



(RESEARCH ARTICLE)



The intelligibility of internet slangs between millennials and Gen Zers: A comparative study

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International Journal of Science and Research Archive, 2023, 09(01), 400–409

Publication history: Received on 29 April 2023; revised on 05 June 2023; accepted on 07 June 2023

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30574/ijrsra.2023.9.1.0456>

Abstract

The study focuses on the emergence of modern-day neologisms (i.e., internet slang) in social media and everyday conversations, with the aim of exploring the language gap between Millennials and Gen Z. These generations exhibit distinct linguistic characteristics compared to previous generations. The research investigates whether Millennials can comprehend and relate to the new emerging words or if they encounter confusion. This quantitative research was conducted at the local college in Opol, Misamis Oriental. The 100 respondents were selected based on registered quota sampling. The findings highlight a significant positive correlation between Millennials and Gen Z regarding modern-day net slang. However, Gen Z often understands metathesis forms of words to conceal syntactical features during the discourse more than millennials. This study recommends itself as a valuable source of data for further investigations into the proliferation of modern-day neologisms among Millennials and Gen Z on the internet.

Keywords: Internet Slang; Millennials; Gen Zers; Word Formation; Word Borrowing; Lexical Deviation

1. Introduction

Language is of paramount importance in the human experience as it allows individuals to communicate and articulate their thoughts and concepts, promoting the exchange of knowledge and facilitating the progress of social and cultural development. When language undergoes substantial transformations, it exemplifies its inherent flexibility and highlights its intricate relationship with changes occurring within society [1].

Social media platforms are extensively utilized worldwide, transcending age, gender, and race, as means of communication and self-expression in the online sphere [2]. The use of social media by young people continues to increase annually, becoming increasingly embedded in their daily lives and communication patterns. According to Martini [3], language undergoes continual transformations with each generation, encompassing shifts in pronunciation, the adoption of new words, and the invention of novel terms, with the rate of change varying. It is often young adults and teenagers who initiate the majority of linguistic changes observed in our language [4].

Individuals born between 1997 and 2012 are commonly referred to as Gen Z, while those born between 1981 and 1996 are known as Millennials. Millennials are often characterized as being more idealistic and politically engaged, whereas Gen Z is recognized for their diversity and proficiency with technology. Although Millennials currently make up the largest portion of the workforce, Gen Z represents the youngest cohort [5]. The youngest members of the Gen Z family are approximately 9 years old. Notably, the oldest Millennials, who are around 40 years old, are sometimes referred to as Gen Y, as they fall between the generations of Gen X and Gen Z. The youngest members of the Millennial generation, around 24 years old, are often described as materialistic atheists.

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The language used by Millennials is considered to be in a conservative stage, indicating that the generation has largely ceased creating new slang terms and deviating from traditional grammar rules. On the other hand, Gen Z language involves taking familiar English words and giving them new, often distorted meanings to fit into novel contexts. As a result of this linguistic process, the older generation may find it challenging to associate a word with its original meaning, as the word has undergone a significant transformation.

In the specific context of the Philippines, Maghirang [6] highlights that the younger generation, commonly referred to as Gen Z, exhibits a heightened awareness of the power and impact of technology. These individuals are characterized by their familiarity with various technological advancements and their ability to leverage them effectively. Gen Zers in the Philippines demonstrate a strong inclination to share their knowledge and actively engage with others through digital platforms. They recognize the value of technology in facilitating human interaction and seek out online spaces to connect, communicate, and exchange information. This suggests that Gen Z in the Philippines embraces technology as a means of expanding their social networks, accessing information, and expressing themselves in the digital age.

This research delves into the emergence of contemporary internet slang within the Millennial and Gen Z cohorts. The younger generation showcases their inventiveness in creating fresh vocabulary, which can potentially perplex older individuals and individuals from other generations who are not acquainted with these terms. The interplay between these generational groups gives rise to a linguistic divergence, leading to notable disparities from preceding generations in terms of language evolution and intelligibility.

2. Material and Methods

2.1. Research Design

In this study, the descriptive research method was employed to gather quantifiable data for statistical analysis of the sampled population, and notable observations were noted based on the data collected. The researchers administered survey questionnaires and interviews to assess the language gap and comprehension of internet slang, between Generation Z and the Millennial generation.

