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# Differences in Emotional Word Use across Generations in the United States

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**Abstract**

This paper addresses generational differences in the United States focusing on the slang words people use to express emotions. Previous research on generational differences defined variations across generations in terms of moralistic views and values (e.g., work values), but has not considered how these differences influence the expression of emotions across different generational cohorts. Extending the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis we suggest that the use of emotion words and their meaning would vary across generational cohorts dependent on shared collective experiences and worldviews. The present study examined emotion words used to express six basic emotions (happiness, sadness, fear, disgust, surprise, and anger) across five U.S. generational cohorts: Digital Native (1995-Present), Millennial (1984-1994), Generation X (1965-1984), Baby Boomer (1950-1964), and The Silent Generation (1930-1946). Participants were asked to recall words that they used in their adolescent years to express these emotions. We predicted that (1) members of the Silent Generation would report the least amount of slang emotion terms, (2) Digital Natives would use the most abbreviations, (3) emotion slang words would be a reflection of popular culture like music, film, and TV shows, and (4) use of profanity would increase with younger generations. Qualitative analysis of the results showed support for these hypotheses except for the increase in profanity use across generations. Profanity use increased from the Silent Generation to the Baby Boomers, but remained constant across the other generations. Emotion words varied by generational cohort and reflected specific cultural experiences shared among members of that cohort.

Keywords: Generational Differences, Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, Emotions, Slang

## Generational Differences in the use of Emotional Words

Previous research has not examined how cultural experiences affect the use of emotion words on colloquial language. Generational differences represent shared cultural experiences which vary from cohort to cohort. The purpose of this paper was to examine whether "slang" emotion words varied by generational cohort in the United States, reflecting shared experiences and a common connection among people in a particular cohort. For example, the term "groovy" was used in the 1960's and 1970's to express a general feeling of well-being and satisfaction. An example of this can be found in the popular Simon and Garfunkel song--"The 59th Street Bridge Song" (aka "Feelin' Groovy"), as well as songs by the Young Rascals ("Groovin") and Toni Wine and Carole Bayer Sager ("A Groovy Kind of Love").

## Cultural Differences

Cultural differences have been shown to affect the expression of emotions (Ekman, 1993; Scherer, 1997; Elfenbein, 2013; Kayyal & Russell, 2013). Culture is a set of shared meanings, interpretations, perceptions, and beliefs that develop through social participation and interaction in a community or social group. It involves the use of symbols as an expression of behavior, speech norms, and rules among people in a particular group. As Joel Sherzer (1987) stated "language is both cultural and social" (p. 296). Previous researchers have argued that language was only developed as a tool for which culture could manifest itself (Lindquist, Satpute, and Gendron, 2015; Prins & Ulijin, 1998).

We focus on the notion that emotional language, that is how we verbally express emotions, is dependent on culture. Past research has shown that the cultural and linguistic differences that exist among cultures has been linked to emotions (Sapir, 1929; Scherer, 1997; Davies, Sowden, Jarrett, Jarrett, Corbett, 1998; Prins & Ulijin, 1998).

Sapir (1929) argued that culture affects communication patterns and a shared understanding within a group. Humans require language to think. The language they develop and use will reflect their shared experiences, thoughts, and perceptions. Language connects people within a cultural group, reflecting their collective exposure to events, interpretations, and views. This view is commonly known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (Sapir, 1929; Whorf, 1956). We suggest that generations within a society experience critical events during their adolescent years that creates a common or shared cultural experience.

Prins and Ulijin (1998) strongly supported the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis and showed that culture and language were reciprocally related. They found that interpretations of mathematics problems were influenced by culturally shared thoughts and schemas among school age children in South Africa. Knowledge of mathematics could not compensate for problems caused by ordinary language and culture deficits. When the language failed to have words that described the mathematical principles, the children performed poorly. Culture played a large role in the readability and interpretation of simple mathematics problems.

Davies et al., (1998) found that "perception can be modified by experience, and experience can be shared by language" (p. 2). Cultural influences affected the responses of Setswana speakers, who only have five basic color terms as compared to native English speakers who have eleven. Participants were asked to decipher which of the colors were unlike the others. Setswana speakers were less accurate than English speakers because they made fewer distinctions among colors. For example, they would label more colors as simply blue while English natives labeled these as blue-green or made other fine distinctions among the colors.

