



(hēhē), which sounds like a cross between a chuckle and a sardonic snort. There's almost always a vein of sarcasm in that particular laughter though and I only do two 呵呵 and never three or more in my responses.

Being bilingual has made me cognizant of the disparate ways people from different countries express themselves online. It has also made me acutely aware of how these differences can easily lead to confusion and misunderstanding. Acronyms like "lol," "rofl" and "lmao," while ingrained in the digital cultures of the US and other English-speaking countries, may appear indecipherable to other internet users upon first encounter. And for Americans, seeing the phrase "kkk," one of the favored phrases of laughter among both Brazilians and Koreans, might be more than a little alarming.

So does the rest of the world also "hahaha" or "lol" or are there more differences than similarities in the way people laugh? To get to the bottom of this question, I decided to look into the many ways people from [the 10 countries](#) with the highest number of internet users express mirth online. While there's ample information on the distinctive phrases used by [different languages](#) or [different countries](#) to indicate laughter, most of it is a little dated. To gain a more detailed and updated picture of how the majority of the world laughs online, I spoke to several people from those countries<sup>2</sup> on what words they preferred to use when they're signaling merriment or amusement and why certain phrases have fallen out of favor. Here's what I learned:

## 'Haha' Reigns Supreme

### The Most Common Ways To Laugh Around The World

1. China (772 million internet users): 哈哈 呵呵
2. India (462 million internet users): haha, lol, hehe, ek 1

3. US (312 million internet users): haha, hehe, lol, lmao
4. Brazil (149 million internet users): haha, kkk, rsrs, huehue
5. Indonesia (143 million internet users): wkwk, xixi
6. Japan (118 million internet users): 笑, (笑), www
7. Russia (109 million internet users): хаха, хохо, гтгггг, ололо
8. Nigeria (98 million internet users): LWKM, LWKMD
9. Mexico (85 million internet users): jaja
10. Bangladesh (80 million users): হাঁ হাঁ, মজাই মজা

One of the things that immediately jumps out from the list above<sup>3</sup> is how prevalent "haha" is around the world. Not only does the actual phrase "haha" occupy an outsized position in countries like India, US and Brazil, but its equivalent in different languages, such as "xaxa" in Russian, "jaja" in Spanish and হাঁ হাঁ in Bengali, are also hugely popular.

The many variants of "haha" are also widely used. In the US, people may type "hehe" or "heehee" as alternatives for "haha." In Brazil, "haha" is common, as are words such as "hihi" and "hehehe" and their heartier cognates, "huehue" and "huahua." The same also applies to internet users in Russia, who use phrases such as "хихи" (hihi), "хохо" (hoho) and "хехе" (héhé). [Like English](#), the connotations of each variant may differ. A Brazilian woman I interviewed explained to me the contexts in which she and her friends use different units of laughter: "hehe," for instance, is utilized when someone wants to express that they're embarrassed, while "hihi" gives off a more playful vibe.

And even when it's not a "haha," other forms of onomatopoeia still account for the majority of the ways people laugh online. The Brazilian "kkk" is

[shorthand for the onomatopoeic "kakaka"](#) and the Russian "гггг" (gggg) or "бгггг" (bgggg) are meant to be simulations of laughter. A Russian woman I interviewed told me that "бгггг" (bgggg) for her sounds like a sardonic or a devilish laugh and therefore conveys a different meaning than, for example, a "хаха" (haha) or a "олюлю" (ololo).

Second to onomatopoeia are words that describe either the action or the state of laughter. Acronyms such as "lol" ("laugh out loud"), rofl ("rolling on the floor, laughing") and "lmao" ("laughing my ass off") fall under this category. So does the Nigerian counterpart for "lol," "LWKM" and "LWKMD," which [stand for](#) "Laugh wan kill me" and "Laugh wan kill me die" in pidgin English, and মজাই মজা, the Bengali version of "lol." In Japanese, both 笑 and www [are words that denote laughter](#), although the former is a Kanji character while the latter is the base for the word "warau" (笑う) or "warai" (笑い), the Japanese word for laughing or smiling.

