

INTERNET SLANG AND HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS: A TEACHER'S PERSPECTIVE

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A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty in Communication and Leadership Studies

School of Professional Studies

Gonzaga University

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Under the Supervision of Dr. Carolyn Cunningham

Under the Mentorship of Professor Giovanni Caputo

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In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Communication and Leadership Studies

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By

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December 2015

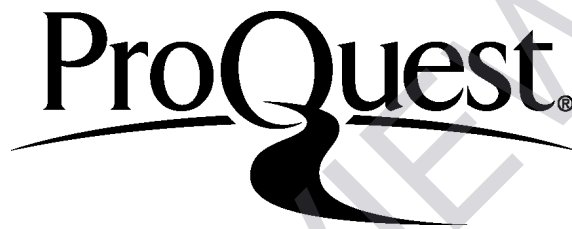
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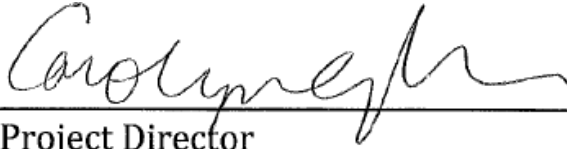
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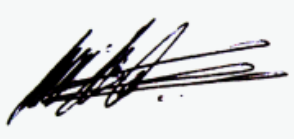
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PREVIEW

### **Abstract**

This study analyzed the perceptions of secondary education teachers on the use of Internet Slang by their high school students. The researcher analyzed educators' perceptions in order to answer what teachers' thoughts were on the use of Internet Slang being introduced into secondary education academic assignments. Additionally, were there negative or positive effects from the use of Internet Slang via texting, social media, and messaging on the writing skills of students? A literature review and a qualitative applied research approach with the use of document analysis via an open-ended survey were the methods for this study. This assisted the researcher in understanding the opinions, motivations, and reasoning of the educators to further develop ideas and hypotheses for follow-up studies. Additionally, to understand the opinions of educators, Concept Mapping was utilized with a mix of Word and Code-Based approaches to interpret the qualitative data. The results of this study began with a look at previous research conducted by Lenhart, et al. (2008) & Ochonogor et al. (2012) where both studies found secondary education students were using Internet Slang on academic assignments and in the classroom. Results of this study show Internet Slang is in fact being used by students in the classroom and found in academic work. Social Presence and Media Richness Theories assisted in understanding Internet Slang use, via educators' opinions, by determining how educators perceived students as real and how they perceive a message using Internet Slang. Online devices have now changed the face of social presence and teens have developed their own language through the use of Internet Slang. This medium has changed the way teenagers act. The majority of schools, in this study, are allowing students to use their personal devices. Schools are purchasing devices which allow the ability to enable students to change understanding of the English language, and educators are learning to interpret the way students use Internet Slang.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### Introduction

The origin of Internet Slang can be traced back to the year 1975, which was long before the beginning of the Internet itself. *The Jargon File* (1975) began in Stanford University's Artificial Intelligence computer lab to define computer hacker terms (p. 1). *The Jargon File* (1975) further explains that "hacker culture" began the use of slang, "among hackers, though, slang has a subtler aspect, paralleled perhaps in the slang of jazz musicians and some kinds of fine artists but hard to detect in most technical or scientific cultures; parts of it are code for shared states of consciousness" (p. 2). Preece (2001) spoke of the Internet as a place that allows people to communicate without distance being a determining factor for the utterance, and where they can share common beliefs through the Web (p. 29). Social media platforms, such as Facebook, are one of many web areas where people develop communities and form new ways of interpreting communication such as teens are doing today to communicate with each other.

The Cambridge Online Dictionary defines slang as "Very informal language that is used especially in speech by particular groups of people and which sometimes includes words that are not polite" ("Slang", 2015). Social networking has allowed these communities to develop their own language (Tellaria, 2012, p. 2). Further, Internetslang.com is a website that tracks and defines over 9,000 currently used Internet Slang terms and also tracks the top 10 trending terms (Internetslang.com, 2015). This makes it easy for teens today to understand and reference the Internet Slang language for their community.

