Interpreting Social Media Memes: Exploring Variations in Understanding Gen Z Slang Across Gen X, Gen Y and Gen Z

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ABSTRACT

This study examines meaning-making in memes, focusing on the meanings participants attribute to social media memes featuring Gen Z slang and the variations in generational interpretation. It employed a qualitative design, specifically, the photo-elicitation technique. The results revealed that participants interpret memes based on relationship dynamics, humour portrayal, and contextual relevance. The study identifies variations among the participants' interpretations in terms of semantic ambiguity, contextualization, semantic shift, and reconstruction. However, the study also revealed that Gen Y adapts well to Gen Z's language, while Gen X faces difficulties, highlighting the role of communication in bridging generational gaps.

Keywords: semantics; communication; memetic language; intergenerational; memes

INTRODUCTION

Language is the most important tool of communication that individuals have at their disposal. However, due to social, cultural, and technological factors, language is constantly changing. Different generations have their own distinct characteristics in using language and vary over time or across generations (Bozavli, 2016).

Researchers (Erickson, 2009; Francioli et al., 2023; Mahapatra et al., 2022) defined "Baby Boomers" as people who were born from 1946 to 1964 and described them as someone who witnessed different wars and the booming population and advancement of technology; "Gen X" is defined as people who were born from 1961 to 1979 and as described as latch key kids who often prefer to have a formal and direct, face-to-face communication with a concise and straightforward conversation; on the other hand, "Gen Y" or "Millennials" is defined as people who were born from 1980 to 1995 and is known to witness the excellent technology revolution. Thus, they embrace technology-driven communication through video conferencing, instant messaging, and collaboration tools, making them neutral in formal and informal language use. Lastly, "Gen Z" is defined as the people born between 1996 and 2010 and is frequently described as the most technologically adept generation. They are known as the first truly digital native generation who tend to rely on digital language learning applications and online language exchange platforms for

communication; thus, it is common for them to use informal language (Sumartono, 2023).

All these generations have their own distinct qualities and use of language, where they have their own slang that is common and familiar only to their generation. However, it is worth noting that the generation more highly connected to the social media web is Gen Z, where they create slang and memes online that are widely used.

Memes have been associated with late teens to early 20s and have asserted that it is one of the most potent weapons of young people as they show innovativeness, humour, and image of youth (Harshavardhan et al., 2019) as well as a challenging attitude which paves the way to the rapid development of the Gen Z slang (Rezeki & Sagala, 2019). Notably, Gen Z has created its own slang related to media culture (Jeresano & Carretero, 2022), and one example of this is through social media memes.

Cavalcante and de Oliveira (2020) defined a meme as a result of the viralization and intertextuality of made-up texts published on the internet, depicting everyday life and popular culture. They agreed with Chagas et al.'s (2019) description of memes, having the following characteristics: 1) consist of images that incorporate overlay text, 2) convey a humorous message or motto through the use of overlay text, which exhibits parody, irony, or jokes, 3) contains a high level of intertextuality where it may be connected to popular culture, and 4) mirrors the social realities and perspectives of the meme creator. Gleick (2011) described memes as having the power to evolve faster through social networks. It can also contain a word or phrase that may be misspelt or grammatically incorrect, which can change its interpretation through frequent sharing (Cavalcante & de Oliveira, 2020).

Chomsky (1957) proposed a challenge in language use, which is how to express an unlimited range of ideas with a limited vocabulary. One of these methods is the creation of new words to express new meanings. Moreover, Richards (2001, as cited in Dahki and Fitria, 2019) mentioned that there are four basic reasons for treating language as a social interaction tool, namely (1)language is a system for the expression of meaning; (2) the primary function of language is to allow interaction and communication; (3) the structure of language reflects its functional and communicative uses; and (4) the primary units of language are not merely its grammatical and structural features, but categories of functional and communicative meaning as exemplified in discourse. Still, assigning new meanings to existing words is a more common strategy (Ramiro et al., 2018). Generational identities also exert an influence on how they perceive and utilise the language.

Subsequently, recent research raises new questions: How does language evolve within the cognitive constraints of its users and, over time, become more easily learned? Li and Siew (2022) found that the meaning of language that people acquire in later life is more likely to change and poses challenges when it comes to processing. They asserted that the semantic evolution of words is limited due to human cognition since older meanings of words may not be familiar to the present generation and, therefore, are unlikely to influence the way they learn and process language directly.

