

The Growing Popularity Of Netspeak Among Millennials: An Analysis Of The Emerging Lingo On Facebook Messenger

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to determine the extent of Millennials' usage of Netspeak on the instant messaging platform Facebook Messenger. It employed both qualitative and quantitative questionnaires to gather data from a total of fifty-three (53) respondents. The findings showed that Millennials always (70.59% of the time) employ Netspeak. In particular, they use emojis (59.6%) and acronyms (35.3%). Their utilization of Netspeak is greatest in the context of communicating with friends and romantic partner/s. The propensity of Millennials to do so is premised on social theories of language acquisition which is further encouraged by the prevalence of the internet and the inherently interactive platforms found therein. This allows us to conclude that Millennials continuously and overwhelmingly create, use, and develop Netspeak.

Keywords: communication, internet, Millennials, Netspeak, Facebook Messenger

1.0 Introduction

Language is a tool for voicing ideas and opinions (El-Nashar 38). Language, particularly among today's youth, changes over time in terms of how it is used in a broad variety of cultures (Dronia, 2020). Millennials, a dominant group of people aged 22 to 38, have had a significant impact on the evolution of language (Angelfish Fieldwork, para. 4). According to the fieldwork conducted in 2021, some of them have acquired an entirely different language in order to address the language barrier of a specific individual's language preferences while remaining entirely capable of communicating with others (Andani and Nur Indah, 2020). This language is called Netspeak and includes the "language, abbreviations and expressions" inherent to communicating using the internet (Crystal, 17). It is characterized by messages that are typically written rapidly and in bursts (ADR, 2021).

The dominance of Netspeak was the result of accelerated technological development vis a vis, the internet (Mazor 3), which is touted as one of the most revolutionary inventions in history. Upon its conception, it was predicted that it would alter all environments and would begin to transform and improve the world (Curran et. al 2012). It achieved this through platforms such as the World Wide Web (WWW), social media, and email. Crystal (2010) claims that the internet has progressed from a source of knowledge to a source of information that has

come to consume our lives. This is largely because “the internet is fully interactive; its effects can be more powerful than those of television or other conventional media,” (Donnerstein, 2011 in Strasburger et. al, 2014). This led to forms of traditional media and communication (in the forms of newspapers, magazines, flyers, snail mail, radio, and television) becoming replaced by internet-facilitated mediums. This includes instant messaging platforms such as the widely used Facebook Messenger, which allows users to send messages, conduct phone calls, and even hold video calls. Other services have also been digitized, allowing people to work from home, form and sustain relationships, and engage in socio-economic discourse with virtually anyone in the world. However, there are fears that “...the use of electronic media may lead to diminished social ties because people have less desire to leave their homes and actively connect face to face with other people because people have less excuse to leave their homes and actually engage face to face with other people,” (Journal of Social Issues Vol. 58, 2002).

The point of contention the researcher aims to resolve regards the use of Netspeak and whether or not it achieves, or perhaps even strengthens, the purpose of communication which is to connect people. It primarily seeks to gauge Millennials’ familiarity, use, and disposition towards Netspeak. It contextualizes this on Facebook Messenger, which is a popular app not among Millennials, but also among other generations who may not be as proficient as Netspeak. The researcher hopes to bridge this purported generational gap when it comes to using Netspeak on Facebook Messenger. This is important to determine how to improve communication in the internet-dominated world in order to make it more inclusive.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The study “The Growing Popularity of Netspeak Among Millennials: An Analysis of the Emerging Lingo on Facebook Messenger” aims to highlight its special aspects particularly on the linguistic level and behavioral characteristics of online communication towards Netspeak in the online platform Facebook Messenger.

1. What are the most commonly used Netspeak of the Millennials?
2. How often do Millennials use Netspeak in Facebook Messenger?
3. To what extent do Millennials use Netspeak in interacting with the following:
 - 3.1 Friends
 - 3.2 Family
 - 3.3 Romantic Partner
 - 3.4 Elderly
4. What are Netspeak’s linguistic and behavioral effects?
5. What are the problems encountered by Millennials in using Netspeak?