There is, however, some dispute as to whether language varies by culture. A long-standing example used to the support the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis has been the belief that Eskimo's have more words for snow than people from the rest of the U.S. Whorf had argued that Eskimos had nearly 200 words for snow (Whorf, 1956). Martin (1986) found that there were only two lexical roots in the Eskimo language for snow, while these can be combined with many different endings; this is less than the 200 unique words proposed by Whorf. Reboul (2012) argued that the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis may be limited to certain simple stimuli that are bound to vary from culture to culture such as numbers and colors.

**Culture and Emotion**

While there is controversy about the generalizability of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, one area that has received a great deal of attention is cultural variation in emotion. Taiwanese is known to have about 750 emotion words compared to 230 in Malay (Boucher, 1979) and 2,000 in English (Wallace & Carson, 1973). Russell (1991) observed English emotion words that were missing in other languages and found that several idioms of Malaysia (Chewong), Philippines (Iiongot), Australian (Pintupi), Ecuador (Quichua) and Sri Lanka (Sinhalese), were missing a word for "guilt". English also lacks emotion words found in other cultures, for example, the German word "schadenfreude" means the enjoyment of another person's suffering (Leach, Spears, Branscombe & Doosje, 2003). English also lacks a word such as "amae", which in Japanese means the feeling of pleasurable dependence on another person, such as being dependent on a parent as a toddler (Doi, 1973).

The constructionist approach to emotion suggested that emotions were purely social constructs and their primary function was social. Lindquist et al., (2015) investigated whether impairing language accessibility of a particular emotion, impaired emotion perception. They used semantic satiation that involved repeating an emotion out loud 30 times. These words were more available and allowed the participants to process the emotion more quickly. Emotions that were not satiated were harder to access. Participants then judged whether facial expressions represented similar emotion categories. Participants who were exposed to semantic satiation were quicker and more accurate at matching the two facial expressions. Temporary inability to access emotion words (those not saturated) led to poorer identification of facial expressions reflecting these emotions.

In addition, when Lindquist et al., (2015) studied the Herero, an African tribe, they found that the Herero were more likely to group unpleasant emotions (anger, disgust, fear) together in one category while their English counterparts were more likely to use discrete emotions. They suggested this supported the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis because when there was a lack of negative emotional words evident in the Herero culture, these emotions were harder to distinguish. Elfenbein (2013) analyzed the cultural differences in the expression of emotion amongst Japanese natives and Japanese-Americans on the six basic emotions. He found that each group had a difficult time deciphering the particular emotions being displayed despite the similarity of participant and ethnic background. When participants were culturally related, the emotional appraisal was quicker. Ultimately, culture plays a role in emotional responses and the words used to express them.

In emotion theory, a competing perspective is universality. Researchers, who advance the universality position, argue that emotions are cross-cultural, but certain facial expressions associated with these emotions vary from culture to culture. Across several studies, Ekman (1993) found evidence that the recognition of emotional facial expressions and the spontaneous expression of emotions on faces were universal. For basic emotions such as fear, anger, and joy people were able to identify the emotion expressed on faces from a culture different from their own. For example, facial expressions of Americans and Canadians could be accurately recognized by people of Papua New Guinea and Tahiti. Also, if people's faces were posed to reflect facial expressions of basic emotions, they could correctly identify the emotion reflected regardless of their culture.

Scherer (1997) examined 7 emotions across 37 cultures. He found that cultural factors such as; geopolitical region, religion, individualism, masculinity, affluence, urbanism, cinema, tropical climate, and frequent rain seemed to affect the appraisals of emotions. For example, African respondents seemed to appraise events as more immoral, unfair, and externally caused as well as expecting more bad things to occur, when compared to other regions such as north and central Europe. Africans also expressed greater levels of sadness, guilt, anger, fear, shame, and disgust compared to Asians, Mediterraneans, and Europeans. This could explain why respondents from one culture sometimes inaccurately interpret a particular emotion expressed by an individual from another culture.

Further research, however, suggested that emotions may have both a universal and cultural component (Lindquist et al., 2015). Basic emotions may be universal, but the variety of emotions expressed and the way emotions are expressed is culturally dependent.

Scherer, Clark-Poiner, Mortillaro (2011) found that there were different types of facial expressions for varying types of emotions. For example, when experiencing panic, the inner brows and lids rise compared to anger in which the inner brows and lips lower. They found that when there was a western decoder and a western encoder, they had much higher accuracy at recognizing happiness, surprise, sadness, fear, disgust and anger as opposed to a western decoder and non-western encoder.

