Keeping up with Hollywood's Valley Girls: A Lifespan Study Exploring the Kardashian Sisters' Use of Traditional and Non-Traditional Likes

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This paper looks at traditional and non-traditional (stigmatised) variations of *like* through a 10-year longitudinal panel study using the readily available speech of reality stars Kim, Khloe, and Kourtney Kardashian. With this unique dataset, this paper compares their use of traditional and non-traditional *likes* and looks at possible patterns to further understand age-based correlations of these features. An analysis of the data shows a relatively stable trend in their use of non-traditional *likes*, supporting theories that suggest the feature is not subject to the lifespan change associated with age-grading. Speech accommodation theory is proposed as an explanation for the patterns found.

1 Introduction

The incredibly versatile *like* fulfils many different grammatical functions and has various different meanings. Standard, traditional uses of *like* are as a verb, noun, adverb, conjunction, or suffix (D'Arcy 2007). More non-standard, non-traditional forms are the quotative *like*, introducing direct speech, and the discourse marker and particle *like*, supposedly randomly inserted into sentences (D'Arcy 2007). The history of these non-traditional *likes* is not exactly known, although it is often suggested that they are recent additions to the English language and were introduced and popularised in California, with the so-called "Valley Girls" (D'Arcy 2007). D'Arcy (2007) partly confirms this, writing that linguists suspect the different kinds of *like* have different origins. The discourse marker *like*, for example, is thought to have been popularised among counterculture groups in New York City in the 1950s, whereas the quotative use of *like* is thought to have been introduced sometime later in California. These new variants were used as a way to construct distinct identities and associate with certain social groups.

One point of discussion concerning the use of *like* as a discourse marker, discourse particle, and quotative—the non-traditional *likes*—has been whether these features are age-graded: for example, whether the features are more prominent in the speech of young adults than in that of older speakers. D'Arcy (2007) writes that the discourse particle *like* is not age-graded, while Buchstaller (2015) finds evidence that the quotative *like* is age-graded, with speakers entering middle adulthood using the quotative *like* less than speakers of younger ages. To the author's knowledge, no study has considered the use of non-traditional *likes* longitudinally in a panel of speakers. It could be useful to conduct a study like this, as it can provide valuable data towards understanding the age-based correlations of non-traditional forms of *like*. Additionally, since there have been few recent studies on attitudes towards these forms of *like*, it can be useful to take this opportunity to look at the differing rates of use between traditional and non-traditional forms of *like* throughout a person's life, as these choices, subconscious or not, can indicate the existence and knowledge of positive or negative attitudes concerning these *likes*. This information can be used to challenge or support any existing theories on the status of these variables in society.

Since real-time panel studies are difficult and time-consuming to set up and conduct, researchers have made use of radio, television, and other modern media, such as YouTube (Lee 2017) for their studies, as these media have made years of individuals' recorded speech readily available. As a result, there has often been research on celebrities, of whom there is a lot of such material. Following this trend, this paper will look at three modern celebrities in a real-time panel study: Kim, Khloe, and Kourtney Kardashian, who star in their reality show titled "Keeping Up with the Kardashians".

Hated by some and loved by others, the show has been on the air since 2007. It revolves around the Kardashian sisters and their immediate family and friends, all of whom are central to its storylines. The show portrays the drama the family goes through, along with their lavish lifestyle, and is often criticised for being "mindless entertainment" (Kelly 2011). The speakers that will be studied in this paper are the three Kardashian sisters: Kourtney (b.1979), Kim (b.1980), and Khloe (b.1984). They were born in California to attorney Robert Kardashian and "momager" Kris Jenner. Having grown up in Beverly Hills, they have lived among Hollywood's rich and famous their entire lives (Cast of Keeping Up with the Kardashians n.d.) and are said to be stereotypical examples of "Valley Girls".