2.2. Respondents

The study involved students who were enrolled in various courses at a local college in Misamis Oriental, including Education, Business Administration, and Information Technology. The researchers employed the registered quota sampling method to select participants based on predetermined characteristics (e.g., age, birthdate), specifically targeting 50 Millennials and 50 Generation Z individuals.

2.3. Research Instrument

The research instrument employed in this study was adapted and modified from the work of Moderin and Go [7] in their study titled "Emerging Netspeak Word Choices in Social Media in Filipino Pop Culture." Careful consideration was given to selecting only those terms and words that are appropriate and relevant to the research locale, specifically focusing on Mindanao, particularly in Misamis Oriental, where the respondents of this study were situated. Additionally, certain newly coined words were sourced from Sanchez and Ott's [8] study. As a result, the utilization of this research instrument in the present study is considered both valid and reliable, as it has undergone adaptation and validation specifically within the Philippine context.

The research instrument comprises two sections. Section 1 of the research instrument is designed to collect essential respondent profile information, including optional details such as sex, age, birthdate, generation, number of hours spent on social media, and access to social media. These basic demographic data are crucial for the researchers to accurately identify the generational categories to which the respondents belong. Such information served as a valuable reference in exploring other factors that may influence the intelligibility of internet slang.

The second part of the research instrument involves the identification of internet slang items representing the meanings of modern-day net slang. Respondents were provided open-ended responses to the research instrument by indicating the intended meanings of the words or expressions. These words are categorized based on their structure and form, following the Krishnamurthy Model of Neologism, which includes word formation, borrowing, and lexical deviation.

3. Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings derived from the collected data, as well as the subsequent analysis and interpretation of the results.

Table 1 The Accessibility of Social Media across Generations

Access to Social Media	Millennials		Generation Z	
	<i>Freq.</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Freq.</i>	<i>%</i>
Facebook	50	100.0	50	100.0
Twitter	11	22.0	22	44.0
Instagram	13	26.0	37	74.0
Tumblr	0	0.0	1	2.0
TikTok	35	70.0	33	66.0
Messenger	50	100.0	50	100.0
YouTube	2	4.0	5	10.0

Table 1 provides an overview of the availability and usage of various social media platforms among Millennials and Gen Zers. The findings reveal that Facebook and Messenger are highly accessible and widely used by both generations, with a 100% adoption rate among the total population. Notably, Millennials do not have much access to Tumblr, YouTube, Twitter, or Instagram and little access to TikTok, as indicated by the limited corresponding percentages in the table.

Additionally, the study highlights the popularity of TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter among teenagers. The data shows that 95% of teens have smartphone access, with 45% reporting being online "almost constantly" [9]. Social media usage is ingrained in the daily routine of over 80% of individuals from each generation, albeit with variations in reasons for usage and time spent across different platforms. While both Millennials and Gen Zers use social media multiple times a day, Millennials tend to utilize a wider range of platforms, whereas Gen Zers have their preferred favorites.

The data suggest that Gen Z individuals typically engage with 2-3 social media platforms on a daily basis, namely YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. They tend to be more selective in their choices, opting for specific platforms that align with their preferences and interests.

In contrast, Millennials individuals tend to utilize a broader range of platforms, with an average usage of 5-6 platforms on a weekly basis. This includes popular platforms such as Facebook, Messenger, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok. Being the first generation to witness the rise of various social networks, Millennials have grown accustomed to having accounts on multiple platforms.

The disparity in platform usage between Gen Z and Millennials can be attributed to their different experiences and the availability of social media during their formative years. While Millennials have embraced a wider array of platforms due to their proliferation during their youth, Gen Z individuals have the luxury of being more selective from the outset, choosing the platforms that resonate most with them and disregarding others.

The shift in Facebook's user base can be attributed to several factors. Millennials have transitioned from being students and teenagers to adults with professional responsibilities, which may have led to decreased usage and engagement on the platform. Additionally, Gen Z individuals, seeking to distance themselves from older generations, have sought alternative platforms for communication and social interaction.

Therefore, the data indicate a changing landscape of social media usage, with younger generations gravitating towards different platforms while Facebook remains a dominant force among older audiences.