Kayyal and Russell (2013) investigated the ability of Americans and Palestinians to judge spontaneous emotions through photographs. Americans were able to assess their fellow Americans' basic emotions as well as Palestinians' in happiness, sadness, anger, surprise, and disgust, but less accurately in blended facial expressions such as perplexed and interested. This demonstrated that both universality and culture play a functional role in the assessment of emotions.

One aspect of culture that has not received attention in the emotion literature focuses on differences across generations. Based on the literature reviewed, we propose that cultural differences among generations would be reflected in the words members of a generational cohort use to express and describe their emotions. Past research showed that the generation individuals belong to has a huge impact on their political views, values, and beliefs. People who belong to a particular generation grow together experience major events that affect their development, views, and the meaning they draw from shared events. Previous research, however, has not examined how different generations express emotions. We propose that members of a generation develop a shared terminology and use a common set of words, including slang words, to determine how they feel. Specifically, this paper argues that generational differences influence the expression of emotions across generations.

**Generational Differences**

A generation is a group of individuals, who are approximately the same age, have similar ideas, and attitudes, and who experienced the same meaningful life events during critical periods of development (e.g. the Great Depression, the Vietnam War). According to the Pew Research Center (2015) generations shape people's' views of the world through shared experiences.

Generations are defined by age cohorts and allow researchers to compare different generations at a given age, and compare the differences among the generations. Cohorts allow researchers to group people who have shared common experiences that impact their values, outlooks, perceptions of events, and worldviews. These generational differences are usually focused in a geographical region.

This paper focuses on generational differences in the United States that reflect common experiences individuals share as they develop. For example, most Millennial's were teenagers when the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center occurred in 2001. Being so young, this event impacted the way these adolescents viewed the world, as well as the way they grew up. One Millennial observed: "It took my innocence. Even now, I catch myself looking at people differently" (NY Post, "Generation 9/11: Growing Up in the Shadow of the Towers", 2014). The terrorist attacks changed the security these young people felt, how they looked at the world and the people around them, and increased their feelings of distrust. Society as a whole became much more security conscious and protective of children raised post 9/11.

The present study focused on five different U. S. generations: Silent Generation, Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and Digital Natives. The Silent Generation consists of people born from 1928 to 1945 who were primarily influenced by events such as the Great Depression and World War II. They tend to hold conservative views and traditional family values. Members of the Silent Generation cohort follow rules, are hardworking, conform easily, and tend to be very patriotic (Taylor, 2014).

Baby Boomers were born between 1946 and 1964 and were influenced by The Civil Rights Movement, the Cold War, and the Kennedy assassination. Baby Boomers are free-spirited and individualistic (Taylor, 2014). Baby Boomers tend to be workaholics, rebellious towards their parents, strive to 'make a difference', and leave their mark at work and in the world (Taylor, 2014).

Generation X was born from 1965 to 1980 and were influenced by the Vietnam War, the end of the Cold War, and the mass return of their mothers into the workforce. They are known as the "latch-key kids" because with both parents working, they would often go home to empty houses after school. Members are labeled as slackers with a "carpe diem" attitude (Taylor, 2014). They tend to be independent, informal, and reject rules and institutions.

Millennials were born between 1981 and 1994 and were influenced by the Oklahoma City Bombing, the Columbine school shooting, Y2K, and the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Millennials are sometimes called the "entitlement" generation (Taylor, 2014). They are the first generation to have helicopter parents: Parents who hover in an attempt to protect their children. Their "freetime" was typically overscheduled with organized sports, music lessons, art classes, and play dates. Millennials are more racially and ethnically diverse than older generations. They tend to be informal and more tolerant of others (Taylor, 2014).

Digital Natives were born from 1995 to the present and were very young or not yet born when the 9/11 terrorist attacks occurred. They were teens when the Great Recession started, and the Sandy Hook elementary school shooting occurred. They are highly connected, very independent, and have no concern for their own privacy (Prensky, 2001). They live in a society that always had smartphones and social media like Twitter and Facebook. According to Prensky, "Computer games, email, the Internet, cell phones and instant messaging are integral parts of their lives" (2001, p. 1).

The Pew Research Center (2015) defined three different generational effects: life cycle, period, and cohort. The life cycle effect reflects differences among generations that can be attributed to different stages in the life cycle. The period effect reflects historical events and social forces that affect everyone, despite their age or generation.

The cohort effect reflects how different generations experience things or events during their preteen or adolescent years that have a profound effect on their development and shapes their views and outlook. We are primarily interested in cohort effects.