2.0 Review of Related Literature

According to ADR (2020), Millennials have the most control over social norms, expectations, and attitudes because they are the largest demographic on the planet with the most purchasing power as of 2018. This allows them to sweep the world and leave a mark on society in the same way previous generations – yet are still jokingly

called the “boomerang generation” who return to live with their parents (Nava, 2014). They are further set apart by how they use language as an indication of social standing. Rosa (58) claimed that younger Millennial cohorts conflate youth with socially rooted characteristics which reinforces their perception as “children”. While they are slowly growing out of being referred to as such, the connotations of Rosa’s harsh descriptors show that Millennials were viewed as a troublesome or causing disturbance. This has implications on gaps between Millennials and their family, and how it affects their mental health. This lends itself to how Millennials could have used language to assert an identity separate from that.

Crystal (2001) coined the term "Netspeak," (also known as Internet Slang, ChatSpeak, and Cyber Slang) the concept of which had been in use for years prior. It is a language with internet- inherent characteristics, including a combination of abbreviations, acronyms, emoticons, and other modifications on words and sentences (Baron 20) and Mann and Stewart (2000). It could even go as far as the Netspeak maxim, which refers to spoofing and trolling (Crystal, 2006). As a language, it is used as a system to abridge or modify the spelling of words so as to limit the keystrokes while typing. This is aligned to the internet allowing information to spread at a faster pace than had ever been feasible (Jordan, 2015).

Netspeak is used through “chatting” which is interpreted to include "listening and reading." It was initially created by and used almost exclusively by avid users of the internet who would later be dubbed as “Netizens” (short for internet citizens). They popularized non-standard orthographies, such as abbreviations, acronyms, and even new meanings for pre-existing words to facilitate more efficient communication in the then-popular platforms of chat rooms where the average chat message is under ten words (McCrindle, 2011). After the universal 160-character limit for text messaging and the 140- character limit for Twitter, this was adopted more widely for the advantage of brevity in communicating online. Netspeak usage increases as the number of internet users grow, and it is passed on from generation to generation – even Generation Z has contributed to Netspeak of their own. Netspeak is also used outside of the internet in physical conversations. In fact, Floyd (2011) suggests that they even help distinguish between those who are part of a social network and those who are not. In other words, this has encouraged cyber unity while also sowing seeds of conflict (Bough, 1998).

The Social Pragmatic Theory of Language Acquisition (Tomasello 401) posits that language acquisition is inherently social in nature. It is not limited to merely learning words in isolation; rather it is “flexible and powerful social-cognitive skills” which allow for such since it fosters “the understanding of the communicative intentions of others in a wide variety of interactive situations” (Tomasello 401). It is not akin to a skyhook that plucks words out of conversations and stores it in a mental bank, but rather a firmly grounded crane that allows for the amassing of such overtime.

The prerequisites for language acquisition are foundational skills of attention - towards the others involved in the conversation. This also includes taking into account the context in order to derive meaning from the messages being sent. By doing this, the individual is able to add a new word to their vocabulary and link it to pre-existing concepts. This is a form of social learning which transcends observational learning. Thus, when used in conversation, the individual does not merely parrot the word. They undergo a 'role reversal imitation' (Tomasello

405) which allows them to use the word from the perspective they first encountered it in. This is then applied either within or completely distinct from the original context. This is in congruence with the helical model of communication.