There is literature that discusses the use of Internet Slang in the classroom and on academic assignments. In studying the topic of Internet Slang usage, the opinions of teachers have been found on both sides of the issue. There have been debates amongst teachers and scholars regarding the effects of Internet Slang used in secondary education (Krupnick, 2010;

Tilley, 2009). According to a Nielsen poll conducted in late 2008, teens in the United States send and receive, on average, 80 texts daily, a number that doubled in only one year. (Tilley, 2009, p. 2). Brown, Campbell, & Ling (2011) have noted that teens primarily use smartphones for texting and less for voice calling, pictures, music, and video (p.145).

Researchers are beginning to define effects of the use of Internet Slang -via text messaging - on secondary education, and some researchers are finding negative results between the use of Internet Slang in text messages and tests results on academic assignments (Cingel & Sundar, 2012, p. 1). Some students appear to be addicted to using Internet Slang in their academic school assignments, and they have been observed to have trouble switching from “text slang” during examinations to the proper use of English Grammar (Ochonogor, Alakpodia, & Achugbue, 2012, p.4). In other studies, teens feel that texting gives them a sense of immediacy of the conversation and take great pride in being able to type fast (Lenhart, Arafeh, Smith, & Macgill, 2008, p. 74).

Texting plays an increasingly prominent role in the lives of teenagers today, and this role is not without its controversy (Tilley, 2009). Ling, Bertel, & Sundsoy (2011) mention in their study of the socio-demographics of texting how prominent texting is for teens “Same-aged persons, 16 to 22 years old, send and receive on average almost 60 times more texts than one would expect were texting evenly distributed through society” (p. 6). Their study further clarifies that 19 year olds text 80 times more within their generation and by comparison those over the age of 70 text 0.01 times amongst their age group (Ling, Bertel, & Sundsoy, 2011, p. 6). Yardi & Bruckman (2010) give us a look into the social life of a teen with this statement “The frequency of texting has overtaken that of every other common form of interaction with their friends” (p. 1). With the advent of Internet Slang the English language is changing with its use. Further study needs to be conducted to understand Internet Slangs effects on teens writing skills

and the perceptions of teachers as witnesses of its use by their students. Internet Slang examples and their definitions can be found in Appendix K of this thesis for additional understanding.

### **Importance of this Study**

“James Billington, the Librarian of Congress, was right when he recently suggested that young Americans’ electronic communication might be damaging the basic unit of human thought – the sentence” (Madden et al., 2013, p. 1). When a librarian at the Library of Congress identifies a problem with the sentence because of electronic communication, his concerns should be addressed. Lenhart et al. (2008) and Ochonogor, et al. (2012) have identified that secondary students, from the ages of 12 to 17, generally do not see a problem with the use of internet slang, and these students do not realize that, at times, they are placing this internet slang into their academic work (p. 29 & p. 4).

### **Statement of the Problem**

There is a language of today that has grown in popularity with the age of computers, smart phones, and social media platforms. Internet slang has been used by many on line communities and has changed vernaculars through many of these communities during the years of the information highway’s lifespan. Referring to language such as ROTFL (Rolling on the floor laughing), and the popular OMG (Oh my God), to name a couple of examples, within an extensive library of terms brought about by internet communities.

This internet slang has impacted secondary education with teachers and scholars concerned with the writing skills of today’s youth. Studies have shown that electronic devices of today are hindering the literacy rate of secondary education students (Madden et al., 2013). It is important that the use of Internet Slang be studied to determine its effects on secondary education students’ writing skills and how Internet Slang affects the English language today.