**Research on Generational Differences**

Twenge, Freeman and Campbell (2012) compared Baby Boomers, Generation X'ers, and Millennial's, at the age of 18, on life goals, concern for others, and civic orientation and social capital. When asked about their life goals, Millennials and Generation X'ers rated finance, being a leader, and living close to family as more important than Baby Boomers. Millennials and Generation X'ers also rated concern for others as lower in importance than Baby Boomers. Baby Boomers were the most involved in politics and cared the most about civic orientation and social capital.

Steininger and Lesser (1974) asked students and their parents to rate how much they agreed with statements of liberal to conservative views. Parents agreed with more conservative statements on topics such as: premarital sex, teen birth control, communism vs. capitalism, and the legalization of marijuana than did the students.

Patten and Fry (2015) analyzed Millennials and the Silent Generation when they were both 18-33. The researchers found that Millennials were more educated than their grandparents, and more Millennial women had bachelor's degrees than millennial males. This is a reversal from the Silent Generation. Millennial women were also more likely to be working than Silent Generation women at the same age, however, less Millennials overall were working then their Silent Generation counterparts at the same age. This difference may be attributed to the fact that more Millennials were attending college. Millennials were twice as likely to not marry compared to the Silent Generation; the average age for a woman to marry increased from 21 to 27, and for men from 23 to 29. Lastly, the researchers found that Millennials were more likely to be racially and ethnically diverse than the Silent Generation. This is attributed to immigration and interracial marriage.

**Communication Across Generations**

Across generations, differences have been found in communication patterns. Facebook users aged 13 to 18 frequently mentioned homework, school, and Justin Bieber (Kern, Eichstaedt, Schwartz, Park, Ungar, Stillwell, Kosinki, Dziurzynski, & Seligman, 2014). Facebook users aged 19 to 22 frequently mentioned roommate, college, and study. Facebook users aged 23 to 29 mentioned work, apartment, and wedding. Facebook users over 30 mentioned family and health concerns in their posts. Teenagers were much more likely than other groups to use emoticons. This research highlighted generational differences in both communication and the expression of emotion.

**Hypotheses**

Based on research on cultures influence on emotion and generational differences, we hypothesized that the words used to describe feelings and emotions would vary across generations. In particular we predicted that: (1) members of the Silent Generation would use the least amount of slang emotion terms, (2) Digital Natives would use the most abbreviations, (3) profanity would increase with younger generations, and (4) emotion slang words would be a reflection of popular culture like music, film, TV shows, and celebrity figures.

**Method**

**Participants**

One hundred and seven participants (34 male, 73 female) were recruited through: flyers posted around a medium northeastern university campus and its surrounding town, e-mail's sent to faculty, staff, and students, visits to nursing homes, word of mouth, and participant pool recruitment. Participants' mean age was 40.9 (range=18-89). Twenty-five participants represented the Silent Generation and were born between the years 1929 and 1948. Twenty participants represented the Baby Boomers and were born between 1953 and 1966. Nineteen participants represented Generation X and were born between 1969 and 1980.

Twenty-three participants represented the Millennial Generation and were born between 1990-1995. Twenty participants represented the Digital Natives and were born between 1997 and 1999.

**Measures & Procedures**

All participants were interviewed for 30 minutes. They were asked to recall slang terms they used to describe the six basic emotions (happiness, sadness, fear, anger, surprise, and disgust). They were instructed to recall the terms they used most frequently during their adolescent years. If participants could not recall the slang word they used at the time, they were provided with an example. For each basic emotion, an example word used typically by members of a specific generation was provided to participants to prompt their memory. These words were given based upon previous research by Dalzell (2009). For example, for the Baby Boomers for happiness the word "groovy" was provided. The interviewer took extensive notes for each of the interviews. Interviews were also audio taped when the participant consented. Audiotapes were transcribed word for word. Notes and audio recordings were compared for accuracy.

**Analysis**

Two coders independently reviewed the notes and audiotape transcripts. They coded the words participants used to describe the six basic emotions: happiness, surprise, sadness, anger, disgust, and fear. Approximately 20% (22/104) of the interviews were coded by both coders (Silent Generation 5/23, Baby Boomers 4/20, Generation X 4/19, Millennials 5/23, and Digital Natives 4/20). The interviews used to determine reliability were randomly selected. The overall reliability of the coding was 93.6% agreement on the words representing the emotions.