"Valley Girls" are defined as being a social group of young, upper-class white women, residing in California (D'Onofrio 2015). They are often stereotyped as "materialistic and superficial" (D'Onofrio 2015:243). "Valleyspeak" or "Valspeak" is the vernacular associated with these Valley Girls. It is a register that is said to

have left its mark on the Californian vernacular, sometimes even on the General American variety. Classic examples of elements of Valspeak are the excessive use of the word *like* (Siegel 2002) or the intonation pattern known as "uptalk", a term often used to describe "the rising intonation at the end of declarative sentences, […] the tendency for people to make statements that sound like questions" (Warren 2016:i). Arguably, the most-discussed, most well-known feature of Valspeak is the former, specifically the use of *like* as a quotative, discourse marker, or discourse particle. Considering this, the Kardashian sisters—supposed classic Valley Girls—are interesting subjects for a study on the use of non-traditional *likes* alongside traditional forms, and what patterns they exhibit concerning these *likes* in their speech throughout their lifespan.

2 Background

2.1 Overview of *Like*

D'Arcy (2007) writes that certain forms of *like* have negative associations, while others do not. There are the "traditional" *likes*, such as the verb, noun, adverb, conjunction, or suffix, which have been incorporated into standard English and are not viewed negatively. The newer, more non-traditional uses of *like*, however, are a different case. These newer uses include quotative *likes* (also referred to as *be like*) that indicate reported speech (1), and discourse markers or particles, the *likes* that are often perceived as being random, or without semantic meaning (2 and 3).

(1) He **was like**, "Yeah so I'm going out with Clara now". And then she sounded really disappointed; she **was like**, "Yeah she's really smart". So then he **was like**, "I kind of feel bad, but then again, I don't". (D'Arcy 2007:387).

(2) **Like** if you're doing your undergrad, no big deal. **Like** it's not that bad, but **like** I'm in a professional school. I want to be a professional. (D'Arcy 2007:387)

(3) He looks like he's **like** twelve or **like** eight. (D'Arcy 2007:387)

Attitudes about the discourse marker or particle *like*, D'Arcy (2007) writes, suggest that it is an empty word without meaning and that it is only a recent addition to the English language. These things, she continues, are far from the truth. In many cases, the discourse marker or particle *like* is not meaningless because it replaces words such as "I mean" and "you know". The popular opinion stating that primarily Valley Girls use the more non-traditional variants of *like* (the discourse marker, discourse particle, and quotative *like*) in speech is not true, either, according to D'Arcy (2007). Indeed, it is popular across the board: with men and women, young and old, Valley Girl or not.

Earlier research by Siegel (2002) comes to similar conclusions. She confirms that the discourse marker or particle *like* is not empty and that the typical use of this particular kind of *like* is as a filler, not only replacing utterances like "ah", "uh", and "well", but also longer words such as "frankly", "obviously", and "so to speak". Moreover, Siegel (2002) writes that, though these forms of *like* seem to originate with Valley Girls, they have since spread to the rest of the United States and even the world.

Despite the fact that the non-traditional *like* is widespread in the English language, its perceived status does not seem to have improved. Hesson and Shellgren (2015) write that *like*, specifically *like* used as a discourse marker, is still highly stigmatised, that the negative attitudes towards it are still present among English speakers, and that it is still often associated with Valley Girls. The assumptions speakers make about the variable are also connected to this: in Hesson and Shellgren's (2015) matched-guise experiment, participants exhibited an automatic negative reaction to use of the discourse marker *like*, rating the speaker lower on both intelligence and friendliness. After this automatic response, the friendliness rating rose, while intelligence ratings remained the same. These results support past studies in which speakers with increased use of *like* as both a discourse marker and particle were rated lower on education, intelligence, and how interesting they sounded, while they were rated higher on attractiveness, overall happy mood, friendliness, and success. It is evidence of ever-present negative attitudes towards and stereotypical associations with the discourse marker *like*.

This is confirmed once more by a 2016 article in the Atlantic (McWhorter 2016), in which the aforementioned attitudes and assumptions about *like* among the general public are summarised: "So deeply reviled, so hard on the ears of so many, so new, and with such an air of the unfinished, of insecurity and even dimness, the new *like* is hard to, well, love" (McWhorter 2016). It is thus undeniable that these negative attitudes and stereotypes regarding non-traditional *likes* are still present in today's society, while traditional *likes* are not stigmatised in this way since they are long embedded in standard English (D'Arcy 2007).

