# Laughing on the Internet: Age-Grading in the Use and Understanding of Written Laughter

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## Abstract

This study uses sociolinguistic lens to examine laughter, which has been largely considered a non-verbal element of speech. Focusing on written laughter, or laughter that is typed in computer-mediated communication, this study examines how different age groups (youth, adults, and seniors) used and understood written laughter and whether age-grading shaped written laughter use and understanding. Two data sets are analyzed: (1) a corpus of 5,000 laughter comments from a Facebook group page, and (2) interviews. The findings show that age-grading indeed shaped the (non)expression of written laughter. Meanwhile, age-grading did not appear to differentiate how written laughter was interpreted by FB users from different age groups. Regardless of their age, the participants understood the various kinds of written laughter because of the context surrounding it.

**Keywords**:    written laughter, Facebook, age-grading, sociolinguistics

## 1.     Introduction

Social media has become a core feature of life in this Internet age. Aside from the ease of communication it brings, it also offers entertainment through posts and memes. We tend to experience different emotions from a multitude of posts— we can empathize, we can get scared, but it is always special that we can laugh just by scrolling on our phones. Expressing laughter and sharing it with others can be done online to create connections and engender camaraderie. While laughter has been construed a non-verbal element of speech (Grundlingh, 2020), the increasing use of computer-mediated communication (CMC) has allowed it to be converted into what McKay (2015) calls "written laughter" or laughter that is typed in a form of CMC, such as a messenger group chat.

        This distinct representation of laughter shapes social interactions in a manner distinct to the way laughter works in face-to-face conversation. Since written laughter in CMC is devoid of the typical non-verbal cues that help express emotion such as facial expression,

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intonation, and body language, how can interactants ensure that the intention of laughter presented in online spaces is understood correctly? This question invites a sociolinguistic investigation of laughter.

Looking at how different age groups perceive and understand messages aligns with the aim of sociolinguistics to reveal and explain how language is used in social life (Coupland & Jaworski, 2009). In addition, using the concept of age-grading to look at the recurring pattern on the language behavior of the speakers can reveal whether and how a pattern of language use can be associated with a particular life stage (Cheshire, 2005; Eckert, 2007). For instance, studies have reported the tendency of the youth to use non-standard capitalization and spelling, while adults seem to prefer more standardized versions, and the older generation tend to stick to the language variation that they are familiar with (e.g., Wagner, 2012). Examining whether this age effect is also evident in written laughter practices is how this study hopes to build on sociolinguistic literature on age-grading and language practice.

## 1.1 Research Questions

There is a need to study the different perceptions of different age groups as regards a message so that (a) the limited literature about age-grading and written laughter is filled and (b) those involved in the communication process could understand how different age groups use and understand written laughter. To examine how written laughter on the internet is used and perceived differently by various age groups, the study aims to answer the following:

1. How do different age groups express written laughter on the internet?
2. How do different age groups understand the written laughter of others?
3. Is the concept of age-grading observed in the different age groups' use and understanding of written laughter?

## 1.2 Literature Review

### 1.2.1 Written Laughter as a Linguistic Practice

For a long time, laughter has been considered as a non-verbal element. Ruch et al. (2019) acknowledged that research on laughter is growing, but most studies focus on the vocal act of laughter. For instance, their own research derived six characteristics of vocal laughter to describe its valence. Rodat (2019) also emphasized how different vowel sounds in laughter could bring different intentions. Vocal laughter was also studied by Ginzburg et al. (2020) to show that laughter, as a non-verbal social signal, is not devoid of meaning and can potentially be considered to have semantic and pragmatic value. It must be noted, however, that while these studies focused on vocal laughter, it still considered laughter as a non-verbal element of speech. With laughter being typically seen as a non-verbal element of speech and

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not a linguistic phenomenon, Grudlingh (2020) puts forward that if it becomes a "written or typed text," it can now be studied using linguistic methods and theories (p. 2). This idea was also proposed by Levisen (2019), who argued that laughter is "a group of highly marginalized expressive words" and proposed the need to examine it in terms of typology and in the context of cross-linguistic studies (p. 110). In the same study, Levisen (2019) used the term "typed laughter" to represent laughter in social media contexts.

With the increasing use of CMCs, the ways of expressing laughter expanded. McKay (2015), in her study, used the term "written laughter" and "spelled-out laughter" as she looked into the various forms of laughter used on Twitter. The forms of laughter explored are "lol", "haha", and the laughing-crying emoji "😂" Her study presented that while forms of written laughter were familiar features in Twitter discourse, "lol" and "😂" were the most commonly used. This result could be attributed to the limited character allowance of 280 characters per Tweet at the time of the study, thus limiting users to the use of "lol" and emojis.