Table 2 Number of Hours Spent Using Social Media

No. of Hours	Millennials		Generation Z	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Less than an hour	5	10.0	3	6.0
1.5 – 2 hrs	8	16.0	6	12.0
2.5 – 3 hrs	5	10.0	8	16.0
3.5 – 4 hrs	12	24.0	4	8.0
4.5 – 5 hrs	7	14.0	14	28.0
More than 5 hrs	13	26.0	15	30.0
TOTAL	50	100.0	50	100.0

Table 2 summarizes the duration of time that respondents spend browsing social media. The majority of individuals from various generations dedicate approximately 2.5 to 3 hours per day to this activity. This finding aligns with Candilio's [10] study, which revealed that a significant portion of online time is allocated to social networking sites. The Internet plays a pivotal role in establishing a prominent linguistic context and environment, facilitating interactive communication [11] [12]. Platforms such as Facebook, blogs, and Twitter enable language learners to connect with others and engage in content sharing and discussions with individuals from around the globe. Social media learning approaches have the potential to enhance language acquisition through social interaction and interactive methods.

On the other hand, Gen Zers tend to spend more time browsing social media compared to Millennials due to several reasons. Firstly, as digital natives who grew up with technology, they are more comfortable and familiar with using social media platforms. Secondly, social media provides them with a platform for social connections and interactions with peers. Additionally, Gen Zers rely on social media for entertainment, content consumption, and self-expression. The widespread availability of smartphones also contributes to increased social media usage among Gen Zers. However, individual preferences and habits may vary, and cultural influences and personal interests can also impact social media usage patterns between the two generations.

3.1. Word Formation

In linguistics, word formation refers to the process of creating new words or forming words from existing ones. It involves the application of various morphological processes such as affixation, compounding, derivation, conversion, and blending. Word formation is a fundamental aspect of language, allowing speakers to expand their vocabulary and express new concepts and ideas. It plays a crucial role in language evolution and adaptation to societal and cultural changes.

Table 3 presents commonly used internet slang, including the terms "*matsalam*," "*marites*," "*dasurv*," and "*selfie*," which are recognized by millennial respondents. A majority of the Gen Zers correctly identified these slangs. Significantly, "*ludz*," "*sorna*," and "*forda*" received the highest recognition among the 50 respondents, with the least identification by the millennials. It is important to highlight that millennials were the first generation to have widespread internet access, which significantly influenced their language usage and exposure to various online slang and expressions. Due to their early adoption and integration of digital technologies, millennials are often considered the first global generation. On the other hand, Generation Z has grown up in an even more interconnected world, with the rise of online platforms and communication. This has expanded their perspectives, interactions, and relatability on a global scale [13].

In general, Millennials recognized a total of 457 internet slang words in terms of word formation, whereas Gen Zers identified a larger number of 572 words from the total populace. This disparity suggests that Gen Zers exhibit a greater proficiency in recognizing and responding to various word formations found on social media compared to Millennials. The heightened familiarity of Gen Zers with internet slang can be attributed to their extensive exposure and immersion in the digital realm. Growing up in an era characterized by ubiquitous technology and widespread use of social media, Gen Zers have fully embraced online platforms, actively engaged in digital communication, and become deeply entrenched in the digital culture. Consequently, they are more likely to encounter and adopt new internet slangs and expressions that emerge within the rapidly evolving online landscape. In contrast, Millennials may have been

introduced to social media and the internet during their adolescence or early adulthood, with their exposure to internet slang possibly not being as extensive or deeply integrated into their daily lives as it is for Gen Zers.

Table 3 Word Formation of Internet Slang between Millennials and Gen Zers

Word Formation	Millennials		Generation Z	
	<i>Freq.</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Freq.</i>	<i>%</i>
Afam	37	74.0	42	84.0
Awit	31	62.0	38	76.0
dasurv	37	74.0	43	86.0
ferson	31	62.0	47	94.0
forda	30	60.0	47	94.0
ludz	32	64.0	45	90.0
Marites	42	84.0	47	94.0
matsalam	43	86.0	47	94.0
mirasol	37	74.0	38	76.0
sakalam	34	68.0	43	86.0
selfie	41	82.0	44	88.0
sorna	32	64.0	47	94.0
yarn	30	60.0	44	88.0
TOTAL	457		572	

3.2. Word Borrowing

This linguistic phenomenon involves the adaptation and integration of a foreign or regional/local word into the vocabulary of a different language. In this context, word borrowing signifies the usage of words that originated from one language but have been incorporated and adapted for use in another language. This borrowing process allows for the expansion and enrichment of vocabulary, as languages interact and exchange linguistic elements.