### **Definition of Terms Used**

This thesis has significant terms that will be used throughout, and some definitions may be left up to interpretation by the reader. These thesis definitions are as follows:

**Internet Slang:** Internet slang consists of slang and acronyms that users have created as an effort to save keystrokes. Terms have originated from various sources including Bulletin Boards, AIM, Yahoo, IRC, Chat Rooms, Email, Cell Phone Text (Internetslang.com, 2015).

**Face-to-Face:** Communication where there is physical interaction via eye contact, facial expression, and body language cues being sent back and forth between sender and receiver (Begley, 2004).

**CMC:** Is inherently impersonal because of verbal and nonverbal cues being filtered out of CMC via the use of social media devices (Jacobson, 2007).

**Communitarianism:** Theoretical perspective that seeks to lessen focus on individual rights and increase the focus on communal responsibilities (Bennett-Woods, 2005).

**Concept Mapping:** A method diagram utilized to depict suggested relationships between two concepts (Jackson & Trochim, 2002).

**Generation Z:** Born 1995-2012. While not much is known about this generation yet, knowledge is known about the technological environment they are growing up in today. They are in our high schools today (Singh, 2014).

**Media Richness:** Theory in the field of communication when examining how and why members of an organization select a particular media to communicate with other people or institutions (Fernandez et. al., 2013).

**Social Presence:** Theory in the field of communication where media differ in their degree of social presence and that these differences play an important role in how people act (Short, Williams, and Christie, 1976).

**Organization of Remaining Chapters**

Chapter two will provide the literature review and a background into the study of Internet Slang and its effects on secondary education students. Additionally, this chapter provides a philosophical and theoretical basis utilizing Social Presence and Media Richness Theories as well as a look at Communitarianism as a philosophical basis. Chapter three is the scope and methodology of the study conducted. A qualitative analysis was conducted via the use of open-ended surveys to gain understanding of educators' perspective on the use of Internet Slang by their secondary education students. Chapter four will reveal the results of the study where a detailed analysis was conducted on the opinions of the educators. This chapter concludes with a discussion and analysis of said data. Finally, chapter five summarizes the study and provides insight to the researcher's limitations, a discussion on further studies that could follow this study, recommendations for additional studies, and a conclusion of the findings of the study.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Philosophical Assumptions

Using social media, individuals can create a message and share it with those within a community. This is in hopes that it becomes a subject of discussion with those who receive the message. This is a very different interaction than face-to-face communication where there is physical interaction via eye contact, facial expression, and body language cues being sent back and forth between sender and receiver. Begley (2004) expresses, "Face-to-Face communication remains the most powerful human interaction and as wonderful as electronic devices are, they can never fully replace the intimacy and immediacy of people conversing in the same room" (p. 3). Teens of today have embraced the technology at hand using their social media devices to interact, and they have formed their own community - with their own vernacular: Internet Slang.

Communitarianism is a "theoretical perspective that seeks to lessen focus on individual rights and increase the focus on communal responsibilities" (Bennett-Woods, 2005, p.32). Newman and Zoysa (1997) mention community and can give us some light into this community/culture of teens "it is hoped that individual community members can regain control over their lives and localities from the encroaching central state" (p. 629). Teenagers are a community, and many teens have heard how oppressive, controlling, and untrustworthy adults can be over their lives. Lenhart (2012) states, "mobile phone providers have begun to offer parental controls to allow parents to manage or constrain their child's mobile phone use" (p. 9). Schools have also tried to suppress the use of mobile phones on school grounds. Thomas, Orthober, and Schultz (2009) remark on schools and banning mobile device use on school campus: "When cell phones first appeared almost a decade ago, most school systems in the United States banned them from school grounds. After the Columbine tragedy, however, schools reluctantly acquiesced to parental pressure to allow phones back in schools" (p. 55).