Building on McKay's (2015) work, Grundlingh (2020) looked at the idea of creating an online identity through the use of a specific language, a notion that has received more attention in research in CMC and sociolinguistics. The study has considered how the data and research in previous studies on written laughter and language identity can be combined to support arguments that laughing in a specific language online showed the language identity of an individual and is potentially an important aspect of second language acquisition. The findings showed that online users expressed their language identity through written laughter, e.g., 55555 for Thai, 哈哈哈 for Chinese, Kkkkkk for Korean, and Hahahaha for English. Moreover, the study showed that written laughter can assist language learners in conveying their messages effectively in an online environment. In pointing this out, Grudlingh (2020) contributes to literature by demonstrating how laughter can build an online language identity.

Overall, studies like that of Ruch et al. (2019), Rodat (2019), and Ginzburg et al. (2020) focused on vocal laughter and the meanings behind voiced laughter, expanding the understanding of laughter as a vocal, non-verbal element of speech. At the same time, the work of McKay (2015), Levisen (2019), and Grudlingh (2020) propose the need to view written laughter as a linguistic phenomenon. With fewer studies examining the latter, this current research seeks to contribute to the sociolinguistic understanding of laughter as a language practice.

## 1.2.2    Different Ages' Online Written Laughter

Cheshire (2005) provided a brief history of the study of language change in the community and a background on the concepts relating to age as a sociolinguistic factor. First, she defined "age-specific" use of language as "the changing language used during the lifespan of an individual" and "generation-specific" use of language as "the language of different cohorts of individuals living within a speech community" (p. 1). Next, she highlighted the distinction between "chronological age", or how many years have passed since birth, "biological age", or a person's physical maturity, and "social age", which is often related to life events. Through this, she was able to clearly define the terms used when talking about age in relation to sociolinguistic contexts.

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It was then emphasized that age grading is "a change of [linguistic] behavior with age that repeats itself in each generation" (Cheshire, 2005, p. 3). There has been a certain linguistic pattern observed for each age group once a person becomes part of that age group. In age grading, the youth, those who are 20 to 30 years of age (Okombo, 2020), has often been perceived to use more slang or non-standard forms of the language (Wagner, 2012). The youth's actual slang words may change from generation to generation, but the process of creating specialized in-group words during this time in life persists over time (Cheshire, 2005).

Age-preferential features of language have also been studied. Cheshire (2005) noted that adolescents usually use language variants that are socially stigmatized, and such variants are influenced by their peers. Once they reach adulthood or their middle years, they adapt to the norms and values of mainstream society, thus tailoring their language for the workplace. This observation was supported by Wagner (2012) since the youth usually abandons their in-group slang once they grow older. Finally, the study shows that older people tend to avoid using colloquial expressions popularized in social practice and either maintain the language they already use or revert to a variant they are most comfortable speaking.

Age grading can be a possible explanation why the younger users of a language tend to have a non-standard/ less prestigious variant of a language. Oftentimes, people their age also create slang words to add to their repertoire. This repetitive creation of non-standard language shows that the younger generation tends to create a language that often deviates from what is often used in society.

In addition, age grading could be used to show why adults and the older generation tend to not subscribe to the use of non-standard forms of language. Adults are not swayed by the younger generation to use these new slang words, but rather they are influenced by the language that mainstream society uses because they are "using" the language instead of "learning" it (Okombo, 2020). Finally, the older generation are no longer concerned with learning what is new and would rather use a variety that they have used growing up or vernacular (Cheshire, 2005).

In sum, the studies of Cheshire (2005), Wagner (2012), and Okombo (2020) demonstrate that age-grading is an important factor to consider when studying written laughter practices.

### 1.2.3    Age-specific Use and Understanding of Written Laughter

As modes of communication evolve, ways of communicating and expressing also change, and part of this is how laughter is represented online. In McKay's (2015) study, she noted how "lol" and "😂" were the most used forms of laughter on Twitter, but at present, many try to avoid the use of the laughing-crying emoji. Yurieff (2021) even mentioned that some members of the younger generation avoid using the emoji since "not too many people" their age use it.

Laughing helps build ties with others and can indicate a desire of interlocutors to work better together. As such, written laughter may be taken as an attempt to create a social bond with other users. Intentions like this, how they shape language, and how factors like

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age could explain variations in language practice are further examined in sociolinguistic research, such as the proposed focus of this study. By expanding the little that is known so far about written language, this paper could shed some light on ways to improve written laughter practice for more positive social outcomes and reduced miscommunication.