2.2 Lifespan and Community-wide Change

Another assumption about non-traditional *likes* as described by D'Arcy (2007) is that they are age-graded, most often used in adolescence, and discarded or replaced by other, more standard-like variants as the speaker grows older. It would be logical to assume that non-traditional *like* variants would indeed be age-graded, since the phenomenon of age-grading can be caused by the stigma around a certain variant. As a result, a speaker discards or replaces the stigmatised variant with a less or non-stigmatised one as they age (Meyerhoff 2011). Because of the present stigma associated with non-traditional *likes*, it is likely that the variant will be substituted by another variant later in a speaker's life.

D'Arcy (2007) presents evidence to the contrary for the discourse particle *like* in North American English. She writes that while younger speakers use this feature much more often, it is used by speakers of all ages. Furthermore, she points out that this difference in use is likely not due to age-grading, but due to language change in progress. This seems to be no different for the quotative *like*: Buchstaller (2015) sees a community-wide trend in increased use of this *like* in the Northeast of England. She has, however, found evidence of age-grading of this variable: speakers entering middle adulthood seem to be replacing the quotative *like* with traditional ways of reporting speech, due to its associated stereotypes.

In any case, age-grading cannot happen without lifespan change. According to Meyerhoff (2011:152), lifespan change is a "change to a speaker's pronunciation or grammar that take[s] place after the critical period". This critical period takes place around puberty. Lifespan change is different from age-grading, as it usually follows a community-wide pattern of language change, while age-grading can occur without any effect on the larger community of speakers. Meyerhoff writes that, whereas lifespan change in pronunciation is highly restricted by, for instance, the standard within the community and the abilities of the speakers themselves, it has been observed that lifespan change for vocabulary can happen often. Lifespan change for the use of *like* is thus very plausible.

Based on findings by D'Arcy (2007) and Siegel (2002), I hypothesised that the Kardashians' use of both traditional and non-traditional *likes* would not change much during the years analysed in this study, as quotative and discourse feature *like* were already widespread during that time span. I also did not expect to see patterns of age-grading, not even for the quotative *like*, because the Kardashian sisters differ in several respects from the participants in Buchstaller's (2015) study that did show age-grading. They are relatively young in the data I consider, which is limited to a 10-year time span. They are also invested in portraying a family persona that aligns with the social associations of the non-traditional *like*.

Indeed, these data are produced in a setting that is different from a naturalistic one: a reality TV show. As such, the speakers may be expected to adjust their speech according to the way they perceive their audience, either moving towards or away from the speech patterns associated with that audience, something that Bell (1984) termed audience design. The speakers may equally be expected to portray a specific identity through language, regardless of perceived audience. Speaker design theory suggests that speakers will change their speech according to the image they want to exude (Coupland 2001). An example of this comes from Coupland (2001), who noted that radio hosts adjusted their speech according to how "local" they wished to sound. Both of these speech accommodation theories suggest that the Kardashians could be adjusting their speech patterns according to their preferred image. Thus, any changes in use of non-traditional *likes* could mean that they are reinforcing their association with the presumed characteristics of Valley Girls, or distancing themselves from that image.

3 Methodology

This paper reports on a real-time panel study spanning 10 years. It analyses the speech of sisters Kim, Khloe, and Kourtney Kardashian, focusing on their use of the word *like* in its different forms. To differentiate between the different *likes* they produce, categories were created, drawing inspiration from D'Arcy's (2007) descriptions of the different kinds of *like*: verb, noun, adverb, conjunction, suffix, quotative, discourse marker, and discourse particle. As there was going to be a comparison between the rates of use of traditional and non-traditional forms of *like*, the categories needed to clearly distinguish these two kinds of *like*.

