

ENGLISH, BUT MAKE IT GEN Z: CREATIVITY AND VARIATION IN SOCIAL MEDIA LANGUAGE

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Abstract. The popularity of social media has altered the communication pattern of young people, particularly the students of Generation Z who are living in the digital world where internet usage is their daily routine. Communication in these online platforms tends to space out of typical written English by incorporating emojis, abbreviations, innovative spelling, different typography, and seamless blending of English and local languages. Although these linguistic creativities are typical of the telecommunication platforms like WhatsApp and Instagram, their intended meanings can be misinterpreted or perceived as reckless or as lack of language proficiency. This issue reveals an opportunity for further research on the communicative values and social meanings of digital languages. This research aims to determine the creative linguistic elements applied by Generation Z learners on social media, and to analyse the new trends in digital English. Qualitative content analysis was employed to document language as it is naturally found in the digital context. Information is gathered in the form of the screen shots of the actual online communication as captured in several social media platforms like Instagram and WhatsApp communication. The results indicate the Generation Z students employ creative features of language like emojis, abbreviations, stylised spelling and code-mixing language in deliberate and organised means. These practices are signs of flexibility, awareness, and good communicative competence in the digital spaces than indicators of poor language abilities. It was revealed that the creative uses of English language by Generation Z on social media are both purposeful and socially inclined. Emojis, stylistic variation, code-mixing, and the use of abbreviation act as extensions of emotion, expression of identity, and relationship expression, and not to be perceived as language deficiency. This online language emerges as a new English language variation which can be perceived as a strategic strength in social communication among Generation Z.

Keywords: *English language variation, generation Z, linguistic creativity, social media communication*

Introduction

Language has always evolved to reflect cultural and technical changes, but the development of social media has accelerated this process, transforming how people interact, construct identities, and negotiate power. With billions of users globally, sites like Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook have emerged as important platforms for linguistic innovation and cultural expression as these platforms become the catalysts for linguistic revolution which has altered the way English is utilised in the digital age (Adeoye, 2026; Gulnazir and Zainuddin 2025; Suganya 2025). The peak of this transformation is spurred by the Generation Z (Gen Z), a cohort of "digital natives" who have seamlessly integrated technology into their daily lives and communicative practices (Obasi and Obasi, 2024; Prajarto et al., 2021). For Gen Z, language on social media transcends mere information exchange; it is a dynamic tool for identity construction, social solidarity, and cultural expression (Adeoye 2026). The current climate of digital environment has fostered a youth culture where internet memes, viral videos, and online slang constitute a primary mode of interaction, creating a unique digital language across geographical boundaries.

Their constant interaction with digital devices has led to high-speed communication that is interactive, graphic, and extremely expressive. This evolution marks a departure from standard written English toward informal, digitally mediated forms known as "textisms" or e-discourse. To communicate as rapidly and concisely as possible, Gen Z, frequently 'violate' formal orthography, truncate words, and reorganise language features. It is important to note that these practices do not occur by chance, rather to be viewed as purposeful and effective techniques that help them to express emotion, tone, social identity, and personality that extends beyond the competences of conventional language (Danesi, 2017a; 2017b; Crystal, 2011). This shift manifests in the heavy reliance on acronyms, abbreviations, and sentence fragments, where grammatical aspects like subjects or objects are usually omitted to economise space and time. Furthermore, digital communication is innately multimodal; traditional text is increasingly supplemented or replaced by visual elements such as emojis, GIFs, and memes (Suganya, 2025). These visual images serve as critical paralinguistic tools that convey complex emotions, tones, and cultural shorthand, as well as minimise the likelihood of ambiguity that go beyond what regular language can achieve (Suganya, 2025).

Visual presentation of emotions, such as emojis, can also be used to understand the meaning intended in particular messages. Characterised by high linguistic creativity, this digital lingo features an organic range of neologisms, abbreviations, popular slang (such as "rizz", "vibe", and "slay"), multimodal elements like emojis, and pervasive code-switching (Gulnazir and Zainuddin, 2025; Suganya, 2025). These digital communication trends demonstrate how Gen Z proactively changes language to suit the rapid paced of digital communication. Through these variations, Gen Z users continuously bend and creatively innovate traditional English language structure to fit the brevity, humour, and rapid nature of digital platforms (Gulnazir and Zainuddin, 2025). The use of these new forms of language transcends beyond digital communication into the rapidly evolving social media platforms. Social media acts as a powerful catalyst for continuous linguistic innovation. These platforms driven by short-form content and algorithms encourage users to experiment playfully with language, leading to the rapid creation and dissemination of neologisms and slang, such as "rizz," "lit," and "vibe" (Gulnazir and Zainuddin, 2025). Such linguistic creativity flourishes through morphological processes like blending, clipping, and phonetic respelling (Gulnazir and Zainuddin, 2025).

Within the context of multicultural and multilingual such as Malaysia, this digital linguistic evolution takes on a highly localised and hybridised form. Digital settings encourage the blending of languages like English and Malay to express sentiments and engage in online conversations (Shamsuddin et al., 2024; Hashim and Soopar, 2022). The use of social media among Gen Z users has impacted the frequency and context of code-mixing that initiates a dynamic and hybrid language use. Code-mixing enhances communication efficiency by allowing speakers to choose the most appropriate lexical items from different languages to convey their message effectively. The integration of English with local languages is said to be driven by the desire to appear trendy and relatable (Hasjim et al., 2026; Tarihoran et al., 2022). Moreover, through the adaptation of global internet trends alongside local languages, Malaysian youths establish in-group solidarity. This dynamic interplay demonstrates how global digital influences are adapted to widen the local linguistic repertoire, allowing youths to navigate the digital environment and connect with global community (Suganya, 2025).