3.0 Conceptual Framework

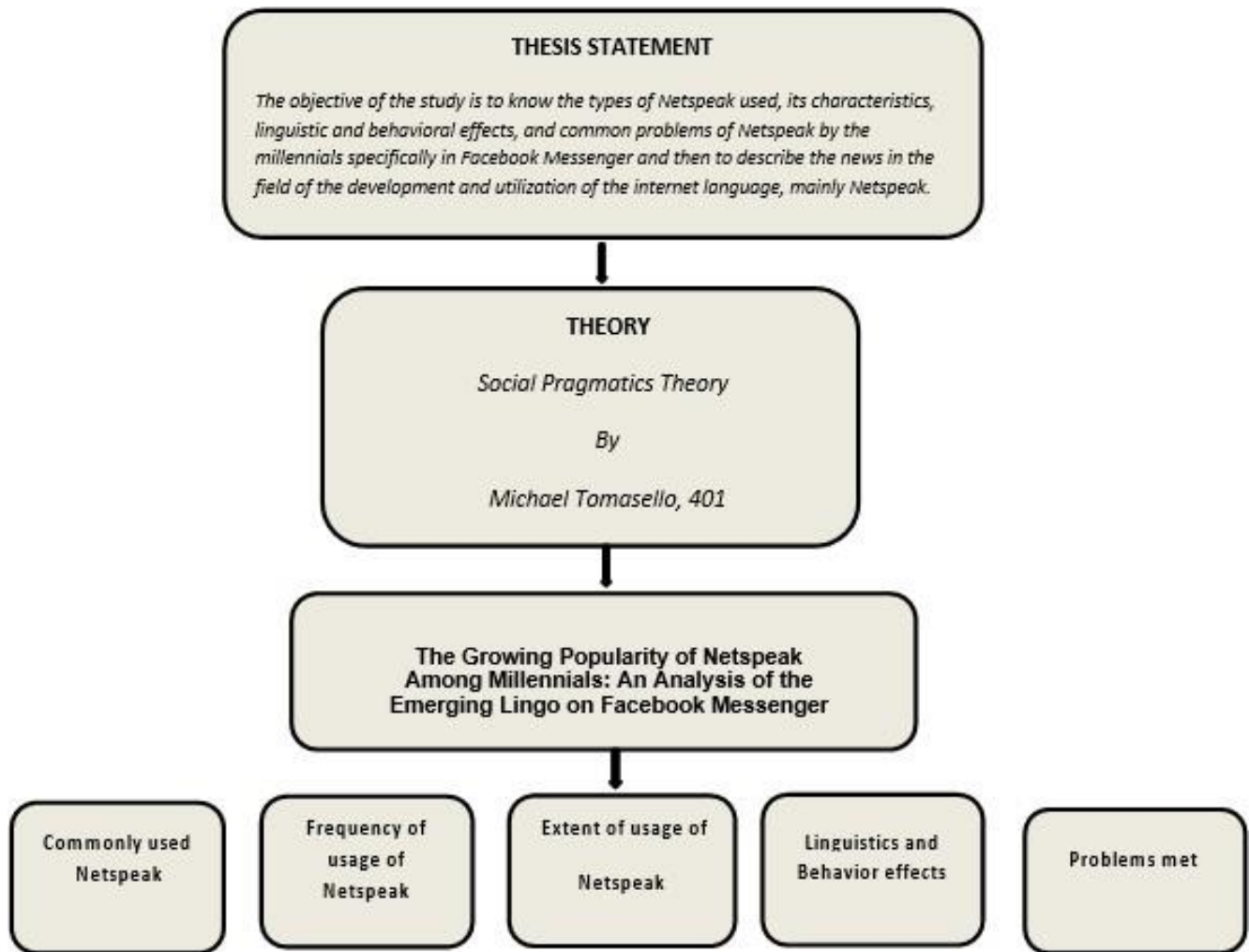


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the Study

4.0 Research Methodology and Design

This study employs a quantitative and qualitative research design. With regards to gathering the quantitative data through the first three (3) questions posited in the Statement of the Problem, the answers were obtained through a 3-survey questionnaire conducted through Google Forms. The respondents were chosen through purposive sampling in order to satisfy the conditions of the study which required them to be Facebook Messenger users. Their consent was obtained through a permission form to answer the questions, which reassured that their answers would be kept confidential. There was no direct connection or conflict of interest involved between the researcher and the respondents of the study. The questionnaire was answered by fifty-one (51) respondents between the ages

of 21-23 residing within Region VII of the Philippines. All of them had the additional and unintended common denominator of being college students, as well as Facebook users for 5-10 years. Their answers were calculated using frequency mean, and standard deviation.

In order to obtain qualitative data through the final two (2) questions, a brief interview (no longer than 30 minutes) was conducted via Facebook Messenger. The respondents were also chosen through purposive sampling and their consent was obtained prior to the interview. There were two (2) total respondents who answered a series of seven (7) questions. Their responses were then tabulated and grouped thematically. Further qualitative data was obtained chiefly from secondary sources, specifically research conducted regarding Netspeak and Millennial language, as well as broader communication in the contemporary global context. Primary sources are also utilized in order to provide a complete picture using firsthand accounts, statistics, and trends. The research instruments were validated by a panel of content experts before the data gathering process.

5.0 Results and Discussion 5.1 Commonly Used Netspeak Used in Facebook Messenger

Type of Netspeak	Frequency	Percentage
Abbreviation	2	3.9%
Acronyms	18	35.3%
Emojis	29	56.9%
Others	2	3.9%
Total	51	100%

Table 1 shows the most commonly used Netspeak in Facebook Messenger

The results of this question show that emojis (56.9%) are the most commonly used Netspeak, followed by acronyms (35.3%), then abbreviations (3.9%), and finally others (3.9%) that do not fall under the aforementioned types.

