic Press. [16] R Core Team. (2024). *R: A language and Environment for Statistical Computing* [Computer software]. R Foundation for Statistical Computing. [17] Tagliamonte, S. A. (2012). *Variationist sociolinguistics: Change, observation, interpretation*. Wiley-Blackwell.