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Leetspeak: The Other Internet Code

Leetspeak, also known as leet, is an Internet-based language that originally consisted of using homoglyphic character replacements and purposeful misspellings to obscure words that would otherwise be censored in moderated online spaces. For example, ‘ass’ might be written as ‘@\$\$’ and ‘porn’ might be written as pr0n (“Leet”). While some of the dialect is relatively innocuous, leetspeak was developed as, and continues to be, a language of online subversion. Initially created by hackers “to prevent administrators from detecting hacking activities and to subvert automated profanity filters”, and eventually expanding to include full words in order to avoid censorship of spoken online content (such as ‘unalive’, which refers to suicide), leet primarily resembles an “anti-language” (Lange 564; Skinner; Lange 565). Traditional anti-languages are meant to be exclusive, creating an “us” versus “them” mentality important for people, especially marginalized people, to create their individual and collective identities (Lange 565). When translated online as a tactic to avoid censorship from social media algorithms, leetspeak as an anti-language serves as a tool for people to discuss taboo topics, such as sexuality (pr0n), suicide (“unalive”), and race (alternately spelling “white people” as “whypipo”, among other phrases) (Chung 15). However, it also serves to create an internet-based dialect with which social media users, especially users who are anti-censorship, can build communities and an online culture that both reflects and, eventually, influences offline culture.

The promise of social media is that it allows anyone, anywhere, to express their opinions and grievances freely. For those facing genuine discrimination and oppression, social media's wide reach and potential for anonymity allows marginalized people to find communities online when physical communities may be unavailable. In Saudi Arabia, where women's public lives are strictly limited, "blogs represent for many of these authors one of the few available outlets to release steam and voice their frustrated responses to various restrictions on their lives and mobility" (Galan 177). Furthermore, social media communities allow marginalized people, such as women in Saudi Arabia, not only the chance to complain, but to relate to each other, compare experiences, and "develop a critical perspective that links individual lived experiences to a larger social and political context" (Galan 179). Essentially, Saudi women's blogs take the conversations held between women in interior spaces in Haifaa al-Mansour's 2012 film *Wadjda* and, much like the film did, make those conversations public. Yet, while Saudi Arabia has made attempts to censor such communities, women's blogs are still generally considered to be personal, non-political spaces and therefore have not been censored as vehemently as other online dissension, allowing such subversive conversations and community-building to continue (Galan 180).

Outside of Saudi Arabia, though, other marginalized groups that have sought to build communities online have encountered perceived censorship from social media platforms rather than the government. Social media algorithms determine who or what is displayed across social media feeds, shaping online reality and "serv[ing] as disciplinary apparatuses that prescribe participatory norms" (Cotter 897). Thus, many influencers carefully observe the algorithm in an attempt to determine what online behaviours are "'reward[ed]' with visibility" and perform them (Cotter 897). However, for many marginalized groups — or even just users attempting to discuss

taboo topics such as sex or race — the opposite is true: they seek to observe what behaviours are punished, usually through deleted and flagged posts as well as user bans and “shadowbans”, which “refers to the (perceived) suppression of one’s post(s), such that a user becomes virtually invisible to others” (Cotter 905). For example, in 2017, Black Facebook users noticed that they were being banned from the platform for posts that criticized racial issues and used the term “white people” (Chung 19).

As such, “folk theories” — “non-authoritative conceptions of the world that develop among non-professionals and circulate informally...via first-hand experience and social interactions” — began to proliferate online to explain such occurrences, especially after the 2016 election (qtd. in Chung 25-26; Chung 10). Theories “included that white supremacists had searched the key word and reported the posts and that the algorithms automatically flagged such posts through the detection of keywords” (Chung 19). Accurate or not, such theories make it clear that the lack of transparency from social media platforms regarding the inner workings of their algorithms has fostered a distrust of the algorithms themselves.