The researcher posits that emojis are the most commonly used Netspeak because of their usability to briefly express emotions or ideas in a visual manner. Moreover, its versatility is also worth note-taking given its particular denotations and connotations (e.g. the crying emoji is used to express sadness, but it may also be interpreted as

laughter in certain contexts; the monkey emoji can convey shyness or embarrassment, etc.). This is supported by a quantitative study that showed that emoji usage was the most common and frequently used on Facebook (Wall et al., 70). Furthermore, the use of emojis has been reported to elicit positive attitudes, particularly from the “younger generation” which includes Millennials (Prada et al., 1925).

Commonly used acronyms according to the interview are G (game), BTW (by the way), JGH (just got home), BRB (be right back), SUP (what’s up?), WYD (what are you doing?), M2M (many to mention), ILY (I love you), SLR (sorry late reply), TYT (take your time), and TY (thank you). It is likely that acronyms are commonly used Netspeak because (as the examples cited suggest) these are commonly used terms even in regular conversation, made easier to impart due to its conciseness, which is logical due to the rise of character limitations and instantaneity of the internet (e.g., Twitter, chat rooms, etc.) (McCrinkle, 2011). This is supported by quantitative studies which found that this type of Netspeak was used most frequently (Thangaraj & Maniam, 47).

Meanwhile, abbreviations substitute similar letters or words with the same pronunciation. Aside from those listed in the interview, examples include “2day” for “today”, “B4” for “before”, “F2F” for “face to face”, among others. It is likely not commonly used (in comparison to acronyms) because of the disposition of Millennials to view it as used primarily by older pioneer generations during the rise of the internet when it was reported to be the then-most common type of Netspeak used (Thangaraj & Maniam, 50).

Other types of Netspeak encompass homonyms and compounding. Homonyms are preexisting words that take on new meanings online. Examples include “bug”, which refers to a small insect found in nature, but in Netspeak refers to a flaw or failure in a system; “virus”, submicroscopic infectious agents that cause diseases, which can also mean malicious code or software that can destroy systems; “hacker”, a person who cuts things roughly, which also means a person who uses computers and the internet to illegally obtain data, and more. Lastly, compounding refers to combining or blending two words to synthesize their definitions, like “malware” which comes from the words “malicious” and “software”, “netizen” from “net” and “citizen”, “cyberspace” from “cyber” and “space”, etc. This too is common, yet so subtle that it does not typically register as Netspeak. Thus, it becomes apparent that these are not commonly used Netspeak because they do not typically appear in everyday conversation for the vast majority of Millennials.

5.2 Frequency of usage of Netspeak

	Responses	Percentage
Never	0	0%
Rarely	0	0%
Sometimes	7	13.73%

Often	8	15.69%
Always	36	70.59%
Total	51	100%

Table 2 shows the frequency of Netspeak use in Facebook Messenger

The results indicate that 70.59% of Millennials use Netspeak always, followed by 15.69% who use it often, and finally 13.73% who use it sometimes. This shows that Netspeak is a common way Millennials communicate through the popular platform of Facebook Messenger. From this, two (2) interpretations may be made. First, and in conjunction with the findings in the previous section, though the types of Netspeak used differ, Millennials use it overwhelmingly frequently. This is likely to be because Netspeak is an efficient and effective way to communicate, particularly among Millennials.

Second, this is because Facebook Messenger is a commonly used and accessible platform to many Millennials. This is supported by data that shows that in 2020, approximately 1.5 billion Millennials were Facebook users (Pew Research Center, sect. 3) and 1.3 billion are Facebook Messenger users (Georgiev, sect. 1), making up 52% of the total number of Facebook and Messenger users. Moreover, over 20 billion messages are exchanged on Messenger monthly (Georgiev, sect. 1). This is only expected to increase given the global average of approximately 777 million downloads of the Messenger application in the previous years (Statista, sect. 1). It can be inferred that the time spent on the internet communicating using Netspeak can be correlated to their proficiency, which can manifest itself when interacting with other people in other contexts (Thangaraj & Maniam 48). This is further discussed in the next section.