## 1.3      Conceptual Framework

Language is dynamic, and there are different factors that influence language change. In sociolinguistics, factors such as gender, socio-economic status, educational background, and age are often explored. Researchers in the field of linguistics such as Labov (1994), Eckert (2007), Sankoff (2005), Cheshire (2005), and Wagner (2012) have presented similar perspectives and noted that age is a factor in linguistic variation.

With this, the study shall follow the concept of age-grading where "there is a change of [linguistic] behavior with age that repeats itself in each generation" (Cheshire, 2005, p. 3). This framework is anchored on the following assumptions:

a.     the youth using more slang words, which are often stigmatized (Cheshire, 2005; Wardhaugh, 2006);
b.     the adults transitioning to more standard and "prestigious" words (Cheshire, 2005; Eckert, 2007); and
c.     the elderly not conforming to the socially accepted language (Cheshire, 2005; Eckert, 2007)

Furthermore, Chambers (1995, as cited in Okombo, 2020) has argued that there are five age groups: childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, middle age, and old age. However, due to limitations and ethical concerns with regard to obtaining consent for participants of minor age, this study adopted the linguistic age groups of Okombo (2020) that includes the youth (20-35 years old), adults (36-59 years old), and elderly (60 years old and above). The age-grading concept shall be used in the study as it aims to look at any recurring patterns in the language practice of the speakers profiled by age group.

## 2.       Methodology

This section presents the methods used in collecting and analyzing the data. An overview of the research design, the data collection procedure, and data analysis involving the corpus and the interviews are discussed in turn.

## 2.1      Written Laughter Corpus and Analysis

The written laughter data set was gathered from the comments of a Facebook (FB) page. FB was chosen for this study since it is the most used social media platform in the Philippines

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as reported in a recent survey conducted by the Statista Research Department (2023). It was found that 96% of the respondents used Facebook for an average of 4 hours a day.

To situate the study in the Philippine context, the corpus was collected from the FB page "Main Pop Girls Stanposting", also known as "MPG," which was created on July 21, 2021. As of the time of data collection, the group had 574, 200 members. The FB page was chosen because its content and context are based on a Filipino online community. Written laughter tokens were collected from this page.

To gather the written laughter tokens, the filter of the posts in MPG was set to "most relevant" to ensure that the most interacted posts were on display. I collected a total of 100 posts from March 30, 2023 to April 4, 2023, wherein an average of 17 posts per day were collected. Each post had to have at least 50 comments, and the first 50 comments, totaling to 5000 comments, were then scanned to count how many instances of each kind of written laughter was used. A spreadsheet was created to keep track of each post's link, date of collection, total number of comments that contained written laughter, and total number of instances for each kind of written laughter.

The typology of written laughter identified by Favilla (2017) was used as categories for the different kinds of laughter. The capitalization and spelling of the laughter were considered in differentiating the written laughter tokens. The number of syllables (HAs), however, were not considered as a differentiating factor. To illustrate, on one hand, "Hahahaha" is different from "HAHAHAHA" because of its capitalization, and "Bwahahaha" is different from "Wahahaha" because of its spelling. On the other hand, "HAHAHAHA" (eight HAs) is treated the same as "HAHAHAHAHA" (10 HAs).

The total number of instances of each kind of written laughter for each post was tallied, and the resulting numbers were combined to the number of instances for all 100 posts. The total number of instances of each kind of written laughter from the 100 posts were then used to identify the most used written laughter which then became the basis in the development of the interview questionnaire.

## 2.2    Interview Participants, Protocol, and Analysis

A total of nine participants were part of the study. There were three participants belonging to each age group: the youth (20-35 years old), adults (36-59 years old), and seniors (60 years old and above). In addition to meeting the age qualifications, the participants were also required to meet the following to ensure that they have had proper immersion and exposure to the use of the language:

a.    must have had a Facebook account for at least 5 years;
b.    must be daily users of Facebook; and
c.    must have lived in the National Capital Region for the last 5 years.

Convenience sampling was used in selecting the participants. This approach ensured the accessibility of the participants (Waterfield, 2018). It was also used since I had to consider

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access to the research site and its participants upon gaining consent to conduct the study, in addition to the limited time provided to gather and analyze the data for the study.

Participants were first asked to sign a consent form to signify their voluntary participation in the study and their agreement to have their interview recorded. After obtaining informed consent, the interview was conducted either virtually (via Google meet) or face-to-face, depending on the preference of the participants.  They were each asked the following questions:

1.  How do you express laughter on the internet?
2.  What meaning do you get from these variations of written laughter?
    a. "HAHAHAHA"
    b. "Hahahaha";
    c. "Wahahaha";
    d. "BWAHAHAHA"; and
    e. "Hehehehe"?