Table 4 Word Borrowing of Internet Slang between Millennials and Gen Zers

Word Borrowing	Millennials		Generation Z	
	<i>Freq.</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Freq.</i>	<i>%</i>
Budol	32	64.0	43	86.0
Char	41	82.0	46	92.0
Charot	40	80.0	45	90.0
Choz/chos	28	56.0	42	84.0
Cyst	28	56.0	40	80.0
Ghosting	29	58.0	45	90.0
Kanser	26	52.0	40	80.0
Legit	34	68.0	48	96.0
Sana all	41	81.0	50	100.0
Salamuch	40	80.0	50	100.0
TOTAL	339		449	

The data collected in Table 4 reveals the occurrence of word borrowing, which involves the adoption of a word from one language and its incorporation into another language. In this particular case, words such as "sana all" and "salamuch" have been borrowed into the English language to ensure comprehensibility among speakers regardless of their location. Similarly, medical jargon like "kanser" and "cyst" is also used as expressions on social media. It is worth noting that the slang term "kanser" is employed to describe someone who is causing trouble or adding negativity to a situation. On the other hand, "cyst" is used as a term of endearment for females, similar to "sis" or "sister."

Generation Z individuals tend to have a higher proficiency in recognizing word borrowing in internet slang compared to millennials. This can be attributed to their increased exposure to diverse linguistic influences and their active participation in online communities. Gen Zers have grown up in a highly interconnected and globalized world, where access to different cultures and languages is readily available through the internet. As a result, they are more accustomed to encountering and engaging with borrowed words from various languages in their online interactions. Additionally, Gen Zers are known for their digital savviness and adeptness in navigating online platforms, which exposes them to a wide range of internet slang and linguistic trends. Their frequent and extensive use of social media, messaging apps, and other online platforms allows them to encounter and familiarize themselves with a greater variety of word borrowings. On the other hand, millennials, who came of age before the widespread adoption of social media and digital technologies, may have had less exposure to the same degree of linguistic diversity and borrowing in their online interactions.

3.3. Lexical Deviation

Lexical deviation in Internet slang refers to the deliberate departure from conventional language norms by using nonstandard words or expressions. It involves the modification of spellings, meanings, or grammar to create distinctive and expressive forms of language within online contexts. This phenomenon enables individuals to demonstrate their creativity and establish a unique online identity. Internet slang is characterized by its dynamic nature, constantly evolving and varying across different online platforms and among various generations.

Table 5 Lexical Deviation of Internet Slang between Millennials and Gen Zers

Lexical Deviation	Millennials		Generation Z	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
OMG	35	70.0	48	96.0
GTG	29	58.0	39	78.0
dasurv	37	74.0	43	86.0
BTW	41	82.0	48	96.0
bet	33	66.0	41	82.0
Brb	38	76.0	44	88.0
fitspiration	27	54.0	35	70.0
gor	30	60.0	39	78.0
LOL	41	81.0	47	94.0
otw	40	80.0	47	94.0
skl	32	62.0	45	90.0
YOLO	36	72.0	47	94.0
TOTAL	419		523	

The data presented in Table 4 illustrates the level of familiarity with internet slang among the two generations, considering the concept of lexical deviation. The table suggests that millennials encounter difficulties in recognizing and understanding these forms of internet slang, primarily due to their deviation from conventional language norms. This includes the use of abbreviations, unconventional spellings, and other non-standard linguistic elements. These

deviations pose challenges for millennials in comprehending and interpreting the intended meanings of these internet slang expressions.

The provided excerpt discusses the recognition of internet slang or newly coined words and phrases among Millennials and Gen Z. The table indicates that Gen Z respondents displayed a higher level of familiarity and accuracy in identifying lexical deviations such as "omg," "gtg," "dasruv," "btw," "bet," "brb," "fitspiration," "gor," "lol," "otw," "skl," and "yolo."