5.3 Extent of the usage of Netspeak

People	Mean	Interpretation
Friends	4.23	Implemented to a Very Great Extent
Family	3.70	Implemented to a Great Extent

Romantic Partner/s	4.37	Implemented to a Very Great Extent
Elderly	2.00	Seldom Implemented

Table 3 shows the extent of the use of Netspeak

The salient points of the results show that Millennials use Netspeak very frequently with their special someone (4.37) their friends (4.23) and their family (3.70), but never with the elderly (2.00) Considering the results of the first question, it can be inferred that the very frequent use with the special someone is because emojis (e.g., heart, heart eyes, etc.) and certain acronyms (e.g., “ILY” for “I love you”, “LOML” for “love of my life”, etc.) express intimacy which mere words cannot. The same analysis applies to friends who are likely also Millennials that use Netspeak, who can be communicated with informally, and who are likely to have inside jokes.

As for the family, it can be inferred that perhaps a number of family members are Millennials themselves (i.e., less than 40 years old) or are exposed to the internet at large, making the use of Netspeak with them possible for many, but not all, families. Lastly, most Millennials never use Netspeak with the elderly, perhaps because of the language barrier that hinders the elderly from understanding the message the Millennials want to convey. This language barrier can be because of age, lesser use of the internet by custom, or even socioeconomic factors.

5.4 What are the linguistic and behavioral effects of Netspeak, as well as related problems?

The discussion herein is categorized into the following themes: linguistic effects, behavioral effects, emotional effects, and problems encountered.

Linguistic effects:

- Respondent 1: Wrong spelling.
Respondent 2: Malimtan ang spelling.
(The [proper] spelling is forgotten)

Behavioral effects:

- Respondent 1:
Ma tapolan ka kay mag sige nalang kag shortcut.
(You will become lazy because you keep using shortcuts)

- Respondent 2:
Paspas maka respond.

(You can give immediate responses)

Emotional effects: (when asked if they experienced negative emotions [i.e., anger] if someone chats them using Netspeak)

Respondent 1:

Dili, pero kung sa akong mga students dili pwede.

(No, but if my students use Netspeak, it's definitely not allowed)

Respondent 2:

Wala ra, normal ra, way kalagot mas importante ma basahan... [Pero] sapoton usahay kay nay mga importanteng mga message nga need pa balik balikon ug basa kay dili man familiar tanan ang Netspeak

(No, it's normal for me, [so] there is no anger as long as I can understand the message... But I get annoyed at times if there is an important message I have to read multiple times to understand because not everyone is familiar with Netspeak.)

Problems Encountered:

Respondent 1:

Ma-misunderstand ka or ma-misunderstand nimo ang iyang i-chat labi na kung sa online kay dili man nimo makita iyang facial expression... Ma confuse ka labi na sa mga new words.

(You will be misunderstood or you will misunderstand [the message of] the sender when it is communicated through chat because you are unable to see his/her facial expression... You can get confused especially with new words.)

Respondent 2:

Naay double meaning kay di man gud nimo makita yang nawng labi na ug walay emoji... ([Some terms] can have a double meaning because you cannot see [the sender's] facial expressions, especially if they do not use emojis.)

According to the interview, the primary linguistic effect of misspelling words is attributed to how the correct spelling has been forgotten because of the frequent use of such. This can manifest itself in formal writing, as evidenced by multiple quantitative studies which found that Millennials have the tendency to use Netspeak in other contexts such as formal writing. However, the extent varies; Thangaraj & Maniam (51) claim that it is minimally used and unintentional, while Shaari & Bataineh (2015) claim that many cannot differentiate between formal and informal writing. This is a problem because it can be construed to mean a below-par grasp on the language, manifesting in poor marks. This is a common perception of a number of teachers, particularly in the context of teaching English (Nauman & Hussain, 2014). Additionally, because Netspeak terms can be new, unfamiliar, or with a double meaning, it can lead to misunderstanding or taking a long time to understand the message. This runs contrary to the purpose and characteristics of Netspeak, rendering it useless or even a hindrance in certain contexts.

Furthermore, the behavioral effects of Netspeak concern its convenience. On a positive note, it is said to make responding faster and not be a waste of time. However, this only applies if both the sender and receiver are fluent in Netspeak. On a negative note, it makes the sender and their method of responding appear lazy. This is likely the case if the receiver does not use Netspeak and instead is accustomed to more formal ways of communicating, or expects the sender to have a level of respect for the receiver who is an authority figure (e.g., students using Netspeak to talk to their teachers can be considered improper). Otherwise, the use of Netspeak does not produce a negative reaction on the end of the receiver because its use is normal and the importance of being able to read it outweighs the method of responding. Thus, the regular and intentional use of such is considered acceptable.