Seyla Benhabib, a Turkish-American philosopher, provides us a lens into communities, through a communitarian critique, stating a possibility that, “instead of reaching a consensus on how everyone should act, interacting individuals can align themselves with a common good” (as cited in Griffin, Ledbetter, & Sparks, 2014, p. 508). This common good would be the culture and community that teenagers throughout the generations have formed. Within each generation teens have dressed the same, talked the same, communes within the same activities, and within this generation have developed their own form of online speech with the use of mobile devices and social media platforms. Madden, Lenhart, Duggan, Cortesi, & Gasser (2013) express mobile use of this generation “In many ways, teens represent the leading edge of mobile connectivity, and the patterns of their technology used often signals future changes in the adult population” (p. 3).

Benhabib (as cited in Griffin, et al., 2014, p. 508) further speaks of regarding people as disembodied moral agents. This can be interpreted from the social norms in which adults think teenagers act: i.e., a mother or father telling their teen to sit up, speak clearly, or use proper English when speaking. Benhabib insists, “that any panhuman ethic be achieved through interaction with collective concrete other (ordinary people who live in community) rather than imposed on them by a rational elite” (as cited in Griffin, et al., 2014, p. 508). So, it stands to reason that teenagers form solidarity through social networks to distance themselves from rational elites such as adult governance over teenagers.

If teenagers feel alienated, suppressed, or are told they are childish; then a communitarian philosophy would bring teenagers together, and they would form their own ways of communicating, e.g., social media, use of Internet Slang, sharing snap shots of a moment in time with the use of Instagram, etc.

## **Theoretical Basis**

Social Presence Theory, developed by Short, Williams, and Christie (1976), explained the effect telecommunications media can have on communications. They theorized that communication media differ in their degree of social presence and that these differences play an important role in how people act (p. 65). Before the advent of computers, teenagers would spend hours on the telephone. In contrast, today they spend hour after hour texting one another. Online devices have now changed the face of social presence where teens now have developed their own language through the use of Internet Slang, and this medium has changed the way teenagers act.

In this fast-paced world, one thing has not changed: the need to be socially accepted by other human beings. This is no different for teens. Lenhart, et al. (2008) stated, "The vast majority of teens have eagerly embraced written communication with peers as they share messages on their social networks" (p. 2). On a continuum of social presence, face-to-face would be considered to have the most social presence, followed by written, and then text-based communication the least.

Research has shown that Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) is inherently impersonal because of verbal and nonverbal cues being filtered out of CMC via the use of social media devices (Jacobson, 2007, p.365). Jacobson (2007) provides an example:

Common ground and relational cultures constitute contexts in which meaning is attributed to CMC. That familiarity with interlocutors or correspondents makes a difference in the ways in which people interpret IM messages is evident in the following exchange. One informant (Joe) used the phrase "please kill me" as an exaggeration in a time of stress-specifically, in the situation of writing a paper for a class. Joe's acquaintances and friends understood the expression in different ways, a

reflection of the differences in their knowledge of his habits and style. (p. 365)

Ochonogor et al. (2012), from their study, stated, “it is clear that the majority of the students do not know when they make use of slangs or chat room language even when they write a formal text to their lecturers. 215 (66.36%) of the respondents said they text in a constructive manner while 104 representing 32.10% said they use text slang in their writing” (p. 2). This study has shown with the use of Social Presence Theory that these secondary students did not know how to act when it was time to write a formal paper, and they also did not know when or how to switch from Internet Slang to formal writing.

Media Richness Theory has been one of the most predominant theories in the field of communication when examining how and why members of an organization select a particular media to communicate with other people or institutions (Fernandez et. al., 2013, p. 3). This theory was created by Daft and Lengal (1986), and the theory states that all communication media vary in their ability to enable users to communicate and change understanding. “Richness is defined as the potential information – carrying capacity of data” (Daft & Lengel, 1986, p. 196). Tilley (2009) wrote, “Texting plays an increasingly prominent role in the everyday lives of young people, and that role is not without controversy” (p. 1). Teenagers are using the technology of today and have allowed the use of today’s media devices to change their understanding of the world. Teenagers have developed a communal society world view with the use of Internet Slang being the core of their language.