In addition, studies suggest that age, cognitive functioning, and various factors like language exposure and willingness to communicate influence the development of communication skills (Daniluk & Borkowska, 2020; Derwing & Munro, 2013; Fagan & Iglesias, 2000). Researchers also added that for older people who experienced the span of the information technology revolution, semantic changes caused much cognitive confusion. In semantic decision-making tasks, the semantic changes between 1970 and 2000 caused obstacles for middle-aged people (45-55 years old) when processing their interpretation. On the contrary, it does not affect

young people (<25 years old) (Li & Siew, 2022). In addition, Dovchin (2015) believes that the "melting pot" youth language practices of the Internet era should be understood as "translingual" not only because of their different permutations and combinations of linguistic and cultural resources, genres, modes, styles, and repertoires but also because of their direct subtextual connections to wider socio-cultural, historical and ideological significance.

That is why social media users of different ages tend to have some generational miscommunication on different slang and understandings of newly coined words on social media. In the study of Bhatti and Hassan (2021), Gen X and Y tend to use both Standard English in communication; however, Gen X was more conscious of the language that they use in terms of its purity. In contrast, Gen Z learners were found to use language in terms of its pragmatic context (Sumartono, 2023). They also tend to use informal language in digital communication, which poses a challenge in shifting to a formal speaking context. For Wakil et al. (2021), it was found that Gen X tend to have politics as their preferred topic of communication, while Millennials tend to talk about their offspring. Additionally, Gen Z was found to be unable to relate to these topics as they have yet to be married and thus do not opt to engage in conversations with other generations.

In the landscape of how humans communicate, most online communication on social media frequently uses verbal irony and sarcasm that is hard to discern in a written context (Muresan et al., 2016). Additionally, several studies discovered that social media impacts the semantics of words, which may affect the learners' writing and communication skills. As observed online, the birth of innovative vocabulary coined, blended, mixed, or derived from other words, changes in etymology, and informal text messaging using abbreviations and acronyms support Buri's (2017) assertion that language is evolving.

It is believed that major social changes caused by wars, invasions, and other important historical events may have caused changes in language semantics. Still, the ongoing process of cultural transmission is the most important factor in language change. Each generation must master the language of the previous generation. In this continuous process, each individual of the younger generation has to "reconstruct" the language of the community, so there is an inevitable tendency to learn preferred elements of the language selectively. Sometimes, the generations have intentions to be different. Due to this unstable transmission process, language will not remain stable, and change and mutation are inevitable (Li & Siew, 2022).

The combination of images and text in memes shapes how individuals construct meaning in online memes. In the study of Pranoto (2021), EFL learners perceived that the use of humour in memes, as applied in their English language classroom, made the learning session less stressful. The research reiterated that the use of humour in memes cuts the distance between teachers and students. Similarly, Bülow and Johann (2023) also studied university students' perceptions of political memes, and their study revealed that the use of sarcasm contributed to the persuasive impact of multimodality. As for millennials, memes were considered a fun way of communicating (Soleh et al., 2021), and they understood the meaning of memes better than non-millennials.

Studies on memes and their role in language communication have increasingly gained attention, which includes their political impact, function, social-cultural relevance, and linguistic elements (Ariyoga & Rahyono, 2020; Navera et al., 2019; Wiggins, 2017). Within the realm of education, memes have gained attention as instructional tools. Baysac and Emmanuel (2017) explored teachers' lived experiences using memes in the classroom. The study revealed that memes have increased the students' attention, filtered the affective domain, and helped visualise an idea or concept. Also, memes have been used in different classroom contexts, ranging from developing

critical thinking skills of students (Harvey & Palese, 2018; Vardi, 2013) to rhetorical applications (Beach & Dredger, 2017), chemistry classes (Underwood & Kararo, 2020) and even online classes (Lin & Sun, 2022).

Having Gen Z as the most digitally connected generation has brought a challenge to the educational landscape. Jeresano and Carretero (2022) found that using Gen Z slang can hinder successful communication between students, teachers, and older generations. Additionally, their study suggested that Gen Z slang may be useful during oral communication, focusing on school-related tasks. Still, it may not be appropriate for formal academic tasks like essay writing. Furthermore, varying levels of digital literacy among different age groups can influence their interpretation of internet cultures and linguistic subtleties (Boyd, 2014). The generational differences in digital literacy can impact how they appreciate and interpret memes, contributing to miscommunication, misinterpretation, and exclusion in a given communication discourse (Madge et al., 2009).