Components of the speech categories can be seen in Table 1, along with examples. Discourse marker *like* and discourse particle *like* were combined into one "discourse" category. Quotative *like*, including *be like* and plain *like*, formed its own category. The comparative *like* also formed its own category, which included traditional uses (conjunction, preposition). The final category included only traditional forms of *like* as well: adverb, verb, or accompanying a verb. *Like* as a noun never appeared and *like* as a suffix was excluded, since this variant is part of a word and this study focused on likes that are used on their own.

Table 1: Examples of the variations of *like* for each category

Category	Variation of *like*	Example
1 Discourse *Non-traditional*	Discourse marker	So **like** things are coming out about Caitlyn's book. (Kim Kardashian 2017)
	Discourse particle	[It was nice] To walk the streets and **like** not be bombarded. (Khloe Kardashian 2017)
2 Quotative *Non-traditional*	Quotative	And I'd **be like**, "I got you". (Kim Kardashian 2009)
3 Comparative *Traditional*	Conjunction	You guys, don't I look **like**- uhm … **like** I'm drunk? (Kourtney Kardashian 2017)
	Preposition	She looks nothing **like** her mother. (Oxford Learner's Dictionary n.d.)
4 As or with a verb *Traditional*	Adverb	I feel **like** they must be dirty. (Kim Kardashian 2015)
	Verb	He told me that … he still **likes** your company. (Kourtney Kardashian 2015)
Excluded *Traditional*	Noun	He grew up with the **likes** … of all great fighters. (D'Arcy 2007:392)
	Suffix	I went, "[mumbling]" or something like stroke-**like**. (D'Arcy 2007:392)

The best way to study the Kardashians' speech patterns is by watching episodes of their family's reality show "Keeping Up with the Kardashians", in which they play a major role. As of 5 December 2017, there were 14 seasons of "Keeping Up with the Kardashians" (Internet Movie Database [IMDb] n.d./a). Six episodes from different seasons were selected for this study, all of them 2 years apart. As such, an episode of each of the following seasons was included in the study: Season 1 (2007), Season 3 (2009), Season 6 (2011), Season 8 (2013), Season 10 (2015), and Season 14 (2017) (IMDb n.d./a). In the interest of consistency, the first episode of each season was selected.

Episodes vary greatly in length, ranging from 20 to 45 minutes, including commercial breaks, previews, "recaps", or scenes that did not feature any of the three sisters. Thus, 10 minutes of each episode were coded, with each sister appearing in at least two scenes per episode. Subsequently, all instances of the Kardashian sisters' use of *like* were coded. Each sister's speaking time in each episode was also tracked so this could be used in calculating a "use per second" rate. The amount of speech produced by each sister was roughly comparable, although Kourtney's overall speaking time was less than that of her sisters.

The samples chosen were not intentionally controlled for external factors that could influence variation, such as interlocutors, topics, and contexts of conversation, but most episodes feature the same cast and are shot in a home or family context. Context formality and interlocutors are thus expected to be relatively stable across episodes.

4 Results

The results were calculated using the number of *likes* for each of the four categories and the total speaking times, separated by year and by sister.

The results in Table 2 indicate that Khloe Kardashian increased in her use of non-traditional *like* over time. Table 2 shows that there was zero use of non-traditional variants in 2007, which is somewhat surprising, considering D'Arcy (2007) and Siegel (2002) suggested that the use of this *like* was already widespread at that time. This changed in the years after, however, when her use of discourse *like* made a steady increase, aside from a dip in 2015. In every year but 2007, non-traditional *likes* are more common in her speech than traditional *likes*.

Table 2: The variants of *like* used by Khloe Kardashian over the years

Variants of (like)	Use per second 2007	Use per second 2009	Use per second 2011	Use per second 2013	Use per second 2015	Use per second 2017
[Discourse] *Non-traditional*	0	0.04 (6)	0.06 (10)	0.07 (12)	0.008 (1)	0.03 (7)
[Quotative] *Non-traditional*	0	0	0	0	0	0.02 (4)
[Comparative] *Traditional*	0	0	0	0	0.008 (1)	0
[As or with a verb] *Traditional*	0.02 (1)	0	0	0.006 (1)	0.0	0.01 (2)

As Table 3 shows, Kim Kardashian also produces more non-traditional *likes* than traditional *likes*, again primarily the discourse *like*. This is consistent across all years. Rates of use of the non-traditional form are relatively steady across the 10-year period, aside from a sharp rise in 2017.