Texting and the use of Internet Slang has become the norm among secondary education students, and these theories help to explain the shift in the thinking of secondary education students, where Internet Slang is a rich media form of communicating. Internet Slang, in fact, may be hurting their writing skills in their academic work. This will show that the students may

not be able to distinguish/switch between the rich media and high school academic writing so easily.

### **The Literature**

A study was conducted on the use of Internet Slang and its effects on secondary education by the Pew Internet & Life Project (Lenhart, et al., 2008, p. 1). The researchers conducted telephone interviews with national representatives of 700 samples on secondary education students ages 12-17, and the study also included their parents. Lenhart, et al. (2008) developed a list with several questions:

How do teens define writing? How does writing fit into their lives? What role do electronic technologies such as computers and cell phones, or communication platforms such as email or online social networks, play in the writing process? Do teens consider their electronic communications to be writing, or think that they have an impact on the quality of their writing overall? What do teens find enjoyable about the writing they do for school and personal reasons outside of school? What are teens' experiences with writing instruction? What suggestion do teens have for ways that schools could improve writing instruction and the experience of learning to write? (p. 2)

The premises behind this study were to fill a gap about the controversy of the use of Internet Slang among teenagers, which was to hear from the students themselves. A total of eight focus groups were also conducted in four cities (Southwest, Northeast, Midwest, West Coast) with boys and girls ages 12-17 (Lenhart, et al., 2008, p. 2). This showed that the researcher used both the qualitative and quantitative methods to establish findings. Results showed teens 50% of the time used informal writing styles on their class assignments, and 38% stated they used shortcuts such as LOL (Laugh Out Loud) on class assignments (Lenhart, et al., 2008, p. 3).

A study conducted by the Department of Library and Information Science, Delta State University, Abraka researchers calculated the impact of text slang or chat room slang on secondary students' academic performance in a Nigerian secondary school (Ochonogor et al., 2012, p. 1). Using the descriptive survey method researchers administered 330 questionnaires with 324 found usable; the six unaccounted for were not filled out properly (Ochonogor et al., 2012, p. 2). Further, it was observed that students do in fact send messages during class with a 99.38% finding. Students did show a shortfall in English writing skills, and when asked if students should stop texting in school, 89% said they would not want texting to stop. As well, 63.36% of the students agreed that it would be good to use proper English in their text messaging (Ochonogor et al., 2012, p. 3). The study concluded that Internet Slang did, in fact, affect students in their study. Also it was determined that Short Message Service, Instant Messaging, and Black Berry Messaging were being used in their classroom assignments. Researchers believed that even though the students knew using Internet Slang in academic work was not appropriate, they did it anyway, showing the researchers that the use of Internet Slang is a possible addictive behavior (Ochonogor, et al., 2012, p. 3).

These two studies revealed that Internet Slang is, in fact, being used by secondary education students in classrooms and in their academic work. It is interesting to note that the word "addiction" was used in the Nigerian study. Neither study was grounded in theory, but these studies did find similar results in establishing that texting and the use of Internet Slang is, in fact, happening in secondary schools. The Pew Study answered and filled a needed gap with regards to finding out what the students actually thought. The Nigerian study and the Pew study both identified a negative impact on the English language via the use of Internet Slang.

There are also comparisons to the idea that mobile devices are affecting students' writing performance in a negative manner. There are studies that show mobile devices assist the



learning of students. Carter (2014) has studied the impact of mobile devices on student performance and their post-test results with the use of media devices in the classroom (p.3). He states, "Implementation of one to one computing (1:1) devices in an agriscience classroom has the potential to have a positive impact on student post-test performance due to easier access to information and increased student motivation" (p. 6). Further, his results showed, "As a whole, the data gathered from these methods indicated the implementation of 1:1 technology had a significant positive impact on all four of the measured outcomes and was a positive experience for both students and teachers" (Carter, 2014, p.8). It is noted that this study was conducted in a controlled environment where the students were monitored and the mobile devices were used for academic work and not for a social aspect with the use of Internet Slang. Nonetheless, the use of mobile devices in the classroom, for academic studies, has been proven effective in teaching our teens today.