It must be noted that each item under the second question was accompanied by the figures gathered in the corpus. If the interview was in-person, they were provided with a pen and a tablet that may be used in answering the questions as to what kind of laughter they were referring to; otherwise, if the interview was online, they were asked to utilize the chat function if needed. The written form of the laughter provided clarification as to what the participant meant (e.g., "haha" vs "HAHA").

The data analysis was conducted in three steps: (1) transcribing, (2) coding, (3) generating patterns of data. First, the audio or video recorded interviews were transcribed on a personal computer or laptop. Prior to transcribing, each participant was assigned a codename according to the age group they were in and their age. For example, if the participant was 28 years old, their codename would be Y-28. To check the accuracy of the transcribed data, it was returned to or narrated to the participants. Next, the transcribed data was coded manually. Transcription conventions could vary (Mackey & Gass, 2005), but the conventions for transcribing in this paper was noted at the bottom of each table, i.e., italicized text referred to words spoken in Filipino; underlined text referred to the participants' main understanding of the laughter; text in brackets were the translations. Finally, patterns in the coded data were generated.

Deductive coding was expected to be used since I already have background knowledge of the existing theory and concepts, but if themes from the data appeared but were not addressed by the chosen concept in this study, then inductive coding was applied to the transcribed interviews (Skjott Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019).

### 2.3    Ethical Considerations

To ensure that the study observed proper ethical procedures, the screen captures were collected from a page on Facebook, a public domain, that has "a non-exclusive, transferable,

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sub-licensable, royalty-free, and worldwide license to host, use, distribute, modify, run, copy, publicly perform or display, translate, and create derivative works of [their] content" in accordance with their sharing settings (Meta, 2024). The screenshots taken from the public group were posts that had the public share settings enabled. Furthermore, all names and identities, including profile pictures, were censored and/or redacted from the screen captures, thus providing anonymity. For the interviews, the participants were informed of the nature of the research and what data were to be collected from them (age, area of residence, and answers for the interview). The participants were provided with an informed consent form (ICF), wherein each item in the ICF was discussed prior to having them sign. The participants were also assigned code names in the process of analyzing and presenting the data.

## 3.      Results and Discussion

This section presents the results of the corpus and the interviews. It also discusses the implications of written laughter in addition to the use and understanding of written laughter by different age groups.

### 3.1      Written Laughter on Facebook

Table 1 presents the tally of written laughter from 100 posts and its first 50 comments, totaling to 5000 comments surveyed.

**Table 1**
*Tally of written laughter*

| Written Laughter | Number |
| --- | --- |
| HAHAHAHAHA | 1254 |
| Hahahaha | 544 |
| WAHAHAHA | 71 |
| BWAHAHAHA | 34 |
| Hehehehe | 23 |
| HWAHAHAHAHA | 19 |
| HSHSHSHS | 3 |
| Nyahahahaha | 1 |
| Total | 1949 |

Following the logic of frequency, I now discuss each kind of written laughter in turn.
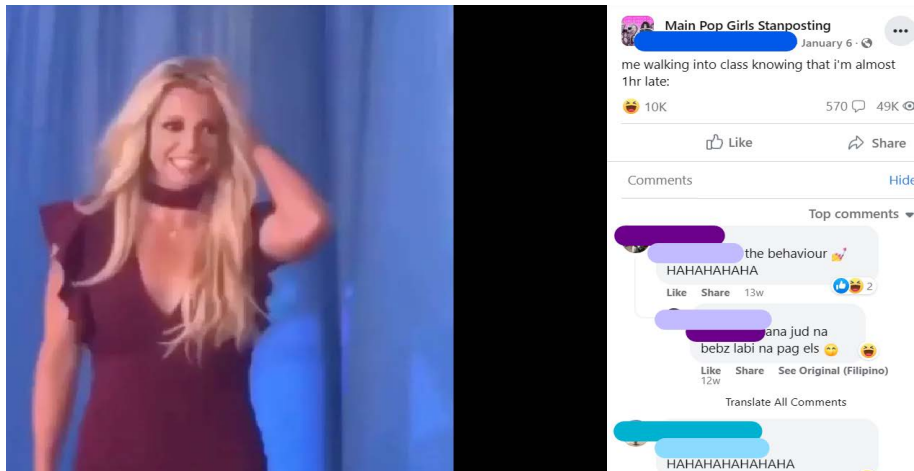
**Image 1.** *A screen capture showing the use of "HAHAHAHA" on a meme*