Table 3: The variants of *like* used by Kim Kardashian over the years

Variants of (like)	Use per second 2007	Use per second 2009	Use per second 2011	Use per second 2013	Use per second 2015	Use per second 2017
[Discourse] *Non-traditional*	0.06 (10)	0.07 (7)	0.05 (7)	0.03 (4)	0.03 (7)	0.14 (16)
[Quotative] *Non-traditional*	0	0.02 (2)	0	0	0	0
[Comparative] *Traditional*	0	0	0.007 (1)	0	0	0
[As or with a verb] *Traditional*	0	0	0	0	0.01 (3)	0

In Table 4, we see that Kourtney Kardashian produces fewer *likes* overall than her two sisters. Her highest rates of use of the non-traditional forms are comparable to her sisters' lowest rates of use. Furthermore, she shows less of a difference between the rates of use of traditional and non-traditional *likes* than observed with her sisters, especially in 2015 and 2017. Like her sisters, she shows little change across the 10-year time span. A comparison across all three tables also indicates that there is a dip in use for all three sisters in either 2013 or 2015.

Table 4: The variants of *like* used by Kourtney Kardashian over the years

Variants of (like)	Use per second 2007	Use per second 2009	Use per second 2011	Use per second 2013	Use per second 2015	Use per second 2017
[Discourse] *Non-traditional*	0.02 (1)	0.03 (1)	0.03 (1)	0	0.01 (1)	0.02 (2)
[Quotative] *Non-traditional*	0	0	0	0	0	0.01 (1)
[Comparative] *Traditional*	0	0	0	0	0	0.02 (2)
[As or with a verb] *Traditional*	0	0	0	0	0.02 (2)	0.02 (2)

5 Discussion

The data seem to confirm the hypothesis based on D'Arcy (2007) and Siegel (2002), namely, that the sisters' use of *like*, both traditional and non-traditional variants, would not change much over the course of the 10 years of this real-time panel study. In fact, the Kardashians underwent only minor changes in their use of *like* in its non-traditional forms. Thus, the sisters' data seem to support D'Arcy's (2007) theory that the discourse *like* is not fully abandoned later in life and that any correlations between age and use are likely due to a gradual community-wide change towards increased use of this feature. Nevertheless, their overall use of non-traditional *likes* is relatively low compared to the stereotypical overuse by Valley Girls, which could be indicative of the negative attitudes towards these non-traditional *likes* and a resulting aversion to the variable.

As hypothesised, there does not seem to be evidence of age-grading of the quotative *like* as was found by Buchstaller (2015), although the data are relatively sparse. Additionally, this study did not compare the total number of quotations, traditional and non-traditional, to the specific non-traditional form. This is something further research might want to consider doing. Anecdotally, however, it can be said that Kim and Khloe used the non-traditional quotative more than they did the traditional form, while Kourtney seemed more "balanced" in her use.

The rate of use of non-traditional discourse *like* does fluctuate for Khloe and Kim. These changes might be accounted for with speech accommodation theories (Bell 1984, Coupland 2001) and the associations with this particular *like* (Hesson and Shellgren 2015). A show like "Keeping Up with the Kardashians" relies heavily on the personalities of its stars, who, in general, can feel encouraged to put on characters or exaggerate their

personalities for the audience, so as to adhere to narratives that will draw in more viewers. Increases in use of non-traditional *likes*, small as they may be, could reflect the Kardashians' desire to associate with the image of Valley Girls, or some related social meaning, while decreases could indicate a wish to disassociate themselves from it.