A fascinating example that doesn't fall into either category is "ek 1," which was brought to my attention by an Indian coworker. "ek 1," which loosely translates to "I rate this number one" — the "ek" itself means number in Hindi — is commonly used as an affirmative response to a joke. If you find something to be funny, you could always type "haha" or "hehe" in India, but you can also signal your enjoyment by responding "ek 1."

It's perhaps not that surprising that onomatopoeia is more common amongst different internet cultures than acronymic signifiers such as "lol." In 2015, Facebook [published a study](#) that analyzed which types of laughter were most widely-used on their social media platform<sup>4</sup>. According to the data, "haha" was the most popular term of laughter, used by 51.4% of the users in their data set. "lol," by contrast, was used by only 1.9% and was the fourth most-used term, behind "haha," emojis and "hehe."

But why are "haha" and its onomatopoeic counterparts so beloved? The simple answer could be, well, its simplicity. While words such as "lol" and "lmao" might be confounding to a user who's not well-versed in internet

slang, "haha," the onomatopoeic expression of laughter, is accessible and more intuitive. It requires no foreknowledge, no savviness in digital culture. The popularity of other less exclusive jargon might ebb and flow with the times, but the populist "haha" and other forms of onomatopoeia will likely endure because it is one of the most straightforward ways to communicate delight.

And speaking of phrases losing their purchase in popularity...

### **Some Laughs Really Don't Age Well**

Popularity is a fickle thing. One day you're hot and trending and the next day you're spurned and consigned to the fringes of the internet. Believe it or not, it happens with laughter too, at least the way you voice that laughter online. I've felt this keenly with "XD," an emoticon that I use on a daily basis but which is used far less frequently by my younger siblings and their peers. These dips in popularity also apply to different online cultures, such as the Russian "гггг" (gggg) or "олюлю" (ololo), which, according to a Russian woman in her 20s, feels outdated and are rarely used these days.

The same thing has also happened to "www," which used to be one of the most prevalent ways of signifying appreciation in Japan, but has now [become less popular](#). Instead, 笑 or (笑), which connoted an undercurrent of sarcasm ten years ago, has become the favored term and is now perceived as a word that conveys genuine, rather than derisive, laughter.

Its linkage to youngsters may be one of the reasons behind its downfall. "www" is perceived in Japan to be the parlance of a younger generation or "hikikomori," social recluses that spend most of their time online, according to a friend who's fluent in Japanese. People who don't want to appear immature or associated with hikikomori prefer the Kanji character over the abbreviation of the Japanese word "warai," she explains, although ironically, they're both connoting the same thing — laughter.

Associations with a certain group can lead to mixed feelings and readings for different users. While the onomatopoeic "huehue" is often [cited in Reddit discussions as a common way](#) for Brazilians to laugh online, my interviews with two Brazilians — one in her 20s, one in her early 30s — tell a more complicated story. According to both of them, they seldom use phrases such as "huehue" and "huahua" because it's perceived as childish and used more commonly among people of lower socioeconomic classes. Instead, they prefer using terms such as "kkk," "hahaha" and "rsrs," [an abbreviation of the word "risos,"](#) which means "laughs" in Portuguese.

That's not to say that phrases such as "www" will soon fade into obscurity or that "huehue" will always be interpreted by certain strata of society this way. Meanings change, popularity often works in cycles and what is considered dead may never die. Just ask "lol," which has often been [pronounced dead](#), and yet still holds on to its dear life with remarkable tenacity, popping up frequently in my messages with friends and coworkers. Perhaps in a few years, "rrrr" might become popular again or "www" might supplant 笑 as connotations shift and different demographic groups re-embrace these terms and make them anew.

## **Do We Laugh Differently From Each Other Or Do We Laugh The Same?**

When it comes to laughing, it's often the distinctive ones, the ones that easily lead to misreadings by different cultures, that stick out. "kkk" is one example, so is the Thai "555,"<sup>5</sup> which when read by Mandarin speakers sounds like crying<sup>6</sup>, rather than laughing. Words that are innocuous in their original language may be confusing to some internet users — the Spanish "ja" also means "yes" in German — and offensive to others — "lol," for instance, might be jarring for Vietnamese people because of [its similarities to "lồn,"](#) a Vietnamese slang word for "vagina."

