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Generational Differences in the Use of Emotional Words

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Introduction

- Extending the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis to emotions suggests that emotion words and their meaning would be dependent on culture and a group's shared worldview.
- We looked at slang words that have come in and out of vogue across generations and sought to link these to possible cultural and demographic factors.
- We studied generational differences in emotional word use by examining the slang words people of a particular generation reported using to express one of the 6 basic emotions:
 - happiness, sadness, fear, disgust, surprise, and anger.
- 5 U.S. generations were examined:
 - Digital Natives, Millennials, Generation X, Baby Boomers, and the Silent Generation.

Hypotheses

- 1) The Silent Generation would use the least amount of slang.
- 2) Digital Natives would use the most abbreviations.
- 3) Profanity would increase with younger generations.
- 4) Slang words used across generations would be a reflection of the particular popular culture of their teen years.

Methods

- 107 total participants (34 men, 73 women) were recruited through flyers; subject pool web sign-up; campus wide e-mail; word of mouth; and visits to nursing homes and assisted living locations.
- Participants represented 5 generations:
 - Digital Natives ($N=20$, $M_{age}= 18$)
 - Millennials ($N=23$, $M_{age}=21$)
 - Generation X ($N=19$, $M_{age}= 39.8$)
 - Baby Boomers ($N=20$, $M_{age}= 53.4$)
 - The Silent Generation ($N=25$, $M_{age}= 72.3$).

Methods (continued)

- All participants were interviewed for approximately 30 minutes and asked to recall slang terms they used during their teenage years to express 6 basic emotions:
 - happiness, surprise, sadness, disgust, anger, and fear.
- If a participant could not remember slang terms used, they were provided with an example word, specific to their generation (e.g. The Silent Generation was asked if they had used the term “aces”). The examples were given based upon a literature search of slang word usage in particular generations.
- The interviewer took detailed notes for every interview. When the participant gave permission, the interview was audio recorded. Approximately 2/3 of the interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Emotion Word Analysis:

- We counted the number of mentions of each emotion slang word within each generation. (Words and their derivatives were counted as one.)
- Chi-square analyses were conducted to determine whether a term appeared more for one generation than the other four.

Results and Discussion

- **Reliability Analysis:**
- Two independent coders coded 25 percent of the notes, transcripts, and audio tapes. They reported the specific words each participant mentioned. Overall there was 93.6% agreement using a word by word comparison.

Results and Discussion (continued)

- Across generations there were unique terms used (e.g. the Silent Generation used “bright-eyed and bushy tailed,” Baby Boomers used “bummer,” Generation X used “rad,” Millennials used “popping,” and Digital Natives used “hyped”).
- Certain words appeared to transcend generational lines. For example, when discussing anger, every generation except the Silent Generation used “pissed.” Other similarities included “cool” (used by 4 generations) and “gross” (used by all generations).
- The Silent Generation reported using less slang words overall. (This is depicted in Figure 5.)
- Baby Boomers had the most mentions of profanity and used words or phrases like: “What’s happening,” “hell,” “chicken,” and “wuss.”

Results and Discussion (continued)

- Generation X reported words like: “rad,” “sweet,” and “stoked.”
- Millennials used words like: “anxious,” “chill,” “popping,” and “shook.”
- Digital Natives used the most abbreviations like: “OMG.”
- Across the board, all generations used terms that referenced popular culture relevant to their specific generation--such as TV shows and music. For example: Baby Boomer’s used “What’s Happening” (from the TV show *What’s Happening*), Millennials used “popping” (featured in the song *Poppin’* by Chris Brown), and Digital Natives used “lit” (which appeared in the Wiz Khalifa song *Get Lit*).

Results and Discussion (continued)

- Based upon our chi-square analysis we found that Digital Natives and Millennials used “Oh My God” significantly more than the other 3 generations. (See Figure 6.)
- One implication is that emotion word usage could aggravate the communication difficulties that people across generations might experience (like parents and teens).
- Future research should examine how generational experiences influence present day expression of emotions.

Wordle Graphs

- Wordle graphs (Figures 1-5) that depict the most frequently mentioned words for each of the five generations. Larger print words were mentioned more frequently than smaller print words.



Figure 1: Digital Natives



Figure 2: Millennials



Figure 3: Generation X



Figure 4: Baby Boomers



Figure 5: The Silent Generation

Figure 6 shows the change in the number of individuals who mentioned the phrase “Oh My God” across generations. Note that the Digital Natives used OMG.