An evident void in the existing literature (Bhatti, 2021; Jeresano & Carretero, 2022; Sumartono, 2023; Wakil et al., 2021) focuses on how generational differences affect classroom communication dynamics, particularly in the context of Gen Z slang within social media memes. The present study, therefore, seeks to investigate meaning-making on memes, focusing on participants' interpretation of social media memes featuring Gen Z slang and the variations in interpretation between teachers and students. Thus, the study aimed to address the following research questions:
1. What meanings do the participants give to social media memes featuring Gen Z slang?
2. What variations exist in how teachers and students interpret Gen Z slang in memes?

Understanding the differences between how teachers and Gen Z students interpret social media memes allows educators to recognise communication barriers that may arise due to these linguistic variations and interpretations. This awareness leads to the improvement of teaching strategies to bridge generational gaps. It can also provide insights into how teachers can adapt teaching methods that cater to Gen Z's use of language and interests, fostering a positive, inclusive classroom. Uncovering the communication landscape of Gen Z can contribute to using contemporary instructional materials in education curricula. The study can also contribute to the knowledge of how language evolves in the digital age, which could guide educational policies and practices.

METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN

A descriptive qualitative research design using content analysis through an interview method employing a photo-elicitation technique was used to address the objectives of the study. Hsieh and Shannon (2005) defined qualitative content analysis as a research approach for subjective interpretation of the context of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns. Additionally, the researchers employed the photo-elicitation technique to gather participant data. The photo-elicitation interview technique involves researchers using visual images to enhance the interview experience (Kyololo et al., 2023). In the photo-elicitation technique, the researcher typically determines the area of focus; hence, the images serve as a prompt to elicit data for an open question in a semi-structured interview (Cleland & MacLeod, 2021).

RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Stratified random sampling was employed in this study. Fleetwood (2023) defined stratified random sampling as a probabilistic method that allows research institutions to divide the entire population into multiple non-overlapping, homogeneous groups (strata) and randomly select final members from each stratum for research. This reduces costs and improves efficiency.

Since the method to be used is photo elicitation, studies suggest having at least 4 to 12 participants, and some would arguably add up to 50 participants for an interview since each individual interview would last at least 20-35 minutes to an hour at most (Kyololo et al., 2023; Dworkin, 2012).

The research participants belong to one of the biggest public high school in San Quintin, Pangasinan, one of the local towns in the Philippines. Through the use of the school database, the researchers categorised the total population of language teachers based on their birth year and classified them into their respective generations, then randomly selected the participants based on age strata. Participants were categorised into three generational groups: Boomers or Gen X, Millennials, and Gen Z.

There are 22 language teachers in total from the initial classification; only six are Gen X language teachers, and 16 are Gen Y or Millennials language teachers. Moreover, the 50 Grade 9 students, averaging from ages 13 to 15, belong to the Gen Z population. The researchers applied proportional allocation in which an equal-sized sample size of 6 from each stratum was used. However, only 4 out of 6 Gen X participants, 9 out of 16 Gen Y participants, and 6 Gen Z participants accepted to answer the questionnaire. Thus, the data was collected from 4 Gen X, 9 Gen Y, and 6 Gen Z, with a total of 19 participants. .

RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS

The main data collection tool used to gather the information for this study is a semi-structured interview, which included both open-ended and structured questions to gather insight into the participants' interpretation of social media memes. Due to the participants' requests, preferences, and time considerations, the researchers used a secondary data-gathering tool in the form of an online written interview through a Google form consisting of the same set of questions and social media memes. As observed in the studies of Kyololo et al. (2023) and Church and Quilter (2021) employing the photo-elicitation method through an open-ended interview, an average of 4 images is suggested when utilising this data-gathering method. To respond to the research questions, the researchers presented seven social media memes curated by the researchers from Instagram and Facebook. The researchers employed researcher-driven photo elicitation, in which the researcher decides what images to use as prompts for discussions during interviews (Cleland & MacLeod, 2021).