Algorithmic bias certainly exists. Algorithms are created by people who possess their own privileges and prejudices, and who are often only able to procure a limited amount of data with which to develop algorithms (Heilweil). Furthermore, because the details of how social media algorithms work is often concealed by platform owners, who “strategically make certain information about their algorithms visible (or invisible) to certain actors”, users typically can only infer how algorithms decide what to delete or who to block based on their own experiences (Cotter 899; Heilweil). Thus, folk theories emerge, and, with them, strategies to counteract the perceived modes of censorship. Yet, as researcher Kelley Cotter notes, “there is a limit to the extent that algorithms control behavior. Influencers’ interpretations of Instagram’s algorithmic

architecture...influence their interactions with the platform beyond the rules instantiated by its algorithms” (897). While algorithmic bias certainly exists, and anti-algorithmic tactics may well be effective, linguistic anti-algorithm tactics, such as the use of leetspeak, function just as much to establish an internet culture as to avoid censorship.

Russian Philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin discusses how any domain of culture is defined by its boundaries, including cultures themselves (274). Yet, the boundaries of culture can be messy, can overlap with other cultures, and can be appropriated by those outside the culture, muddying the boundaries that define it. As the Internet has developed, it has also developed cultures and subcultures, which possess similarly messy boundaries that are, primarily, linguistic. As anthropologist Patricia G. Lange notes, “Invoking written ideologies helps people organize into cultural groups and determine appropriate access to resources, such as communicative rights and privileges” (554). However, the Internet is a “participatory culture”, meaning it is generally a non-institutionalized space; therefore, it is individuals who create and disseminate the linguistic signifiers of their culture and who police each other’s use of language (Lange 555). As such, it is difficult to definitively label leetspeak and Internet culture as a “discourse community” considering “the internal contradictions that may exist within such a group, or even within the same contextual field of interaction” (Lange 556). However, as Bakhtin notes, a cultural domain is determined less by its whole than by the boundaries that separate it from other domains (274). While the exact usage of leetspeak may differ between subgroups, it is primarily separated from other dialects by its origins on the Internet, indicating that those who use it are comfortable with Internet culture, and its use to speak about censored or restricted topics.

Leetspeak’s subversive implications are particularly important within marginalized groups, who use the dialect to recognize and communicate with each other. Researcher Anna

Woorim Chung notes that while algorithms can be easily modified to also detect and block leet phrases, use of the words “just as importantly signal subversion of the ‘algorithms’, which could represent Facebook’s content moderation practices more broadly” (34). Effectively subverting the algorithm is not always as important as signaling that one *wants* to subvert the algorithm — that one is integrated into Internet culture, and especially the section of Internet culture that is anti-censorship.

Furthermore, leetspeak can also function as a tone indicator, often denoting either that a post will be a humorous look at a serious subject, or that the post will be a sincere criticism of an institution or issue. In fact, the use of alternate spellings in Black communities online is more often used “as a way of talking about race through critique and humor than as an explicit tactic of algorithmic subversion” (Chung 36). Particularly in Black online communities, leetspeak can function as an extension of African American Vernacular English, which also uses alternate spelling and is “an integral action in defining Black identity and in resisting white supremacy, marginalization, and erasure” (Chung 34). Both AAVE and leet are forms of “surreptitious communication design”, allowing Black writers and speakers to communicate with each other in ways that are inaccessible to outsiders (Chung 34). Even as the use of leetspeak, particularly alternate spellings of “white people” expands into non-Black areas of the Internet, the words are “less meaningful for those outside of Black communities, which have developed collective understandings of what these spellings mean and collective practices around how they are used” (Chung 34). Regardless, the connection between leetspeak and dialects that can be written or spoken has become more widespread, particularly as people have begun to contend with censorship on the popular platform TikTok.