The most used kind of written laughter is "HAHAHAHA". Figure 1 presents an example as it can be seen that the meme is likened to how a student enters class when they are late, and a pair of commenters show exchanges on such an experience, accompanied by intense laughter. The pair recall their high school moments with the responder saying, "It's okay, I still passed HAHAHAHAHA." Another commenter also tagged a friend's account and just commented "HAHAHAHAHAHAHA" without any accompanying text. This variation implies that the written laughter is intense and genuine (Favilla, 2017) as capitalization affects the intensity of emotions that the sender is trying to convey (Byron & Baldridge, 2007, as cited in Choi & Aizawa, 2018). This kind of written laughter allows the commenters to immediately understand that the person they are conversing with finds the content of the meme genuinely hilarious.
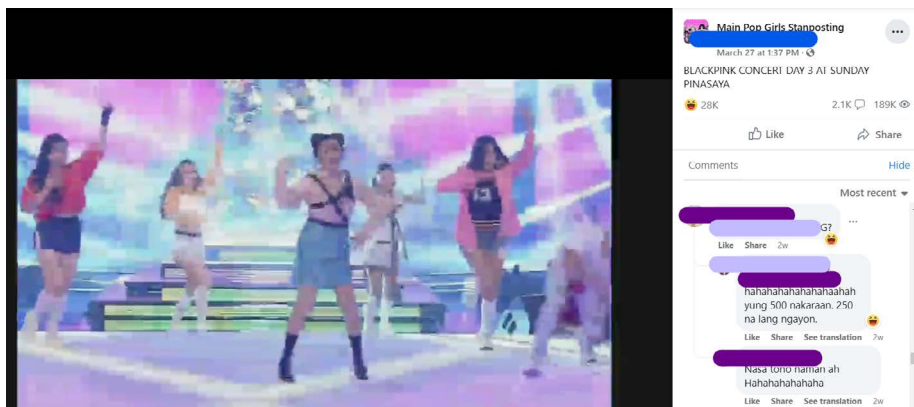


*Image 2. A screen capture showing the use of "Hahahaha" on a meme*

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Another variation of laughter is "Hahahaha", which is perceived as genuine, albeit not as intense as "HAHAHAHA". In Figure 2, a pair exchanges laughter about a noontime TV show that mimicked an international girl group set to perform in the country, but the noontime show's performer ultimately ended up as a laughingstock. One of the commenters tagged their friend and invited them to watch the girl group's non-existent day 3 concert but the performer would be the one in the video. The commenter's friend responded with the ticket price being lower than it originally was, accompanied by a multisyllabic "hahahaha", and the commenter commented about the performer's voice but showed mockery through the use of the written laughter "Hahahahahahaha".

It has already been established on the internet that capitalization of text shows more emotion than non-capitalized ones. Thus, while "Hahahahaha" may be genuine, it is perceived as less intense than "HAHAHAHA".

"WAHAHAHA" is an onomatopoeic laughter showing a maniacal laugh. In Figure 3, the commenter narrates about their somewhat evil plan in ensuring that their teacher would not get angry for their absence. Their plan somewhat succeeded, and the commenter accompanied their story with "WAHAHAHA" that is often regarded as a display of optimism about one's own evil intentions.
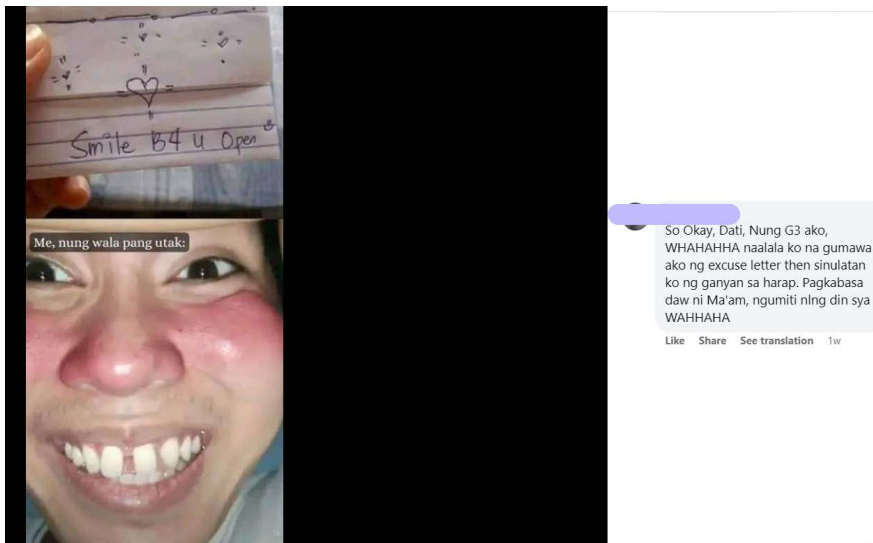