All discrepancies were discussed and resolved. Words that were direct derivatives of the basic emotion label (e.g. happy for happiness) were regarded as equivalent. Only words that were mentioned by at least two or more participants were counted. The rationale was that if only one participant mentioned a word, we felt it could simply be idiosyncratic. If the same word was used for two different emotions (e.g. surprise and happiness), it was counted for both emotions. Emotion words with similar roots were coded as the same word (e.g. amazed and amazing, creeped out and creepy). We then counted the number of mentions of each word within particular generations. We calculated chi square differences in the frequency of mentions across generations and z-tests for proportion comparisons, when appropriate.

**Results**

The main prediction of our study was that the words recalled would vary across generations. In total words reported, there were 438 coded emotion words across all five generations: The Silent Generation used 48 (M = 1.92), Baby Boomers used 82 (M = 4.1), Generation X used 73 (M = 3.84), Millennials used 130 (M = 5.65), and Digital Natives used 105 (M = 5.25). A chi square analysis (corrected for sample size) showed a significant difference in the number of emotion words reported by the Silent Generation as compared to the other four generations combined, $x^2(1) = 25.14$, $p = 0.00001$.

On average, members of the Silent Generation mentioned 3.36 emotion words, Baby Boomers mentioned 6.85, Generation X mentioned 6.89, Millennials mentioned 13.30, and Digital Natives mentioned 10.75. Figure 1 depicts the word clouds for each of the five generational cohorts showing the most frequently mentioned words by generation. The figure depicts the number of individuals mentioning each word with larger print words being mentioned more frequently than smaller print words. For the Silent Generation, the popular emotion words included "down" and "bright eyed and bushy tailed," for Baby Boomers—"cool" and "pissed," for Generation X—"Oh My God" and "Awesome," for Millennials—"shit" and "tight," and for Digital Natives—"OMG" and "tight."

We found that certain words appeared to transcend generational lines. For example, while the expression "Oh My God" was used across all generations, its frequency varied by generation. A one-tailed, z-score test of the proportions showed that Digital Natives, Millennials, and Generation X used "Oh My God" significantly more than the Baby Boomers and Silent Generation ($z = 3.64$, $p. = .0001$ Figure 2 shows the number of mentions of "Oh My God" corrected for sample size across the five generations. Digital Natives used it in every emotional context to represent a wide range of emotions from happiness to anger to surprise and were likely to use the abbreviation "OMG".

In addition, "Wow" was also used across generations for surprise, "down" for sadness and "gross" for disgust. "Pissed" was used in every generation except the Silent Generation for anger. "Cool" was used by all generations to express happiness with the exception of the Digital Natives. The term "shit" or some derivative was used in every generation except the Silent Generation. Millennials used it across all emotional categories.

We also predicted that each generation would use unique words, specific to that generation, to describe the six basic emotions. In addition, we predicted that the Silent Generation would use fewer unique words than the other generations. In terms of unique words, the Silent Generation reported 19 unique words, Baby Boomers 41, Generation X 26, Millennials 54, and Digital Natives 46. While the Silent Generation reported 19, the other generations reported an average of 43.15 unique words ($x^2(1) = 22{,}72$, $p = 0.0001$). Thus, supporting our second prediction that the Silent Generation would use the least amount of unique emotion words.

Unique to the Silent Generation were the words "bright-eyed and bushy tailed" to describe happiness, and "phooey" to describe disgust. Baby Boomers reported the use of the phrase "what's happening" to describe happiness, and "raunchy" to describe disgust. Interestingly, the term "groovy" was not spontaneously mentioned by the Baby Boomers and even when used as a prompt, participants indicated that they did not use the word frequently. Generation X reported that among their peers, popular words to describe happiness were "rad," "fly," and "blissed out." "Livid" and "vexed" were used for anger, "putrid" was used to describe disgust. Millennials reported using "gassed" for happiness, "grimy" for sadness, and "stanky" for disgust. Digital Natives reported that their peers used "blue" to describe sadness, "shmegy" to describe disgust, and "skimp" to describe anger.

Our third prediction was that Digital Natives would use more abbreviations compared to other generations. Digital Natives used abbreviations such as LOL (laugh out loud), and SMH (shaking my head), OMG (oh my god), and FML (fuck my life). The Silent Generation, Baby Boomers, and Generation X did not report using abbreviations. Millennial participants reported using only OMG. While other generations used the phrase "Oh my God" they did not abbreviate it as "OMG."