The internet slang "gor," "omg," "dasruv," and "fitspiration" are language slangs commonly known by Millennials, and they also received high scores among Gen Z respondents. These words have become part of daily conversations on social media platforms. As a generation distinct from its predecessors, Gen Z has developed its own slang. Their slang consists of new forms and meanings that differ from past slang. They create or modify slang to fulfill their language needs, often using it to maintain an insider-outsider dynamic and exclude non-participants from their conversations. For instance, when they want to keep secrets from adults, they use slang that adults are unlikely to understand. This leads to the creation of new slang understood only among Gen Z, allowing them to preserve their secrets.

3.4. The Level of Intelligibility of the Internet Slang between Millennials and Gen Zers

Table 6 The Level of Intelligibility of the Internet Slang

Generation	Mean	SD	Interpretation	Level of Intelligibility
Gen Z	11.48	0.8	Good	High Intelligibility
Millennial	6.74	1.2	Satisfactory	Average Intelligibility

Legend: 12.81-15.00 (Excellent), 9.61-12.80 (Good), 6.41-9.60 (Satisfactory), 3.21-6.40 (Unsatisfactory), 0.0-3.20 (Poor)

The findings from the data analysis present a significant contrast in the level of intelligibility observed between the two generational cohorts, namely Gen Z and Millennials. Specifically, Gen Z participants demonstrated an average score of 11.48, indicating a high degree of familiarity and comprehension regarding the emerging language expressions under examination. On the other hand, the average score of 6.74 obtained by the Millennials suggests a comparatively Average level of understanding and exposure to these newly coined words and phrases. This marked discrepancy in scores underscores the distinct linguistic knowledge and awareness of emerging language trends exhibited by Gen Z individuals. It implies that members of Gen Z possess a greater aptitude for linguistic adaptability and display heightened sensitivity toward the evolving lexicon of contemporary language. Conversely, Millennials may exhibit a relative lag in terms of their familiarity with these internet slangs.

The members of Generation Z undeniably represent the initial cohort of individuals known as digital natives, as they have grown up in an era marked by remarkable technological advancements and widespread exposure to social media, smartphones, and instant access to information. In light of this, Jeresano and Carretero [1] assert that technology plays a significant role in shaping the characteristics of this generation, particularly in terms of their modes of communication, social interactions, and the ongoing evolution of language itself. Moreover, the prevalence of social platforms as the predominant means of communication among this current generation has been further amplified by community lockdowns and the increased emphasis on physical distancing. As a result, the digital realm has become a significant domain for the formation of culture and the emergence of language, exemplified by the proliferation of slang within the context of social media.

3.5. The Relationship between Internet Slang and Generations

Table 7 The Relationship of the Internet Slang and Generations

Number of pair score	Sum of Millennial score	Sum of Gen Z score	Correlation	Interpretation
50	1,215	1,544	0.90	Positive Correlation

Legend: Coefficient values range from +1 to -1, with +1 indicating a perfect positive relationship.

Table 6 suggests that Millennials and Gen Z exhibit a strong connection to contemporary neologisms, as evidenced by a positive correlation of 0.90 according to Pearson's analysis. This indicates that both generations are increasingly embracing these neologisms. The overall scores of Millennials (1215) closely align with those of Gen Z (1544), indicating a minimal generation gap, which primarily exists among a few Millennials who are less involved in social media

activities. A study conducted by Vogels et al. [14] reveals that Millennials spend an average of 2 hours and 38 minutes per day on social media, utilizing various platforms such as YouTube (66%), Instagram (72%), and Facebook (87%). Additionally, Millennials are actively adopting newly coined words prevalent in social media, demonstrating their understanding of the usage and meaning of these terms.

Furthermore, Jeresano & Carretero [1] posit that individuals of the younger generation encounter numerous terms on a daily basis that may be unfamiliar to those outside of their age group. These terms are not only found in their social media posts but also in their comments and messages exchanged with family and friends. These newly created terms and phrases are known as Gen Z slang, reflecting their unique linguistic expressions influenced by the media culture they have been immersed in.