**Image 3.** *A screen capture showing the use of "WAHAHAHA" on a meme*

**Image 4.** *A screen capture showing the use of "BWAHAHAHA" on a meme*

"BWAHAHAHA" is a variation of written laughter often linked to evil or demonic laughs. Interestingly, Figure 4 presents an example wherein the meme talks about how a person could go to heaven after saying "no offense" as they insult a person. The commenters kid on going to heaven and use "BWAHAHAHA" as a retort to their somewhat devilish attitude of saying "no offense" even when they have just insulted a person.
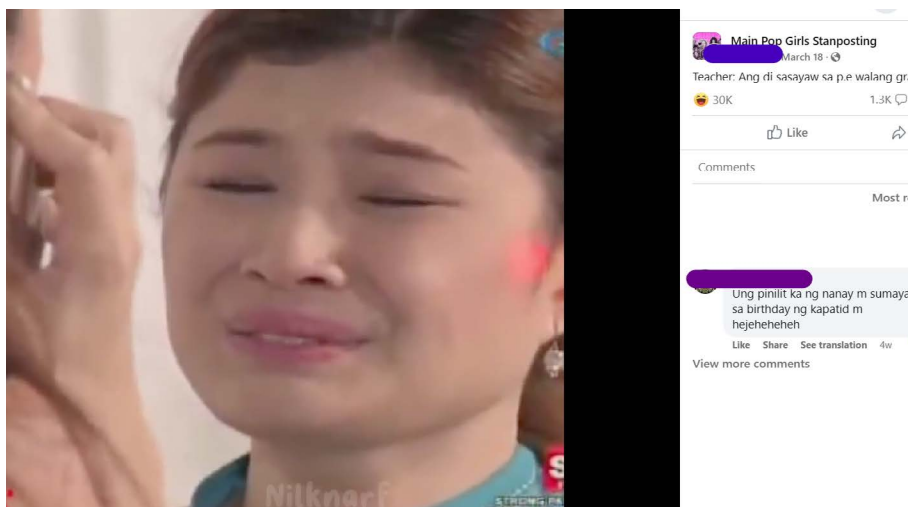


**Image 5.** *A screen capture showing the use of "Hehehehe" on a meme*

"Hehehehe" is a calmer and a subtler way of expressing laughter online and can signify mild amusement. It is often associated with people in the mid-age and is related to how a person can be cautiously optimistic in their somewhat evil plans (Favilla, 2017). Figure 5 presents a comment saying that the video shows how a person looks if their mother coerced them into dancing at their younger sibling's birthday party, followed by a variation of "hehehehe". In that context, the commenter could be mildly amused as they know that a person could be subjected to punishment from their mother if they do not follow the mother's plan. The age of the commenter, however, could not be determined.

The top five mentioned variations of laughter shall be included in the interview questionnaire that explores different age group's understanding of others' written laughter.

## 3.2    Written Laughter Practices of Different Age Groups

The first question asked the participants how they expressed laughter on the internet.

### 3.2.1    Youth

In the gathered data, it is apparent that the youth (20-35 years old), express written laughter on the internet. Their usual varieties of written laughter include "HAHAHAHA" and "hahaha", sometimes the variations "hehehe" and keyboard smashes like "HAKIJHHQ" are also used.

The first variation of laughter, "HAHAHAHA", is often used when they find the post hilarious. The number of syllables could be limitless and participant Y-21 even stated that "the standard one … goes on sometimes [even up to] two layers" and tend to fill any existing space just so they could express how hilarious they find the post.  This kind of laughter is also said to be the most genuine laughter that they use online. The second most used variation is "hahaha", and it is used to make situations less serious. For Y-26, the laughter is usually used "'*Pag* bored *ako … para lang hindi* awkward … *para lang hindi seryoso 'yung usapan*" [When I'm bored … just so that the conversation isn't awkward and serious.] This kind of laughter is not as hilarious as the former, but it still serves its purpose to show that they, to some extent, laughed. Spelling and capitalization are important since they might prompt different reactions. For instance, the capitalization of the phrase "HAHAHA" conveys a profound sense of joy, whereas "hahaha" lacks this intensity. Similar to this, capitalizing a negative sentence heightens negative feelings (Byron & Baldridge, 2007, as cited in Choi & Aizawa, 2018). This implies that capitalization affects the intensity of emotions that the sender is trying to convey and acts as the substitute to face-to-face communication's use of facial expressions, gestures, and intonations to express emotions.

The less common variation of "hehehe" is used to lessen awkwardness in conversations. To illustrate, Y-28 uses it *"Kapag nagpapa*-cute *lang ako for* informality, 'Sorry *po, hehehe.'"* [When I'm trying to be cute for informality, "Sorry, hehehe."]. Keyboard smashes are also used to express extreme laughter. For Y-21, those are reserved for "The crazy ones, when you're like doing things, something is happening, whatever, …random." Some expressed that they use emojis and GIFs, but it is only in rare circumstances.

