Examining Language Usage and Patterns in Online Conversation: Communication Gap Among Generation Y And Baby Boomers

Vithya Subramaniam\textsuperscript{a}, Norizan Abdul Razak\textsuperscript{b}\textsuperscript{*}

\textsuperscript{a}010-2100223, vitu_1118@yahoo.com, Puchong 47100, Malaysia
\textsuperscript{b}019-3664462, norjef.ukm@gmail.com, Bangi 47100, Malaysia

Abstract

Currently, with the rise of online communities, communication has shifted away from traditional modes that have long been based on face-to-face models of interaction, to a more digital approach such as social networks. Thus the acquisition of online literacy in social networks such as Facebook might create a gap or linguistic difference that distinguishes generation Y aged from 20 to 30 years old who are the active users of Facebook from the baby boomers aged from 40 years and above who are adopters of social network. Hence, the aim of this study is to examine topics they post, use of non standard language and the use of multimedia application in social network to highlight the issues that could allow misunderstandings to occur in social network conversation. The data is derived from the ‘status’ of selected Facebook users and analyzed qualitatively. The pilot findings show that there are differences in term of spelling innovations and capitalization, acronym and abbreviation, emoticons and punctuations. In the matter of content, baby boomers posts are more informative, direct and in order compared to generation Y. Baby boomers are also more likely to respond to the comments that are relevant to their post compared to generation Y. This study proposes that in order to minimize the differences and bridge the communication gaps generation Y need to formalize their writing and avoid unnecessary spelling innovations, capitalization, abbreviation, emoticons and punctuations that can course uncertainty to baby boomers. At the same time baby boomers should also be aware of the online literacy to mingle with the future generations.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +0-000-000-0000 ; fax: +0-000-000-0000 .
E-mail address: vitu1118@yahoo.com.
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1. Introduction

Social networks are defined as a body of applications that augment group interaction and shared spaces for collaboration, social connections, and aggregates information exchanges in a web-based environment (Barlett & Brag, 2006). Facebook, Myspace, Youtube and Flickr are the most commonly known social network sites containing similar as well as different features. Facebook is preferred among other social networks in this study because of it being the most popular and most heavily visited social network website (eBiz, 2010). Facebook is defined as “a social utility that helps people share information and communicate more efficiently with their friends, family and coworkers” (facebook.com). Despite the fact that Facebook was launched in 2004 as a Harvard-only Social Network site, it expanded to include other high school students, professionals inside corporate networks, and eventually everyone who have access to the online world (Cassidy, 2006). Facebook provides an opportunity to users, to create personalized profiles that include general information like education background, work background, and favorite interests and also to add links and song clips of their favorite bands, post messages on friends' pages, and post and tag pictures and videos, among other things (Rosmarin, 2007; Zywica & Danowski, 2008).

Most of the social network users are young individuals most of whom are university students. Hence, social network sites are considered to play an active role in younger generation’s daily lives (Lenhart, 2009). The relationship between the youth and their involvement in social network sites has attracted many researches that focused on young people’s social network activities in relation to their privacy concerns as pertaining in their social network usage (Lenhart et al. 2007; Pempek, Yermolayeva & Calvert, 2009; Zywica & Danowski, 2008). Similarly, comparisons of different social networks in terms of their features and users’ demographics such as age, frequency of use and their reasons for participating in social network environments remain as the most popular research areas. In this paper, communication barrier between generation Y and baby boomers in social network are highlighted and at the end of this paper instructional strategies which can be applied to accommodate different generational groups are proposed.

1.1. Statement of the problem

It should not be entirely surprising if computer messaging systems turn out to be as problematic as conversational environments. As many CMC historians have pointed out, computer networks were originally intended for data transmission, not as a means for social interaction (Reid, 1994; Rheingold, 1993). Majority of current Malaysian University students have been using Facebook communication for several years, starting in secondary school and continuing into the university years. Therefore, most university users are aware of the nature and conventions of Facebook message conversations. These university students are the generation Y and when they communicate with their superiors who are their lecturers, who could be the baby boomers, through social network it may cause misunderstanding between them. Certainly, new communication technologies such as social networks can empower young people and many do indeed explore and develop imaginative ways of making the technology work best for them (Thurlow & McKay, 2003). Thus the acquisition of online literacy in
social networks such as Facebook might create a gap or linguistic difference that distinguishes generation Y aged from 20 to 30 years old who are the active users of Facebook, from the baby boomers aged from 40 years and above who are adopters of social network.

1.2. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate the topics they post, use of non standard language and the use of multimedia in social networks to highlight the issues that could allow misunderstandings to occur in social network conversations. The study also aims to minimize the differences and bridge the communication gaps between generation Y and baby boomers.

1.3. Research Questions

These are the questions that need to be answered in this study:

i. What are the topics baby boomers and generation Y post on Facebook?
ii. What patterns of non-standard language and multimedia applications use are there among baby boomers and generation Y?
iii. To what extend is there a communication gap between baby boomers and generation Y?