Moreover, the range of scores for millennials falls within 19-29 out of 35 items, indicating that they struggled to comprehend and respond to slang words. On the other hand, Gen Z performed exceptionally well, almost achieving a perfect score. This contrast in scores highlights the significant gap between the two generations when it comes to their understanding and usage of new slang words. According to Sheryllia [15], the utilization of colloquial expressions among individuals with close relationships signifies a positive rapport between them. Slang language is more commonly employed in informal daily conversations, such as online chatting [16]. It is observed that certain social groups develop their distinct slang, which remains comprehensible only to members of that specific group [17]. Additionally, in contemporary communication practices, individuals have increasingly embraced the use of slang to condense sentences in their conversations, particularly in digital interactions.

In conclusion, based on the findings presented, it is evident that both Millennials and Gen Z share a strong affinity for contemporary neologisms. The positive correlation of 0.90, as determined through Pearson's analysis, indicates a significant connection between the two generations and their increasing embrace of these new linguistic expressions. The comparable overall scores of Millennials and Gen Z suggest a minimal generation gap, primarily observed among a small subset of less socially engaged Millennials. Additionally, Generation Z individuals possess a high level of intelligibility in comprehending and utilizing internet slang or modern-day neologisms in daily conversation, specifically in the areas of word borrowing, lexical deviation, and word formation. However, Millennials actively adopt and understand the usage and meaning of newly coined words prevalent in social media. These findings collectively emphasize the strong association between these generations and their engagement with contemporary neologisms.

4. Conclusion and recommendations

Language holds a vital role in our daily interactions, serving as a fundamental means of communication within societies. Slang, a notable linguistic variation, emerges within the realm of language. According to Hilte et al. [18], slang is commonly observed in the speech patterns of young individuals worldwide, permeating the conversations of teenagers across different cultures. The study's findings highlight a minimal language gap between Millennials and Gen Z concerning internet neologisms. The collected data reveals that Millennials face challenges in understanding newly emerging words such as "bet," "choz/chos," "fitspiration," "kanser," "netizen," and "SkI," with less than 2 out of the millennial respondents answering them correctly. A comparison of scores clearly indicates differences between the two generations. These internet slangs are frequently utilized by Gen Z in their day-to-day conversations and social media posts. The highest scores for both generations were observed in the neologism component, particularly in word formation. Language continually evolves and changes, especially in social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok, where these new words originate. It is evident that Millennials struggle to comprehend these emerging words, and the older generation, who may be even less familiar with them, faces similar challenges. However, both generations exhibit a positive correlation regarding the intelligibility of internal slang. It is worth noting that these new words predominantly emerge from social media platforms, and individuals who are less active on social media may have limited exposure to them.

To effectively address the findings, the following recommendations are proposed: Firstly, fostering digital literacy among individuals of all age groups is crucial, with a focus on providing resources and training to enhance their understanding and navigation of social media platforms and the evolving language landscape. Secondly, promoting linguistic awareness through workshops, discussions, and educational campaigns can help older generations better comprehend and appreciate the language used by Millennials and Gen Z, especially the prevalent neologisms in social media. Thirdly, bridging the generation gap requires encouraging active participation in social media activities and creating opportunities for intergenerational dialogue to foster understanding and connection. Fourthly, staying updated and adaptive to linguistic developments is important for educators, parents, and professionals to effectively communicate and connect with younger generations. Lastly, conducting further research to explore specific linguistic

patterns, motivations, and impacts of neologism usage across different platforms and cultural contexts can contribute to a deeper understanding and inform future language education and communication strategies.

Compliance with ethical standards

Acknowledgments

The authors affirm that they have no competing interests related to the publication of this article. The authors assure that the research was carried out with fairness and impartiality, without any financial or personal affiliations that could potentially affect the integrity or objectivity of the study results.

Disclosure of conflict of interest

There was no conflict of interest.

Statement of Informed Consent

Prior to their participation, all individuals involved in this study granted informed consent. They were provided with comprehensive information regarding the research's objectives, procedures, potential risks or benefits, and their rights as participants. Participants were guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity of their responses. Their voluntary engagement in the study signifies their comprehension of the research objectives and their willingness to actively contribute to the data-gathering process.

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