But to focus on the dissimilarities and cultural mistranslations would be to ignore all the similarities people from different countries laugh online.

Most languages, like English, follow a pattern where the more enthusiastic the laughter, the longer the expression of laughter. If you appreciate a joke in Brazil, for instance, you might type out a supportive "haha." But if you really think something is hilarious, you might let loose a long string of "kkkkkkk" or something akin to "uhauhahHAUHahaa," a mishmash of words that signals your laughter was so uncontrollable that you temporarily lost control of your keyboard.

Another commonality shared by many internet cultures is the large degree to which expediency and efficiency in typing have shaped the vernacular of laughing. Many of the ways of laughing online are products of keyboard or smartphone typing and would likely bewilder people if you voiced them aloud in real life. In Indonesia, for instance, the common term of laughter, "wkwkwk," comes from a series of abbreviations: it's actually [derived from "hwhwhw,"](#) which in itself is a shortening of the onomatopoeic phrase "huahuahua."<sup>7</sup> "wkwkwk" reportedly came into being because it was easier for users to type "k" rather than "h," which would require them to move their forefinger away from its placement on the keyboard. In Russia, the phrase "3a3a3a" has become increasingly popular in recent years, one of my interviewees told me, because of the rise of smartphones. "3" and "x" are adjacent to each other on the smartphone keyboards in Russia, and so more people have been using "3a3a" in lieu of "xaxa," a common way to laugh online.

An interesting exception to this rule would be the Japanese 笑, which, according to my friend, actually takes more effort to type out than its slighted counterpart, "www." Its more time-consuming nature is actually one of the reasons Japanese users have begun favoring it in these past few years as they believe it shows [more care and attention has been put into this digital laughter](#) compared to "www," which is faster to type and easily falls into the realm of hyperbolic laughter, especially when there are too many "w"s.

But speaking of commonalities, it would be remiss to not mention emojis and how extensively they're featured among different online cultures around the world. Unlike phrases of laughter that are rooted in the languages of individual countries, emojis are more universally accessible and capable of transcending national barriers. Many of my interviewees and friends mentioned to me that in the past few years, they have increased their usage of emojis in their expressions of laughter. It's not that surprising, considering how 😂, the "face with tears of joy" emoji, is [one of the most popular emojis](#) and the usage of emojis has climbed steadily on social media platforms these years, perhaps [to the detriment of internet slang](#) such as "lol" and "lmao."

But even though emojis may have staked out a place in online communications, it doesn't seem that emojis will be replacing online slang or onomatopoeic terms of laughter anytime soon. According to that [2015 study done by Facebook](#), "haha" is still more widely-used than emojis and all of my interviews corroborated the impression that emojis, while popular, are still not as predominantly used as simple phrases such as "haha" and "jaja." And when you consider the fact that people [don't readily change the ways they laugh online](#) once they've adopted a certain phrase, it's more than likely that textual laughter such as "haha" will still be getting the last laugh.

<sup>1</sup> There's no specific reason for this. My Digg cohorts just feel like a "lol"-sort of crowd. ↩

<sup>2</sup> All of the interviewees in this article are people in their 20s and 30s. ↩

<sup>3</sup> The list is not meant to be an exhaustive representation of all the ways people from these countries laugh online. Instead, it is showing some of the most common or idiosyncratic ways internet users from these 10 countries express laughter. Phrases such as the phonetic variants of "haha" in different languages, therefore, might be omitted from the list. ↩

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that the Facebook study itself focuses on posts and comments written in the English language. ↩

<sup>5</sup> The number 5 is pronounced "ha" in Thai. ↩

<sup>6</sup> In Mandarin, the number 5 is pronounced as "wǔ," which is phonetically similar to the word 嗚 (wu), an onomatopoeic word for crying. ↩

<sup>7</sup> [Another theory](#) regarding the origins of "wkwkwk" is that it's a condensed form of the words "I" and "laughing" in Indonesian. ↩

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