TikTok is known for the specificity of its algorithm, measuring “each user’s behavior every few seconds and track[ing] exponentially more content than any other platform, mak[ing] the algorithm better and better at serving up what users will like” (Greenwald). TikTok’s algorithm is also extremely adept at forming micro-subcultures on its platform (Greenwald). Yet, wider TikTok trends also exist, one of which — the use of the word “unalive” to refer to suicide or kill — is an anti-algorithmic tactic. Much like the alternate spellings of “white people” used by Black communities on Facebook, ‘unalive’ is primarily used either to indicate humour or to soberly discuss a serious topic that would otherwise be seemingly censored (Skinner). Additionally, like discussions of race using leet, ‘unalive’ allows users to discuss suicide without being blocked and, moreover, allows users to process such a serious topic using humour, as ‘unalive’ possesses a less serious connotation (Skinner). For example, as described in an article about the phenomenon: “Rory Philpott, an 18-year-old student in Toronto, posted a TikTok of her friend jokingly talking about wanting to jump out a window. The closed caption for the video reads “s0ic1al” instead of “suicidal” and the hashtags include ‘unalive,’ ‘funny,’ and ‘humor”” (Skinner).

Furthermore, “unalive” also possesses the ability to be spoken, making it easier for people to transition from solely using the term online to using the phrase in offline slang, integrating leet phrases into mainstream culture and thereby making more people aware of the terms and able to use them. For example, Lex Pruijt, a Dutch 19-year-old interviewed for the same article concerning the use of ‘unalive’ on-and-offline, stated that the word has become a part of spoken slang used by herself and her friends (Skinner).

However, as leet becomes more widespread online and especially offline, its status as an anti-language is weakened. As Lange states, “when outsiders appropriate anti-languages, their

usefulness for creating social solidarity may weaken for original users” (566). As she describes, leetspeak’s original usage by hackers died down once it was “appropriated by lesser technical groups, such as “warez d00dz” (pronounced “wares dudes”), AOL users, and other hacker ‘wannabes’ who used these forms in feeble attempts to signal membership in hacker communities without demonstrating the commensurate technical skills that the form connoted” (Lange 566). Indeed, even if social media platforms do not decipher the anti-algorithmic tactics being used and alter the algorithm to censor such words, the more widespread leet becomes as a phenomenon, it is likely that the sense of cultural identity it gives to those who use it will be diluted by its admission into mainstream culture.

Alternatively, provided that leet speak continues to be less of an anti-algorithmic tactic and more of a symbol of being against algorithmic censorship and wanting to discuss taboo topics online, more people being aware of the dialect allows more people to share their experiences, read about the experiences of others, and engage with the humour and criticism that is generally marked by the use of leetspeak. For example, therapist Shahem McLaurin notes that it is important for people to discuss topics such as suicide, and the term ‘unalive’ helps those discussions happen and for people to find resources without being silenced (Skinner).

Moreover, the more widespread discussions about censorship, race, sex, and mental health become, the more likely it is that such discussions will yield genuine change. The blogs written by Saudi Arabian women, despite being monitored and despite being considered a “private space”, are still considered radical centres of change, with one Saudi commenter noting that “discussions such as these are “like the single drops accumulating” and, over time, create a “ripple effect” that can produce change” (Galan 179). In much the same way as *Wadjda* was meant to be “an intimate portrayal of life [in Saudi Arabia], which [Al-Mansour] hope[s] touches

people on a personal level”, Saudi women’s blogs radically give voice to the everyday experiences of Saudi women (Garcia 36). Indeed, Saudi women’s blogs eventually facilitated conversations leading to protests against the ban on women driving (Galan 180). More people having access to the blogs may have broadened the identity of the blogs’ readers, but it also meant that more people were discussing women’s rights in Saudi Arabia and more people were willing to actively protest. By making the language of change relatable and accessible, by “framing...the driving issue in terms of lived experience”, Saudi women were able to “camouflage the degree to which blog conversations radically challenge fundamental contradictions of the Saudi state” (Galan 180). While secrecy is lost and identity is broadened when leet words become mainstream, more people are able to access important conversations. Whether the algorithms are censoring the words of marginalized communities or not, the social phenomenon remains the same — those who are marginalized offline seek to use language not just to escape censorship, but as a method of finding each other and forming communities in which they can speak freely, in a language of their own.

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