The presented variations thus show how the youth and the younger generation are able to express written laughter without adhering to a certain standard of how written laughter is commonly expressed. The instances wherein keyboard smashes are also used represent how laughter could still be shown even when it does not conform to the standard "HAHAHAHA". Moreover, there seems to be a certain commonality between the youth as they all use "HAHAHAHA" to express hilarity, and the other variations mentioned are used for the same purpose and context.

### 3.2.2    Adults

For adults (36-59 years old), it shows that their ways of expressing written laughter online is a combination and a transition of how the youth and the seniors show their laughter. For instance, A-38 uses a lot more variation of written laughter than A-46 and A-52, but A-46 shows a combination of using and not using written laughter, similar to the seniors.



**Image 6.** *Sample Written Laughter of Participant A-38*

In Figure 6, it can be seen that participant A-38, similar to the youth, has a number of variations of written laughter. However, the use of their written laughter is different from how it is commonly used. For example, for them, "hahaha" expresses the most hilarious kind of laughter which is contradictory to "HAHAHA" being the most common way to express

extreme laughter. In addition, A-38 also uses capital letters to express insulting laughs, which is contradictory to the use of capital letters in the youth group. Furthermore, the use of "hehehe" is also used as an insult or as a laughter for green jokes, whereas it is usually used to just lessen awkwardness for the younger generation.

The adults' variations of written laughter show that it affirms Cheshire's (2005) study that adults use more standard and "prestigious" language. They either do not express laughter, or when they do, they settle with the standard "hahaha".  In this case, adults do not use much capitalization in their commonly used laughter and only use "hahaha" since it is less intense and less emotional, thus being more "prestigious".

### 3.2.3    Seniors

The seniors (60 years old and above) tend to not express written laughter online. Whenever they see something funny, they are already content with laughing by themselves and see no need to express or share their laughter online. For instance, S-72 said "*Tumatawa lang ako pero 'di ako sumasagot ng* 'haha' *o* 'hihi' [I just laugh, but I don't respond "haha" or "hihi"] and S-78 mentioned "*Natatawa ako mag-isa, pero hindi ako nagte-*text*"* [I laugh on my own, but I don't express it through text]. This shows that seniors do not give much regard to how society usually expresses their laughter online, and they tend to revert to what they have usually done during their youth, which is to laugh by themselves. This could be attributed to the fact that in their younger years, written laughter is not usually expressed since the technological gadgets that we have now have not yet existed in their youth.

Overall, looking at the patterns that emerged from the participants' answers from all age groups, it is evident that age-grading is visible in the use and expression of written laughter online. First, the youth's use of variation in capitalization and spelling to express differences in their written laughter show how their age group uses more stigmatized language (Cheshire, 2005; Wardhaugh, 2006) since it has been established that capitalization of words, or in this instance, capitalization of "HAHAHAHA" could often be misinterpreted as offensively shouting, yet they continue to do it. Next, the adults show their transition from using written laughter commonly used by the youth to using variations that are deemed more acceptable and prestigious (Cheshire, 2005) such as the non-capitalization of laughter since the opposite of it, capitalization, equates to shouting (Byron & Baldridge, 2007, as cited in Choi & Aizawa, 2018). Finally, the seniors' non-expression of written laughter affirms Cheshire's (2005) and Eckert's (2007) study that those in the older generation do not conform to the norms of language use but rather revert to what they are just used to doing, in this instance, in expressing written laughter, they just laugh by themselves, because growing up, they did not necessarily have to express written laughter online.

Aside from looking at how different age groups use written laughter, the interview also probed how the participants understood other people's written laughter on the internet.

## 3.3    Understanding of Written Laughter by Different Age Groups

**Table 2**

*Comparison of Typical Meanings and Participants' Understanding of Written Laughter*