Our fourth prediction was that there would be an increase in profanity across generations was not supported. Profanity included religious blasphemies and other obscene language (e.g. hell, damn, fuck, Oh My God). While the Chi Square analysis showed that the number of mentions varied across the five generations $x^2(1) = 53.30$, $p < 0.00001$, the Silent Generation used very few profane words, whereas profane word usage was approximately equal across the other four generations (See Figure 3).

## Discussion

### Interpretation

The primary purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between emotional words used and generational differences. We predicted that each generational cohort would function as its own culture thereby producing unique emotion terms. As predicted, the Silent Generation had the least amount of overall mentions compared to the other generations, while Millennials had the most. Digital Natives did produce more abbreviations than the other generations. Contrary to our predictions there was not a continuous increase in profanity across generations.

An example of the crossover from popular culture to word usage can be found in the use of Bright-Eyed and Bushy-tailed by members of the Silent Generation. This was a 1956 song by Eileen Barton and Jimmy Wakely that was popular during the adolescent years of the Silent Generation. A common word generated by participants in the Baby Boomer generation was "what's happening" which appeared to reference the catchphrase of the character Rerun in the popular 1976 show "What's happening." Generation X participants recalled the expression "sweet" which was used to describe happiness and was featured on the Billboard top 100 songs in the 1983 hit single "Sweet Dreams" by The Eurythmics.

For Millennials, expressions such as "are you kidding me" were found in several movies such as "Ten Things I Hate About You" in 1999. Millennials used the expression "popping" which was featured in the popular song "Popping'" by Chris Brown which was on the Billboard charts in 2005.

Digital Natives recalled using the expression "Lit" which was featured in Wiz Khalifa's song "Get Lit" 2015. The term "amazing" for surprise and happiness has been featured in Bruno Mars hit song "Just the way you are" in 2010.

To examine whether common usage of terms in print corresponded to our data, we conducted an analysis of word usage using Google's Ngram viewer search engine which charts the usage of words in print sources from the 1800's to 2000's. We examined the usage for two terms more frequently used by Millennials and Digital Natives than any other generation: "popping" and "tight." Figure 4 depicts the frequency of the word "popping." The graph shows a sharp increase in usage since the 1980's, which coincides with the results reported by our participants

Likewise, the term "tight" showed an uptick in usage for Millennials and Digital Natives. Figure 5 depicts a decrease in usage of the word "tight" in print from the 1960's to the 1980's and an increase in usage starting in the mid 1980's.

As predicted, the Silent Generation had the least amount of overall mentions compared to the other generations, while Millennials had the most. Digital Natives did produce more abbreviations than the other generations.

Contrary to our predictions there was not a continuous increase in profanity across generations. All profane mentions were still drastically lower for the Silent Generation than for the other 4 cohorts.

**Comparison to Previous Knowledge**

Consistent with the Sapir-Wharf hypothesis (Sapir, 1961; Whorf, 1956), we found there to be unique words particular to a generation. The emotion words that are unique to a particular generation allow us to categorize that generation as a type of cultural group with their own way of expressing themselves.

People with similar backgrounds, beliefs, values, and experiences use the same words to describe emotions. Elfenbein (2013) observed that there is an "in-group advantage" in that people perceive emotions more easily when they are expressed in a familiar way. We believe that there is an in-group advantage to being in a specific generation; individuals have an easier time understanding emotion words that people from their own generation use.

Ekman (1993) found evidence that the recognition of emotional facial expressions and the spontaneous expression of emotions on faces were universal. People were able to identify the emotion expressed on faces from cultures different than their own. This universality principle can be applied to our findings. Each generation reported emotion words that were unique to that generation, but each generation also reported words that the other four generations also used. We can attribute this universality to three explanations: 1) Younger individuals grow up listening to an older generations' way of speaking, and acquire some of the words into their own vocabulary thus passing down a word; 2) Because of social media, Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and Digital Natives, are all being exposed to the same stimuli, and are acquiring the same emotional words; and 3) Different cultures are able to accurately assess another culture's expression of the six basic emotions (Kayyal & Russell, 2013).

Past and present research is important because we can learn about different generations and how and why they express emotions the way they do. This has important implications for social interactions where members of various generations must interact together such as in the workplace or in families.

**Limitations**

There are several potential limitations to the current study. First, because this was a qualitative study the numbers of participants in each generation was small. In addition, the participants were all from the same geographical area. Future research will need to determine to what extent these results can be generalized. Another methodological concern was that not all of the interviews were audio taped due to lack of consent by the participants. Thus, analysis for this set of interviews relied on handwritten notes taken during the interviews.