In the curation of social media memes, the researchers selected a variety of Gen Z slang terms that represent emotions, appearances, and social interactions to provide a comprehensive overview of Gen Z slang and showcase the different semantic changes and variations of communication dynamics. To select the memes, the researchers used the hashtags #LanguageMemes, #MemeEvolution, #genzmemes, #memetrends, #semanticsmeme, #memeculture, and # humour on Facebook and Instagram. The meme selection process used the following criteria to guide the selection: memes showcase the semantic changes within the Gen Z slang, which can be related to different aspects of life; meme conveys a visual image; the

popularity of the memes conveys humour or irony, free from any offensive content, and used in Instagram and Facebook as these are accessible to all participants. The curation of memes varies from different perspectives, focusing on Gen Z culture. After the meme presentation, interview guide questions were used to answer the research questions.

Prior to gathering data, the interview questions had undergone a validity analysis using Aiken's Validity Coefficient Analysis, with an average of 0.807, measuring the validity of each item. The interview guide questions contained a set of memes, which were presented to the participants to interpret, followed by interview questions, which provided insights about the interpretation and understanding of Gen Z slang in memes. The researchers asked permission to record the interview and transcribe, analyse, and code the participants' answers using a priori code to categorise developing themes within the answers.

RESEARCH PROCEDURES AND TREATMENT OF DATA

Prior to the collection of data, informed consent forms were obtained from the school principal, teachers, and students. The participants were informed of their rights and that their participation was voluntary. Moreover, the participants were assured that their identities and responses were kept and treated with utmost confidentiality.

Upon completing the consent form, the researchers set a date for each interview. The participants were grouped according to their generation to address the first research question on the participants' interpretation of the meaning of memes. Each participant was presented with memes to analyse and interpret. Afterwards, questions were asked regarding the memes' visual and textual content interpretation, their meme interactions, and their impressions of the memes. Their responses were thematised to identify recurring themes in their perception.

To address the second research question, which explores variations in how teachers and students interpret Gen Z slang in memes, both teachers and students were interviewed separately. The data collected from the teachers delved into sharing their experiences as well as challenges in understanding Gen Z slang in memes. The data collected for students gave an insight into their use of Gen Z slang and misinterpretations encountered in teacher-student interaction. They reflected on how it affects meaning-making or communication. Responses from both teachers and students were transcribed, and qualitative content analysis was employed to analyse the interview data. This analysis was carried out separately for teachers and students, which was thematised.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

Since the participants belong to the same school and population from one province in the Philippines, informed consent was obtained from all participants, including the school principal and teachers. Assent was acquired from the students and consent was granted by their legal guardians or parents, ensuring voluntary participation and confidentiality. All collected data was stored securely on a designated online drive and retained for the duration of the research. No physical copies of the data were utilised. The recording of the interview was also stored in a secure Google Drive to maintain its confidentiality. The memes and interview questions were designed to prioritise the well-being of the participants, especially the minor participants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

MEANINGS OF SOCIAL MEDIA MEMES

The following themes are presented to address the first problem of the meanings participants give to social media memes featuring Gen Z slang.

ILLUSTRATING RELATIONSHIP DYNAMICS

To understand the meanings of memes, participants of the present study related them to their daily lives, particularly their work, family, and student life. When asked about their engagement in memes, they have cited that they find memes that encapsulate themes such as jealousy, such as the Jak Robert memes, a Filipino actor popular for portraying relatable relationship scenarios. This shows that Gen Z is inclined to memes that depict romantic scenarios.

> Z1: Jak Roberto memes usually contain a picture of the talented actor Jack Roberto with a funny caption relating to a person being jealous and protective of their partner, but acting like they're okay.

Memes related to school life are also highlighted as memorable for the participants, which holds a significant relevance, mainly since this is the participants' career or exposure. This promotes a sense of community, which also holds true for the generation belonging to Gen X and Y, wherein they attach meaning to memes in terms of their relatability, such as memes related to education or life events.

> Y3: postings about their lives, their work, and also financial
> X3: Memes about teachers, life, and trends.
> Z2: The memes regarding school events/situations. It stood out to me because I can relate to it.

Since the participants hold a similar meaning pertaining to memes as a portrayal of relationship dynamics, this shows a common ground for them in terms of cultural and linguistic context. The familiarity between slang terms and their usage demonstrates that they can understand one another, contributing to their cultural identity or sense of belonging since they have similar expressions or behaviours. This result shows they might also share similar experiences when attaching meaning to these memes. As pointed out in the literature, memes represent images and texts (Chagas et al., 2019). Having the same understanding of Gen Z slang in memes shows that the participants have the same communication codes in interpreting memes.