| Variation of Written Laughter | Typical Meaning | Age Group | Participants' Understanding |
|---|---|---|---|
| HAHAHAHA | Expresses extreme hilarity and genuine laughter | Youth | Really funny and relatable; sarcastic and somewhat funny |
| | | Adults | Genuinely rejoicing; laughing at another person; teasing |
| | | Seniors | Sarcastic, intentional, and insulting |
| HAHAHAHA | Expresses extreme hilarity and genuine laughter | Youth | Really funny and relatable; sarcastic and somewhat funny |
| | | Adults | Genuinely rejoicing; laughing at another person; teasing |
| | | Seniors | Sarcastic, intentional, and insulting |
| Hahahaha | Expresses not so hilarious, but somewhat genuine laughter | Youth | Does not translate to physical laughter; Judgmental and insulting laughter; Exciting laughter |
| | | Adults | Genuine, insulting laughter; an automatic kind of laughter; not as funny |
| | | Seniors | Not hilarious; not content |
| WAHAHAHA | Expresses onomatopoeic maniacal laughter showing optimism towards one's evil intentions | Youth | Genuinely laughing and shows personality; reminiscent laughter on one's plans; menacing laughter |
| | | Adults | An invitation to laugh; purposeful and reminiscent laughter on one's plans |
| | | Seniors | Intentional laughter; contentment in the success of one's plans |
| BWAHAHAHA | Expresses evil or demonic laughter | Youth | Relatability of the context |
| | | Adults | Shows no remorse and proud laughter; relatability of the context |
| | | Seniors | Insulting and teasing laughter |
| Hehehehe | Expresses mild amusement | Youth | Shy and forced laughter |
| | | Adults | Insulting and forced laughter; expresses amusement at the situation |
| | | Seniors | Forced laughter |

First, "HAHAHAHA" was often considered as the most hilarious laughter, and it was reflected in the youth's answers. In addition to it being genuinely expressed, Participant Y-21 pointed out that the capitalization of the laughter affected the laughter's perceived intensity. The youth also noted that the laughter expressed relatability in the specific context. Similar to the youth, the adults also mentioned that the laughter was genuine but it denoted teasing and laughing at someone. Meanwhile, the seniors did not see the laughter as genuine, but rather was sarcastic, intentional, and insulting.

Second, "Hahahaha" expressed not so hilarious but somewhat genuine laughter. All three age groups answered that that kind of laughter is not as hilarious as the first one, but they also mentioned that it expresses judgment and insult.

Some participants in the youth and adult groups noticed the differences in the two mentioned written laughters. While both groups generally agreed that the first kind of written laughter is more genuine and expresses more hilarity, a participant in the adult group noted that the second laughter, "Hahahaha", was "not as funny as the other one", "HAHAHAHA", because there was effort exerted in capitalizing the first laughter. Meanwhile, a participant in the youth group noted that they think the second laughter also expressed the same level of hilarity as the first one because there was also effort exerted in typing multiple "ha" syllables. The participants' answers showed that not only did context help in their understanding of the laughter, but also the way the laughter was written or its orthography, specifically its capitalization and spelling (number of syllables).

Third, "WAHAHAHA" expressed onomatopoeic maniacal laughter showing optimism towards one's evil intentions. All age groups commented that the laughter in that context was reminiscent of someone's plans and there was intent in laughing, considering that the laughter was brought about by the success of the plans mentioned in the meme and comment. It showed that all age groups had a similar understanding of the laughter in context.

Fourth, "BWAHAHAHA" expressed evil or demonic laughter, and the participants in all age groups had a grasp of the laughter in the right context. They mentioned how the laughter was relatable since the meme had a villainous plan embedded in it and how it showed no remorse and somewhat even proud laughter.

Finally, "Hehehehe" expressed only mild laughter, and the participants understood it as forced and involuntary laughter. It was also not as genuine unlike the other kinds of laughter.

Overall, participants had a grasp and an understanding of the different kinds of written laughter regardless of their age group. This understanding may have been achieved because the presented written laughters were not taken out of context, thus, regardless of the way the laughters were written, its meanings were easily understood through the participants' comprehension and interpretation of the memes and the written laughters attached to it. The descriptions for each age group wherein the youth uses more slang and non-standard forms of language, the adults use more prestigious vocabulary, and the seniors reverting to the language they were used to using when they were younger did not reflect in their understanding of the written laughters. Because of this, it can be said that age-grading is not visible in the understanding of others' written laughter by different age groups.

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## 4.        Conclusion and Recommendations

Through this study, I was able to ascertain that people of various age groups express their written laughter or the lack thereof in different ways. The differences in expressing their written laughter reflect Cheshire's (2005), Eckert's (2007), and Wardhaugh's (2006) studies on age-grading that the youth tend to use more slang and more non-standard forms of language, or in this case, variations of written laughter. The adults only use common standard versions of "hahaha", and the seniors tend to not express written laughter at all.

Meanwhile, age-grading is not visible in the understanding of others' written laughter, and the participants, regardless of their age, all understood the various kinds of written laughter because of the context that surrounds the laughter. In addition, some participants, although they do not personally use or express certain variations of written laughter, recognize that spelling and capitalization change the meaning of the written laughter.

This study presents implications in the field of sociolinguistics and computer-mediated communication as it can potentially open more research on how written laughter can be understood even when it is devoid of the nuances of audible laughter. Written laughter can also be explored in terms of its graphological aspects and whether such variations in written laughter affect meaning. In addition, further research can be made to explore the relation of age-grading in the understanding of written laughter.

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