By the very nature of generational research, our participants in the Silent and Baby Boomer Generations were at the older end of the spectrum. To get a roughly equivalent number of participants in all cohorts, participants were recruited from the local community including from nursing homes. Only individuals referred to the researchers by the nursing home staff as capable of providing consent were included in the study. No individuals with clinically diminished memory (e.g., dementia or Alzheimer's disease) was included. Given their age, it is possible that it was more difficult for participants in older generations to recall terms they used during their adolescent years. They were, however, able to recall many anecdotes about their adolescence. Members of the Silent Generation cohort often indicted that they simply did not use that type of "slang" terminology and they were often committed to this position. They reported being more formal in the expressions they used. Baby Boomers, on the other hand, reported that they frequently used slang terms. One way to examine this might be to examine archival data. We used Google's ngram to support the change in frequency term usage reported by members of different cohorts. Indeed, archival data from print sources showed a corresponding change in usage for words Millennials and Digital Natives reported using frequently.

Only one participant from a generation other than the Digital Natives spontaneously reporting using abbreviations when recalling their emotions. Future research may need to investigate this using an alternate methodology. If a survey was conducted instead of a verbal interview it is possible that more individuals would indicate that they used abbreviations to express their emotions.

**Future Research**

Future research in this area could focus on why the individuals chose the emotion terms they associate with certain basic emotion. In addition, because of technology, individuals from the Millennial and Digital Native generations now have a much different way of communicating (i.e. Facebook, texting, Snapchatting, Twitter, Skyping, etc.) than their parents did several decades ago (i.e. talking on the phone). Researchers may want to examine how the use of social media and technology influences emotion expression and the spread of using emotionally charged words. For example, the use of the word "bae" as a term of endearment for a friend or loved one was not part of the vernacular until the early 2000's. Because they are heavily influenced by social media and technology, Millennials and Digital Natives may acquire, use, and then drop slang emotion terms more rapidly than previous generations. One way to examine this might be to study Twitter posts of individuals from different generations to examine the ebb and flow of words used for emotional expression. Some questions future research may want to address include: How do differences in communication technology, influence how members of different generations express their feelings and emotions? Does the use of emojis, and emoticons to express feelings and communicate vary across generations? Does the release of new emojis reflect changes in how individuals communicate and does this vary by generation?

Another potential line of research would be to extend these results to other geographic locations. The premise of this paper is that generational differences form part of the culture that individuals experience and that this has an impact on emotional words used to describe how a person feels. Due to language differences, the words used by individuals from different countries will vary a great deal. Would this also be greatly influenced by generational differences within those geographic regions. As Stokes (2015) noted, for European Millennials economic stagnation from the 2008 recession has continued unabated. Millennials reported satisfaction with their country's direction varied a great deal across European countries. While 70% of German Millennials were satisfied with the direction their country was headed, only 6% of Greek Millennials were. European Millennials also had a negative outlook for the next generation's prospects. Examining how generational differences vary across these geographic regions and the impact this has on emotional expression would be interesting.

**Conclusion & Implications**

A generational cohort can be thought of as possessing its own culture, and thus might be expected to develop its own terminology to express emotions. Each generation shares beliefs, values, and collective experiences. The present study found that while there are emotional expressions shared across all five generations, each cohort demonstrated the use of unique emotional expressions.


Figure 1: Emotion words most frequently reported by each generational cohort.