This is in line with the findings of Terzimehić et al. (2021), where memes were used to express life events, experiences, and emotions. In their research, meme serves as a coping mechanism for them to overcome negative events in their lives. These events shifted to becoming a positive one, and simultaneously, the use of memes paved the way for self-expression. Vacca et al. (2022) explored middle school students' construction of memes, where they also examined the methods of how students engage in data reasoning and data argumentation when communicating with memes. The study revealed that students tend to associate their personal experiences with the context of their relationships with others.

DEMONSTRATING HUMOROUS EXPRESSION (ENTERTAINMENT)

Participants tend to like funny memes as a source of entertainment. All participants from different generations derive meaning from memes that exhibit humour, ridicule, or sarcasm. This shows the importance of humour in fostering positive emotional responses to memes. The combination of comedy and its relatability makes a meme memorable and enjoyable, showcasing the importance of using semantic elements in conveying and understanding comedic intent in social media.

> Z5: … The ones that stand out are the ones that cleverly combine humour and relatability. They have the power to make us laugh and say, "That's so true!

All of the generations mentioned that memes are a source of entertainment. This shows that semantic elements such as clever captions, context or scenarios, and wordplay contribute to the comedic feature of memes. As in the case of Generation X participant 7, the semantic element of the "expanding brain" meme illustrates the ironic portrayal of intelligence. The image of a large brain is compared with silly or sarcastic ideas, allowing the creation of sarcastic or satirical commentary on perceived intelligence.

> Y7: "Expanding Brain" shows a person's intelligence level, but ironically, the big brain picture contains the silliest or most sarcastic idea.

Furthermore, their age differences also influence the understanding of humour in memes. For example, Gen Z finds Jak Roberto's memes funny since they portray relatable relationships. The interest in celebrity relationships makes them humorous, and the irony is also shown in how jealousy and protectiveness are humorously portrayed. In contrast, participants from the older generation (Gen X and Y) enjoy memes that mock or ridicule politicians and celebrities.

> Y2: "Yes, mostly funny memes like mocking politicians and celebrities. I also like school-related memes."
> X1: Entertainment, educational
> Y4: Pop culture and Dad jokes

This can be attributed to their experiences of witnessing politicians or celebrity events over the years. Memes related to school life were highlighted across all generations since both participants belong to the same educational context. Memes on the portrayal of typical school scenarios, such as being late to school, serve as an example. Older generations might find humour in these memes by reflecting on their school days or their experience with their students, while younger participants might connect with these scenarios based on their current experiences.

This is corroborated in the study of Brody and Cullen (2023), where meme usage was used to satisfy one's craving for enjoyment. Mihailidis (2020) found that out of 126 memes, 76 memes that the participants used depicted humour or sarcasm. They can enjoy memes without associating with any value, particularly in politics or civics. Memes that allowed them to laugh allowed them to relate to it and grab their attention immediately.

Participants from Generation X tend to extract meanings of memes through context. They look into the connections between the memes' content and their personal experiences, social issues, or cultural references, such as food and spirituality. Moreover, they mentioned memes related to teachers, life, and trends, indicating their preference for content that resonates with their lives. Hence, the derivation of meaning stems from relating the meme content to their life narrative.

> X2: Spiritual, food, architecture
> X3: events
> X5: postings about their lives, their work, and also financial matters

Millennials extract meaning by connecting memes to contemporary culture, such as current trends and pop culture. Using "interesting captions" with memes reflects how Gen Y goes beyond visual humour. Textual elements such as captions play a role in extracting and enhancing the overall meaning of a meme.

> Y5: Those memes with interesting captions
> Y1: Language memes and puns, Movie updates, celebrities, Poetry

Similarly, Gen Z participants also use contextual relevance in meaning-making; however, when faced with confusing Gen Z slang or unfamiliar memes, they resort to social interaction to find the meaning, such as checking the comment section and asking peers.

> Z2: I usually check the comment section. If the comment section does not provide me with an explanation, I go to Chrome and search for it. If I have not been provided with an explanation, I just ask my close friends.