In contrast, Kourtney's use of the discourse *like* remained low and stable. This could be because she is the only one of the three sisters to have graduated from university (Cast of Keeping Up with the Kardashians n.d.) and could thus be more aware of the negative stereotype associated with frequent use of the discourse *like.* Additionally, Kourtney has been a mother since 2009 (Murray 2018). For these reasons, she could be trying to steer herself away from the Valley Girl stereotype using speaker design (Coupland 2001), opting to exude a more "mature" image, something that is often expected from mothers and university graduates alike.

Kim experienced a dip in her use of discourse *like* in 2013. Like with Kourtney, motherhood could have influenced her decisions in what image she wanted to portray, since she gave birth to her first child that year (Murray 2018). Unlike Kourtney, however, Kim's use of the discourse *like* subsequently rose to more than double that of her starting point in 2007, seemingly unaffected by the birth of her second child in 2015 (Murray 2018). It is possible that she adjusted her speech using audience design instead (Bell 1984): with continuously growing fame, Kim could have chosen to move towards the Valley Girl stereotype to encourage growth in popularity, knowing that this method had worked for her in the past.

Khloe's case does not seem as cut and dry as that of her sisters. She was not, nor did she become, a mother between 2007 and 2017 (Murray 2018). One possible reason for her dramatic drop in 2015 could be her dealings as a business owner, like her appearances in "Kourtney and Khloe Take the Hamptons" in late 2014 and the start of 2015, in which Kourtney and Khloe set up a branch of their clothing store "Dash" in the Hamptons (IMDb n.d./b). Using speaker design (Coupland 2001), she could be trying to portray a more "mature" side of herself and lean away from the Valley Girl stereotype, as this is not often associated with the maturity or intelligence expected of a business owner (Hesson and Shellgren 2015). However, she made appearances in a show with similar goals, interlocutors, subjects, and tone—"Kourtney and Khloe Take Miami"—in 2009, 2010, and 2013 (IMDb n.d./c), years in which she did not exhibit the patterns she did in 2015. Thus, this does not seem to be enough of an explanation. Another reason for the change in her speech patterns could be her divorce, which started in late 2013 and ended in late 2016 (Bromley and Heller 2016), correlating with the decrease in non-traditional *likes* in 2015 and their increase in 2017. It could have taken her mind away from trying to portray the Valley Girl image and brought her to use the discourse *like* less.

6 Conclusion

In conclusion, there does not seem to be any drastic lifespan change occurring in each of the three sisters for non-traditional *likes*. The data seem to support theories that the discourse *like* is not age-graded, but rather a variable that is undergoing language change in progress, while they call into question hypotheses of age-grading of the non-traditional quotative *like*. However, since data were relatively sparse, this last claim should be made with caution. In general, the small fluctuations each sister exhibits could be explained by speech accommodation theory and external factors, meaning that the sisters are adjusting their speech according to the image they want to project (Coupland 2001), what they think their viewers want to see (Bell 1984), or both, and that external factors could have been influencing these decisions.

While Kim and Khloe seem to have a preference for non-traditional *likes* in their speech, Kourtney strays from the pack, as her use of the different *likes* varies and she shows more balance between her use of traditional and non-traditional *likes*. Possible explanations for this are her university education and motherhood. The latter could also be a reason for Kim to use non-traditional *likes* less in 2013 and 2015, although the subsequent increase does not seem to be consistent with this explanation. As with Kim, it could not be determined with certainty why the fluctuations in Khloe's speech occurred.

In addition to the fluctuations, the fact that the Kardashian sisters' overall use of non-traditional *likes* is relatively low compared to what is assumed to be the case for Valley Girls seems to underline the theories previously discussed, namely, those pointing to the stigmatised position of and negative attitudes towards non-traditional *likes*. Indeed, while the correlation of a higher education, motherhood, or business dealings with a low use of non-traditional *likes* per second is not necessarily causation, it does seem to show a pattern that confirms existing theories: while the use of these *likes* is established and becoming increasingly widespread, so are the negative attitudes to this use. Additionally, the characteristics associated with the variable could be, and evidently are, used by both speaker and audience to form images of themselves and others.

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