Thus, it can be inferred that because Netspeak can have linguistic implications that can affect formal education, and because it can elicit negative reactions from non-Netspeak users or authority figures, its use has to be contextualized properly to foster proper communication. Millennials have the necessary social-cognitive skills to do so, as discussed in the proceeding and final chapter.

6.0 Results & Discussion

The findings clearly establish that Netspeak is widely used by Millennials on Facebook Messenger. This is because of the characteristics of Netspeak which render it universal due to how easily understandable it is. These include innovation, conciseness, flexibility, and humor (Tong 471). Innovation shows creativity in creating novel elements of language, thus expanding ways to communicate. Conciseness is apparent in the brevity of Netspeak, which allows for more efficient communication. Flexibility is one of the strongest characteristics of Netspeak because anyone can create and use Netspeak - the language virtually cannot be gatekept, which makes it popular. Humor is a characteristic which evolved with Netspeak, allowing for the effective conveying of emotions. These characteristics are undoubtedly manifested in the most common Netspeak reported - in the forms of acronyms and emojis.

However, with Netspeak's continuous evolution, countless niche terms are being created or replaced. For example, Netspeak like "lewk", "shook", "yeet", and more can be construed as indecipherable nonsense in certain contexts; while Netspeak for "I love you" by older Millennials is "143", but younger Millennials write it as "ILY", "gossip" used to be "goss" but is now "tea", so on and so forth.

The implications of this are two-fold: firstly, that the use of Netspeak can be a social signifier the more niche it is, a tool for both inclusion and exclusion, especially between social groups (i.e., friends, family, romantic partner, and the elderly) as the findings suggest. Secondly, the overwhelming use of Netspeak changes the dynamics of communication in other contexts. Millennials who use Netspeak can communicate efficiently but must be cognizant of using this in more formal contexts or towards authority figures belonging to older generations, otherwise risk being misunderstood, or being perceived as lazy or disrespectful. Despite this, Netspeak remains universal and its use only continues to dominate on one of the most widely used avenues for computer-mediated communication, Facebook Messenger.

The point of contention then shifts to how Netspeak became so universal. In other words, how Millennials are able to learn countless terms and use them frequently. This is where the Social Pragmatics Theory of Language Acquisition (Tomasello 401) is applied. It states that language acquisition is a social process. That is, individuals, learn new words from others, store them in their vocabularies, and use them when applicable in certain contexts.

This tells us that Millennials are not necessarily more adept in learning words (relative to other generations), but rather have the foundational skills to do so. The primary skill needed is joint attention, or the ability to share attention with others. It is not a surface-level association, but rather an in-depth intention reading (Tomasello 402). This is enforced by the internet, which allows for interaction in a plethora of contexts with diverse individuals. Millennials need to pay attention to who they are communicating with and how they are communicating in order to apply the acquired language.

In context then, while Millennials are exposed to billions of other people on the internet, their use of Netspeak is not only predicated on if those billions of people use it too but because it is both efficient and a social signifier. It is efficient because Netspeak complies with character limitations and instantaneity. It is a social signifier because it allows the identification, and consequently inclusion or exclusion, of those who do and do not use Netspeak. For example, using the term “GG” or “good game” can identify one as a gamer; “period” can identify one as a teenage girl; so on and so forth. In that, Netspeak - much like any other language - can become part of the multifaceted identity of Millennials; this, aside from its efficiency, is what allows it to remain universal and continue to dominate.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the prevalent use of Netspeak by Millennials on Facebook Messenger affirms the Social Pragmatic Theory of Language Acquisition insofar as Millennials have the skills necessary for language acquisition of Netspeak, which they are able to continuously hone and frequently use due to the efficiency of such and due to the commonality of Facebook Messenger. This is further supported by a plethora of other studies which highlight its social aspect.

Recommendations

In order to further determine the extent of the use of Netspeak by Millennials in the contemporary global context, further research could be conducted on:

- a. Groups of Millennials: i.e., Millennials in states that speak English as a second language or do not speak English; in a certain age range, social class, or SOGIE; in or across different messaging platforms, etc.
- b. Netspeak in other contexts: i.e., Netspeak in offline conversations; in formal writing; in media and advertising, etc.

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