Additionally, their exposure to memes on different social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter, illustrates their exposure to a wider range of meme content that can contribute to understanding memes. By using different platforms, Gen Z does not interpret slang in isolation but interprets it in terms of how the meme is used on each social media platform. This provides a more established, comprehensive comprehension of the intended meaning of the meme.

> Z3: I search for its meaning on TikTok, or I would ask a friend

This reaffirms the study of Chagas et al. (2019), where memes often reflect popular culture and reflect life's social realities and perspectives. Saint-Laurent and Literat (2018) also described memes as having strong intertextual features as they use images with high familiarity across media and generate new meanings embedded with cultural context. Also, Yus (2019) study on analysing the multimodality in memes proposed that using contextual information, such as background knowledge on different facets of the community, is crucial in understanding the meaning of memes. This can be influenced by the reader's prior knowledge and by examining the discourse features of memes, such as visual and verbal, form and style (text-oriented).

VARIATIONS IN INTERPRETATION

The research question aimed to see the variations in how teachers and students from different generations interpret social media memes featuring Gen Z slang. The data gathered from the four (4) Gen X and nine (9) Gen Y represent the data from the language teachers, and the five (5) Gen Z participants represent the data from the students of one of the biggest high school in San Quintin, Pangasinan as they interpret the slang terms.

Words have different meanings depending on their context and use, which sometimes results in confusion. Gen Z slang terms come from normal words that may be used differently in context, resulting in semantic ambiguity. Ramiro et al. (2018) discussed that older generations associate meaning with newly coined terms such as Gen Z slang.

As shown from the results of the data gathering tool, Gen X and Y teachers and some Gen Z students tend to get confused about the meaning of certain words or slang used in memes since they are not familiar with them. Thus, the researchers find it interesting how teachers and students try to interpret the meaning of Gen Z slang, and they come up with three themes on how they interpret it. These are familiarity, contextualization, association, and language adaptation.

FAMILIARITY

The participants were asked about their familiarity with Gen Z slang, and half of the teacher participants confessed that they were only slightly familiar with some of the slang used on social media memes. Moreover, 2 out of 19 participants answered that they were not familiar with using these memes. These two participants both belonged to Gen X. On the other hand, teachers from both generations X and Y mentioned that aside from seeing these slang terms in their social media feeds, they usually hear these Gen Z slang terms in the students' conversations. Moreover, most participants find this Gen Z slang to be confusing and are unfamiliar with it. Thus, it shows how language can be ambiguous. The level of familiarity depends on the exposure of the participants to the slang terms used in memes. This limitation will influence their comprehension of memes. It is observed that Gen Z is more extensively exposed to different social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Threads, and TikTok. In contrast, the teacher participants are mostly exposed only to Facebook and Instagram. It is reaffirmed by Madge et al. (2009) that the digital literacy of participants can affect how they interpret social media memes featuring Gen Z slang. Moreover, this is corroborated in the study by Weiser and Alam (2022), where suicide or depression memes used came from social media platforms and noted that due to the algorithms of these platforms (likes and dislikes), the more exposed the viewers will be. Usage of these social media platforms will also lead to increased meme viewership.

CONTEXTUALIZATION

Older generations tend to have difficulty understanding the meaning of the given words, resulting in using context clues based on the images presented in memes. The way teachers contextualise memes varies. For instance, the meme featuring the acronym "TMI," which stands for "Too Much Information," caught the attention of the participants. Most of them had not encountered it yet, and still, some of them figured out the meaning through contextual clues from the image. One Gen X participant said, "She looks scared of what the other person is saying." The Gen Y participant answered, "The image shows how disgusted the woman is and asking the person she's talking to

not to give her any more information. Probably sharing too much personal information." and added, "I thought immediately what TMI means from the context, and I think it means Too much information." This posits that Gen Y looks at the comments or searches for what it means to understand the meme, while Gen X teachers ask a more knowledgeable person regarding the meanings of a meme.

In addition, when asked how they interpreted the meaning of the slang term, one participant said, "Just analyse the content of the pictures." Moreover, some participants admit that when they encounter some Gen Z slang, they look for its meaning on Google to understand it, and some tend to ignore it.

> Y4: "Usually, I'm right if there are pictures accompanying the memes or if it is situational, since I'm basing the meaning of the words in their context. However, if it's just an abbreviation or sign, I will Google it."
> Y2: "[I] Read the comment section, or sometimes I use Google."
> X3: "I ask other teachers if they know what it means, especially the younger ones."