2. Literature Review

2.2 Related Previous Studies

Today the world is consumed with the idea of the Internet and the advancement of technology. Everywhere one looks the Internet and the communication tools associated with new technologies, play a major role in education, politics, and the economy. With new advancements made everyday, individuals must constantly be keeping up with new trends while simultaneously making decisions on what communication medium is most beneficial for fulfilling their particular want and need. The older generation did not grow up with this recent phenomenon and so their grasp of the digital world is slower, apprehensive and less accepting to the changes that are taking place. The younger generation grew up in the fast-paced digital world; learning from an early age to communicate through mediated computerized channels. An increasing number of older generation are becoming part of the Internet constituents, following the trends of their children and changing their traditional modes of communication, which ultimately changes the quality of interpersonal communication.

In recent years, much of the communication that occurs face-to-face has moved to computer-mediated communication. Some studies show that this type of communication is just as important, with a majority of Internet users relying on email to communicate daily (Adler, et al. 2010). Although email is known as the most popular form of computer-mediated communication, social networking, text messaging, and instant messaging, are all methods that family, friends, acquaintances, or unfamiliar persons can all use to communicate (Lenhart, et al 2007).

When thinking of the Internet usage, most people associate social networks and instant messaging with the younger generations, mostly younger generation. In reality, that’s not always the case because over half of the adult Internet population are between the ages of 18 and 44, and larger percentages of older generation are doing more activities online according to surveys taken from 2006 to 2008 (Jones & Fox, 2009). Although younger generation is seen as the ‘Net Generation,’ old generation dominate Internet use in other areas. Instant messaging, social networking, and blogging have gained ground as communications tools, but email remains the most popular online activity, particularly among older Internet users. Simultaneously however, email has lost some
ground among teens. Teens are also the most likely group to use the Internet for entertainment and for communicating with friends and family. Internet users aged 12-32 are more likely than older users to read other people’s blogs and to write their own; they are also considerably more likely than older generations to use social networking sites and to create profiles on those sites. Teen users are also significantly more likely than older generations to send instant messages to friends (Jones & Fox, 2009).

The use of the Internet is broad and complex, however its use in computer-mediated communication is obviously extremely important. While in the past some argued that computer-mediated communication diminished relationships and led to lonely or hostile environments, others believe that computer-mediated communication has enhanced communication for the better; increasing social groups, allowing use to speak more openly, and enhancing verbal, emotional, and social intimacy in friendships. Generation gaps change the way people use and communicate online, and because of these differences the interpersonal skills of different generations change as well. With younger generations mostly dominating the social aspect of the Internet, more and more older generations have caught onto the trend, opening up communication platforms from one generation to another.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Instrument and Respondents

This research is a qualitative research where content analysis is used as the research instrument. This study involves 8 respondents and it is a purposive sampling from three major ethnic groups in the country (Malay, Chinese and Indian) that took part in online communication as real social networkers on Facebook. The group of respondents for generation Y consisted of both males and females with ages ranging between 21 to 26 years. The samples are from various higher institutions. The rationale of selecting people from this age group as a sample of this study is because they are considered as the generation of IT who receive most Internet influence and online communicative language. The other group of respondents for baby boomers generation consisted of both males and females aged 40 and above. The samples are professionals consisting of lecturers from various higher institutions.

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis Procedure

The data is derived from the ‘status’ of selected Facebook users and analyzed qualitatively. Daily observations were made over a period of 2 months and all conversation were retrieved and organized manually. The raw data was analyzed using Content Analysis to identify the topics that both generations posted in Facebook, occurrence of non standard words, phrases, characters or sentences contained in the status that they posted. There were several aims of Content Analysis, which include interpreting the attitudes and behavior such as the users’ perspective towards using social network, and to discover one’s meaning and purpose, for example the young generation who are getting themselves into trouble because they upload unflattering pictures which come back to haunt them, or because they post derogatory comments about their friends. Such anecdotes, often found in media, add to the popular notion of younger social network users as careless and eager to express themselves, whereas older users are generally seen as more restrained.
4. Findings

4.1 Topics posted by Baby boomers and generation Y in Facebook

In this research eight topics are introduced and it is based on Lenhart and Fox (2009) in ‘Twitter and status updating’. The topics includes expression of their current mood and activities, work/studies, family& friends, food, news, politics, sports and sharing quotes.