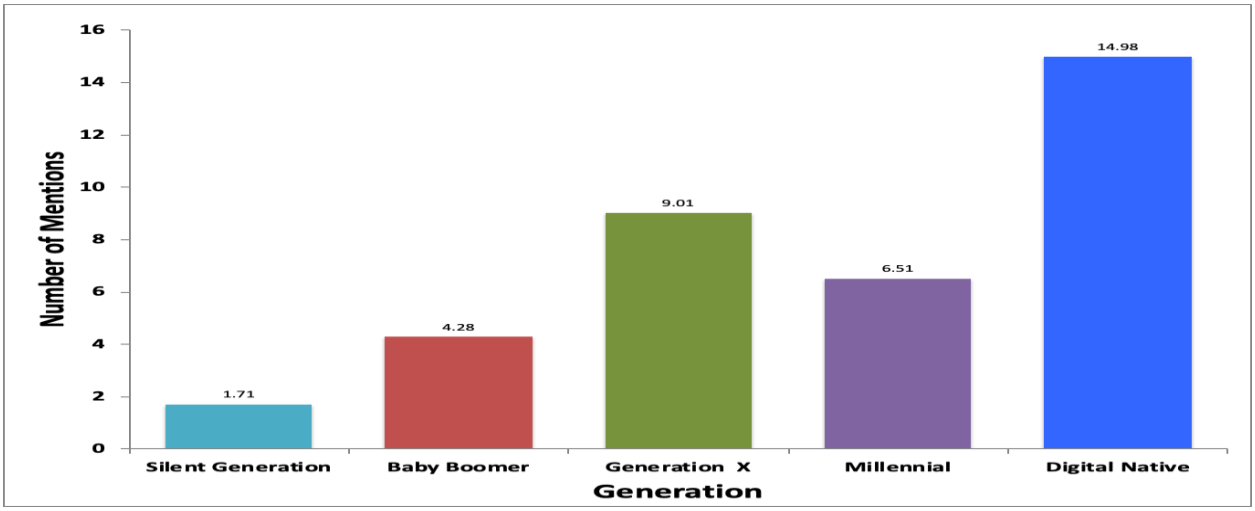


Figure 2: Usage of the phrase “Oh My God” across generations.

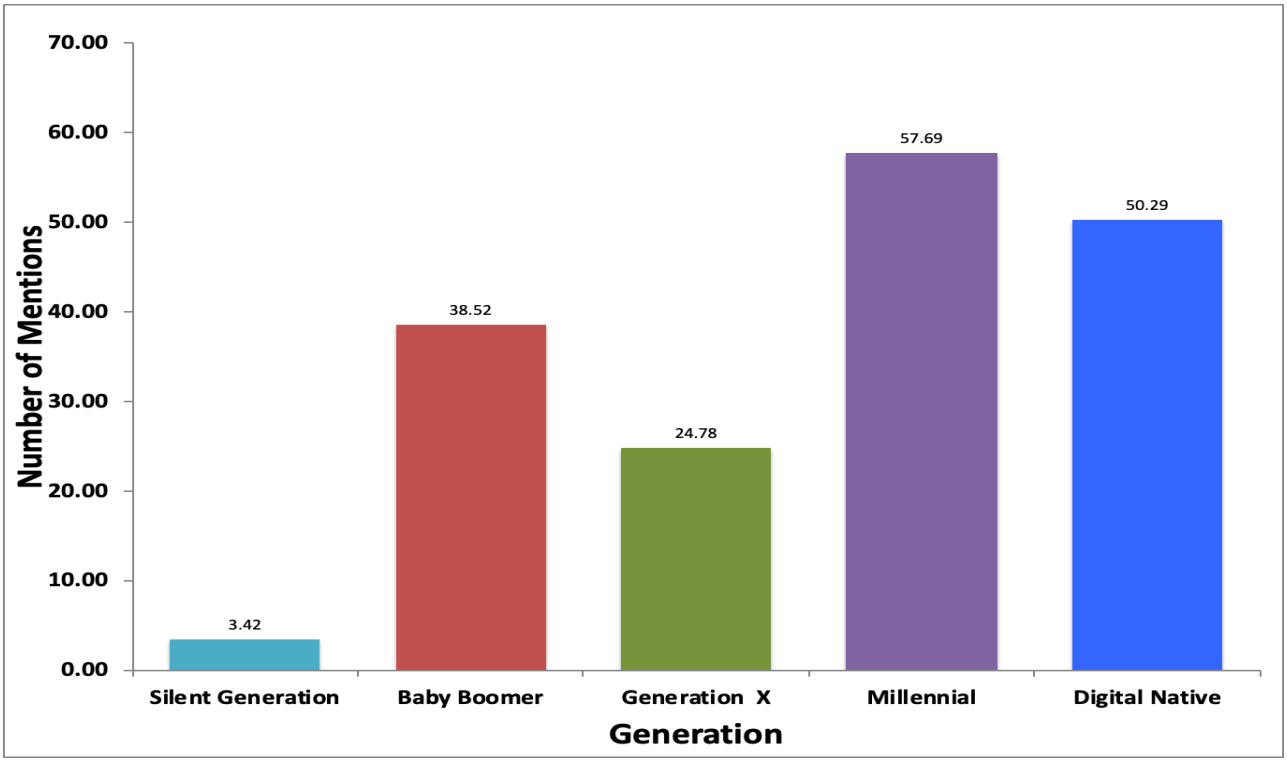


Figure 3: Usage of Profane Words Across Generations


Figure 4: Google Ngram of term “popping.”


Figure 5: Google Ngram for the term “tight.”

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