On the other hand, two Gen Z participants admitted that it was their first time encountering the acronym TMI, but they can easily recognise what it means based on the image used and the context itself. When asked what their strategies are to interpret the meaning of the slang term, they simply answered that they examine the picture.

This shows the variation of contextualization of teachers and students on the interpretation of social media memes featuring Gen Z slang. Students tend to adopt the strategies used by Gen X and millennial teachers. They examine images or visual components and contextual cues in meaning-making. So, students are not dependent on the literal meaning of words but are also influenced by context. This shows their holistic approach to interpreting language, textual and visual aspects. As Chagas et al. (2019) emphasised, the nature of memes containing visual and textual cues aids in the interpretation of memes.

<div align="center">ASSOCIATION</div>

Language is dynamic, and through social media, it is easily shared and used widely, making it part of the vocabulary. Gen Z slang is one of those. Thus, older generations like Gen X and Y, where teacher participants belong, tend to get confused about what a certain Gen Z slang term means because they keep on associating it with the meaning that they are familiar with within their generation. For example, the words "savage" and "flex." One participant from Gen X refers to the term "savage" as "Wild and modern" (X3), which is associated with its dictionary meaning because that is their exposure to the term. On the other hand, (Y7) another participant from Gen Y thought that "savage life" means "harsh," which is also associated with its dictionary meaning. In today's generation, when someone says "savage," he/she may refer to both "wild and harsh," associating it with its dictionary meaning.

Another scenario is the slang term "flex," which is widely used on social media. Typically, when people use the word "flex," it refers to a joint or limb being bent like "flexing the muscles," but on social media, when someone says "flex," he/she is referring to "a boastful remark on something." Most millennials or Gen Y participants know that "flex" refers to "bragging" or "showing off." However, Gen X participants got confused, thinking it meant "fighting" (X3) or "going to the gym" (X2).

The examples provided above show how different generations interpret a new term, associating it with its old meaning. Supporting Li and Siew's (2022) claim that human cognition limits the semantic evolution of words because the current generation may not be familiar with older meanings of words, which makes it unlikely that these meanings will directly affect how they learn and process language. Looking at it the other way, older generations can easily associate the older meaning of words, making it more confusing for their part.

The student participants can easily point out what the memes mean because they have been part of their vocabulary and are commonly used in their communication. As observed from the qualities of Gen Z slang on social media memes, Gen Z slang is actually derived from previous words and, over time, is reconstructed to have a different meaning, such as "bae" and "fam."

"Bae" originally came from the Korean word "Bae Bae," which is used as a term of endearment for a significant other. Over time, it became a popular term on social media, referring to someone you love since it sounds like a "baby." Another term, "fam," came from the English word "family," used informally to refer to family members or someone close. Since all the teacher participants are language teachers, it is easy for them to determine what those slang words mean, even for those who have less exposure to them. In contrast, student participants have no problem interpreting the memes because of their familiarity and exposure. This suggests that these slang terms are integrated into their everyday communication, making it a shared language among Gen Z participants, demonstrating their language assimilation within their group.

This shows that the younger generation tends to be creative in their use of language (Jeresano & Carretero, 2022). That is why different terms and slang are created by reconstructing or associating the old word with a new one. Furthermore, Cheng and Zhang (2015) discussed the reproduction and transmission of language memes involving four stages: assimilation, retention, expression, and transmission. In the assimilation stage, the host influences the new individual in understanding and accepting the new meaning of the meme.

LANGUAGE ADAPTATION

In terms of language adaptation, it is observed that these generations have different opinions. Gen Y or Millennials are more likely to welcome and adapt the language used by Gen Z and try to learn their slang terms to address the communication gap among different generations. On the other hand, older generations like Gen X are more conservative with the use of syntax and semantic rules in trying to understand their meaning in conversation. For example, in the meme on the use of "they" in reference to the pronouns of the LGBTQ+ community, half of the Gen X participants observed that they used the plural form of the pronoun referring to only a person and mentioned that it is grammatically incorrect. Moreover, some Gen X participants also tend to ignore or disregard the slang term when they encounter something that they are not familiar with. In addition, a participant from Gen Y mentioned, "There should be consideration and understanding in terms of sharing information and communication. Memes are also a good way to share humour while providing information. Adding Gen Z terminology as a topic in some communication and Social Science subjects is also a good way of understanding the language of younger generations." Also, Y6 mentioned, "It's making the gap wider between generations. But language is evolving, and it is only natural that slang or lingo varies from different generations. We just have to keep up with the trend while maintaining our identity. We don't have to use it, but the least we can do is understand it since it is our duty to cultivate and prepare them for the future." Furthermore, another Gen Y participant thought, "I think different generations have their own language identity, so using these memes might probably bridge the gap among many generations