The major difference is the expression topic as 56 statuses posted by generation Y’s were about expression of their mood while for baby boomers only 28 of their statuses showed that they were expressing themselves. Lenhart and Fox (2009) also had a similar result as they said that youngsters are more likely to update their mood on social networks such as Twitter than the older generation:

R5GY23/2/272: Paranoid.. :/
R5GY22/1/241: *stress stress stress*I want to eat Thai food so badly tonight! Anyone?
R7GY20/1/311: Having great fun in UMASTGO programme. Thank you SERU. :)

The above example shows that generation Y update their status when they feel happy or stressed or even when they feel dissatisfaction towards others in Facebook. This study shows that the generation Y are more expressive as they never hesitate to share their feelings or mood by updating their status. Status about work or studies also showed major difference in topics that were posted on Facebook. The study showed that 12 statuses by baby boomer’s were about what they do and related to their work while only four of generation Y’s statuses were about their studies. Social network allows baby boomers to share what they do as it allows them to remember their conference date, etc (Lenhart and Fox, 2009). With regard to the other six different topics that were posted by baby boomers and generation Y it is obvious that baby boomers’ statuses have more variety of topics on Facebook compared to generation Y. Baby boomers share status about their family and friends, food, news, politics, sports and even quotes too. Meanwhile generation Y had zero posts on sports, politics and news.

4.2 Pattern of non-standard language by baby boomers and generation Y in Facebook

Thurlow and Poff (2011) proposed the brevity in the texting which was manifested in the abbreviation of lexical items. Based on the findings, it is revealed that most of the generation Y tend to do a variety of abbreviation compared to baby boomers. The use of syntactical and lexical reduction, English language shortenings, misspellings and typos, and acronyms were detected to appear more in generation Y posts than baby boomers. For example, words ‘b4’(before), “cal”(call), “shud”(should), “wel”(well) occurred in generation Y posts in Facebook which proved that they are more creative in using abbreviated words when trying to speed up their typing. Similarly in the study by Crystal (2008), he showed that words were formed when letters were used to represent syllables as seen in “ b4”, “u” and “fb”.

There is also the element of interjection such as ‘la’, ‘ah’ and ‘lah’ in the posts, it shows the informal style of posts. This is defined as informal expressions commonly understood by members of a similar culture in a region. A variety of other interjections was also used such as ‘haha’, ‘okay’ and ‘yaaa’. It is more commonly used by generation Y than baby boomers as baby boomers only used ‘la’ and ‘haha’ in their post and even that was not as frequent as generation Y’s.
Nevertheless, it should be noted that capitalization (e.g. NEVER) was used more by generation Y than baby boomers. Only 11 posts from baby boomers had capitalized words but generation Y had almost double that amount than baby boomers, which was about 23 posts that had capitalized words in it.

R6GY1/2/284 Uncle yooo uncle DON’T TEASE IN FRONT OF ME!!!..i know many language..

Above is one of the posts from generation Y. It has a sense of anger in the text message shown by the capitalizing DON’T TEASE IN FRONT OF ME which obviously means not to tease him as he knows what the uncle meant in the other language.

In terms of punctuation marks, it was found that only a few punctuations were used by these two generations. Baby boomers only use trailing dots and punctuation when it is really necessary. On the other hand it was found that generation Y used more trailing dots and a variety of multiple punctuations than baby boomers. For example multiple exclamation marks and multiple question marks were used. In this study it was revealed that the younger generation made use of the emoticon application more than baby boomers. Generation Y used a variety of emoticons such as :), =P, :p , ♥, :) , :/, :)), ^O^ and @@ but baby boomers only used the smiley :). This variety of use of emoticons by generation Y showed that they are expressive and creative to convey their meaning on Facebook. For instances, the emoticon such as the smiley and crying are used to enhance the intended meaning of the post engendered as a playful and informal style (Thurlow & McKay, 2003).

4.3 Use of multimedia application in Facebook by baby boomers and generation Y

This study showed only a small number in terms of uploading and sharing of videos by baby boomers compared to generation Y. Baby boomers uploaded a video and shared two videos within the two month period whereas generation Y uploaded and shared 19 videos within the same period. Though the study showed that baby boomers do upload many pictures, proving that they know how to use picture uploading application in social network, in terms of sharing pictures, the study showed that they only shared four pictures. Generation Y however showed a considerable amount of uploading of pictures and sharing of pictures. Based on Marketingcharts (2009) the younger generation outpaced the older ones in virtually all types of internet application use. They are more likely to have their own social networking profiles, to connect to the internet wirelessly when away from home or work, and to post videos of themselves online compared to baby boomers who only use social network in free time.
5. Conclusion

It is important to understand how the younger generation and baby boomers use and make sense of social network. This understanding can provide important information for educators who generally belong to the older generation. They are still new to social networks, and communicate with students who are from the younger generation and are active users of social network. The popular notion of younger social network users shows them as careless and eager to express themselves, whereas older users are generally seen as more restrained. Baby boomers primarily used social networks such as Facebook to show their friends what they were doing and what they cared about. They write about their vacation trips and post descriptions of their work and conferences that they are attending. In order to minimize the differences and bridge the communication gap, generation Y members need to formalize their writing and avoid unnecessary spelling innovations, capitalization, abbreviation, emoticons and punctuations that can course uncertainty to baby boomers. At the same time, baby boomers should also be aware of online literacy to mingle with the future generations.

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