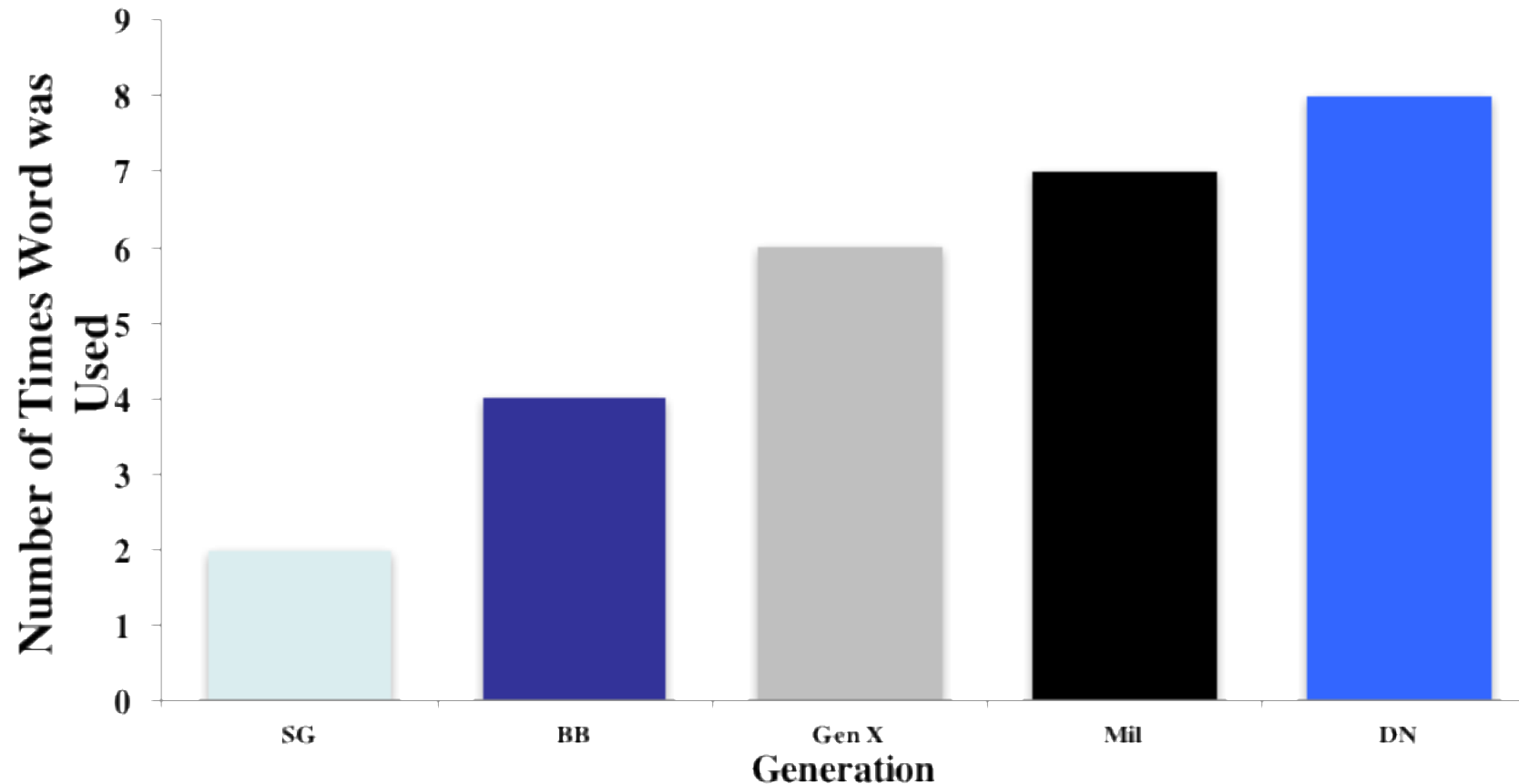


Figure 6: Usage of “Oh My God” across generations.

Google Ngram graph for the change in usage for the term “popping”



Figure 7: Google Ngram of “popping.” Depicts the frequency of the word “popping” in every word or short sentence across print sources from the 1800’s to 2000’s.

Conclusion

- Emotional terms used across the generations indicated that common slang terms for emotions were shared within a generation and reflected common culture and experiences.

Acknowledgements

- Funding was provided by the SUNY New Paltz Psychology Department, Student Association, the SUNY New Paltz RSCA, and C-STEP.

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