if one is open to learning," showing how adaptable the younger generation is, since they are more exposed to it. However, the older generation, such as Gen X, has a different opinion. One Gen X participant pointed out the need to learn the Gen Z terms as it "Makes the gap wider", yet they tend to be hesitant in adapting and learning the language. Gen Z participants, on the other hand, are obviously more adaptive in the use of these slang terms since they can relate to using the language, and it gives them a sense of belonging to a group.

> Z1: "pag gumagamit sila ng mga meme na mas nakakarelate sa isang tao" [using memes allow me to relate with others]

Teachers vary in the level of acceptance of Gen Z slang. Older generations (Gen X) are more hesitant to use and adapt Gen Z slang because they are concerned with the syntactic and semantic structure of words. On the other hand, younger generations of teachers (Gen Y) and Gen Z participants are more likely to adapt to the language since they can relate to it. As Bornkessel-Schlesewsky et al. (2022) claimed, adaptation to language variations is strongest for young adults, weaker for middle-aged adults, and absent for older adults.

CONCLUSION

The research shows the role of Gen Z slang in memes, particularly in meaning-making across different generations. It reveals its significance in illustrating relationship dynamics as well as a source of entertainment and incorporates contextual relevance. It also highlights variations in the interpretation among teachers and students, emphasising challenges posed by familiarity, contextualization, association, and language adaptation.

The findings in the study highlight how memes featuring Gen Z slang can serve as an obstacle and a bridge in cross-generational communication. Hence, it is essential to maintain efficient communication strategies and encourage an open dialogue that respects linguistic diversity to foster an inclusive and connected teacher-student relationship.

Overall, the findings underscore the entertaining and relatable nature of memes today. Teacher participants from Gen X and Y vary in their strategies for interpreting the meaning and the adaptability of Gen Z slang. Language teachers should understand that language is dynamic and evolving. Thus, it is a must to understand how language evolves and adapt to bridge the gap in communication and adapt their teaching strategies to how the language evolves. Moreover, teachers must also be updated about the current online language trends to foster a culturally responsive teaching-learning environment. Many of the students expressed that the memes accurately capture the unique challenges and opportunities of growing up in the digital age and that they appreciate the sense of community and shared understanding that comes from engaging with these memes. As students find memes relatable, humorous, and reflective of their experiences, they should critically evaluate both textual and visual cues to avoid misinterpretations and be responsible consumers and producers of digital content. Lastly, teachers and students should have an open dialogue and mutual understanding of linguistic variations to avoid miscommunication and achieve a better and healthier language teaching-learning environment.

LIMITATIONS

This study has two limitations. First, the present study involves a small sample size, as there are no Boomer and Gen Z teacher participants in this study due to the age limitations in the locale. This limitation may not fully capture the perceptions and variations of each generation. Moreover, the researchers opted to use one school setting, which might influence the results of the study. Since the study employs qualitative content analysis, the responses of participants may exhibit biases in their interpretation of Gen Z slang memes. Furthermore, the scope of the study focuses on the education context; it does not include variations in other settings or contexts. Future researchers might want to address the said limitations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study revealed that there is an intergenerational difference in interpretation in understanding Gen Z slang using social media memes. However, it only featured three generations, Gen X, Gen Y, and Gen Z, with an unequal number of respondents. Future researchers might want to address this unequal proportion of each generation to show the representation of each generation's interpretation. Moreover, the researchers suggest conducting this study in a wider context and population.

Since the study made use of qualitative data, an exploration of the use of mixed method design could give a more holistic understanding of the impact of Gen Z slang in memes, which will contribute to the robustness of the study.

For future research, it is recommended to investigate the challenges and dynamics of generational communication in the online context, focusing on how different generations respond to memes and their impact on communication and meaning-making.

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