Purcell, Buchanan, and Friedrich (2013) conducted a survey of 2,462 Advanced Placement and National Writing Project teachers where they too found some positive results in the use of digital tools and the effects on the students' writing skills (p. 2). Purcell et al. (2013) continue with positive statements from teachers, "These teachers see the Internet and digital technologies such as social networking sites, cell phones, and texting, generally facilitating teens' personal expression and creativity and broadening the audience for their written material" (p.2). Reading further into the Purcell et al. (2013) study does reveal a warning though: "Teachers describe the unique challenges of teaching writing in the digital age, including the 'creep' of informal style into formal writing assignments" (p. 2).

These studies show opposing views and opinions about the use of social media devices in the classroom. The general consensus of the educators that feel its use is positive; still warn if not monitored, Internet Slang will be found in academic writing assignments.

## Research Rationale

“James Billington, the Librarian of Congress, was right when he recently suggested that young Americans’ electronic communication might be damaging the basic unit of human thought – the sentence” (Lenhart, et al., 2008, p. 2). Having the librarian at the Library of Congress identify a problem with the sentence because of electronic communication should be addressed. Lenhart, et al. (2008) and Ochonogor, et al. (2012) have both identified secondary students generally do not see a problem with the use of Internet Slang, and these students do not realize that, at times, they are placing this internet slang into their academic work (p. 29 & p. 2).

Though the research is not extensive into this field of study, it does require an empirical look so that the institution of English writing can be maintained as sovereign and whole. The purpose of this research is to bring to light, no, bring to the forefront an identified problem that internet slang may be affecting the writing skills of our secondary students. Tilley (2009) quoted Jennifer Lee, who stated in the *New York Times* in 2002:

To their dismay, teachers say that papers are being written with shortened words, improper capitalization and punctuation, and characters like &, \$ and @. Teachers have deducted points, drawn red circles and tsk-tsked at their classes. Yet the errant forms continue (p. 2)

Internet Slang and the social media platforms of today have been noted to affect the writing skills of our youth. Additionally, this study wishes to take a qualitative approach to the issue by addressing the educators of secondary education. Finding out what the educators’ point of view is will establish one of the following: A majority thought there is a problem, or a majority thought it is not a problem, or this may not be an issue at all. Once the data is analyzed, this study can come to a conclusion on what the thoughts of the educators are.

Using Social Presence and Media Richness theories described earlier, this study's findings will be used to identify that Internet Slang could be a factor in the degraded writing skills of our youth, and the study further will articulate the need for more empirical research needed. In regards to Social Presence, this study will help to understand the perceptions of the educators' perspective and will answer the following question. Does Internet Slang in fact cause the educator to perceive if the students are a real person in mediated communications and to what degree? Additionally, this study will look at the language variety that Internet Slang provides. Media Richness theory will assist in understanding the perception of the educator in how they interpret a message when a student uses Internet Slang. This study could develop into empowering our teachers with the knowledge to combat the effects of Internet Slang on the writing abilities of the youth today.

### **Research questions**

Research has begun on the effects from texting within our secondary education classrooms. There is little empirical evidence that Internet Slang is actually affecting the writing skills of teens, but there has been evidence found that there is an effect on teen writing skills with the use of Internet Slang being found in academic assignments. This issue is not fully developed into a mainstream problem, and more exploratory research needs to be conducted to understand basic facts, settings, and concerns of the teachers, as well as the students.

In reference to the literature review, Social Presence and Media Richness Theories will assist in understanding if Internet Slang is an issue for educators by determining if students are perceived as real with the use of Internet Slang and how educators perceive a message using Internet Slang. The opinions of the educators on this issue need to be defined to develop the basis of Internet Slang's effects on secondary education writing skills. Qualitative data must be gathered on students' academic assignments in order to identify the crossover of the use of