On a contrary note, despite rapid linguistic innovation enriches modern communication, it also triggers socio-linguistic and educational challenges (Obasi and Obasi, 2024). It is argued that the integration of global linguistic elements into local languages can lead to cultural hybridity and shifts in identity. This challenge can be observed within educational setting when Gen Z users are inclined to use informal language, slang, and mixed language styles that they adopt from the social media, during classroom interactions. This preference for informal communication appears to challenge conventional academic formality, ergo instructors are required to adjust their pedagogical strategies to maintain engagement while upholding educational standards. Furthermore, there are legitimate concerns from instructors on the normalisation of "textisms," grammatical simplifications, and non-standard syntax could lead to the potential erosion of formal language proficiency, academic writing skills, and traditional linguistic purity (Suganya, 2025). Consequently, the primary issue is the challenge of resolving the tension between the necessity for creative, identity-driven linguistic variation on social media among Gen Z and the challenges that this digital evolution presents to the preservation of standard literacy norms and cross-generational comprehension (Suganya, 2025).

As communication has shifted from face-to-face interaction and traditional writing to instantaneous digital messaging, digital languages like the use of emojis, abbreviations, stylised spelling, typography variation, and code-mixing are generally perceived as casual, informal, or even indicative of the declining standards of language, and not analysed as a significant, systematic form of communication. Advancement of technology is argued to diminish linguistic richness and standard norms, while others view it as a catalyst for innovation in language use and learning (Babayiğit, 2025; Eisenlohr, 2004). Furthermore, these changes may contribute to misunderstandings, as meaning becomes more context dependent and risks displacing native linguistic forms and promoting hybridised registers that deviate from standard norms (Husaj, 2014).

Gen Z's linguistic creativity possesses its own patterns, operations and communicative principles that operate on the background of digital environment. Its adoption should be understood as deliberate communicative strategies. The disjunction between real-world digital communication practices and traditional language ideologies that prioritise standardisation and formality (Tagg, 2015; Crystal, 2011) further widens this gap. Thus, more empirical studies need to be established to explore the correlation between the realities of Gen Z digital communication and traditional ideals about language that emphasise more on standardisation and formality (Tagg, 2015; Crystal, 2011).

Gen Z's digital language should be viewed as organised, purposeful, and socially meaningful forms of communication, rather than deviations from standard English. Their preference for informal and digital-influenced language fosters familiarity and self-expression which are socially meaningful to them. Their communication strategies are adapted to their digital environment specifically serving social and emotional functions. In addition, the adoption of digital language by Gen Z reveals the crossroads between technology and language which has redefined how humans express, interpret, and exchange meaning in the digital age. This proves the notion that English language is vulnerable to be influenced by communicative competence, contextual awareness, and adaptability of its users in online settings; hence, more research needs to be conducted to facilitate a more nuanced understanding of digital English. Thus, the present study aims to: (1) identify the creative linguistic elements utilised by Generation Z learners on

social media, and (2) analyse the emerging trends that characterise contemporary digital English.

Literature review and theoretical underpinnings

The rapid expansion of digital technologies has redesigned how people communicate, and how language is structured, performed, and interpreted. In computer-mediated environments, written discourse increasingly incorporates features traditionally associated with speech, visual expression, and multimodal interaction. These developments challenge conventional distinctions between spoken and written language and provide avenues for further research on how English evolves in digitally mediated spaces. For Gen Z, whose daily communication is rooted in social media platforms, digital environments function not merely as tools of interaction but as space for identity construction and social engagement. Gen Z's digital language use reflects their creativity, adaptability, and connection with their audience, rather than deviation from linguistic norms. Hence, examining the linguistic practices of Generation Z requires moving away from deficit perspectives and toward a more nuanced understanding of digital communication as socially meaningful and strategically positioned.

This following review gives focus in two interconnected areas. First, it examines language change within computer-mediated communication, particularly on the aspects of informality and multimodality as part of the characteristics of digital discourse. Second, it situates digital English within broader discussions of World Englishes and language variation. Language changes initiated by the evolving digital realms should be acknowledged as legitimate linguistic variation and evidence of communicative competence in contemporary contexts. Finally, the review also discusses on the theoretical aspects that underpin the study.

Digital communication and language change

The rapid expansion of social media and digital platforms has fundamentally transformed the linguistic landscape, creating dynamic environments where language evolves at an unprecedented pace. Language, as a dynamic and adaptive system, continues to evolve in response to historical, social, and technological changes (Babayigit, 2025). Gen Z prefers informal language, including slang, regional languages, and mixed language styles. Such preference encourages them to engage in creative activities such as meme creation, the use of emojis, and slang, which appear rampantly in their online interactions (Obasi and Obasi, 2024; Park and Park, 2021). Digital communication acts as a powerful catalyst for language change, evading traditional linguistic gatekeepers such as dictionaries and formal institutions which liberates the process of word formation (Gulnazir and Zainuddin, 2025). Social media platforms like TikTok, X (formerly Twitter), and Instagram are the 'breeding ground' for creative linguistic trends that are shaped by the functional and demands of digital discourse environments which has led to a massive influx of neologisms. These trends are quickly catching on and penetrate mainstream discourse (Gulnazir and Zainuddin, 2025; Ebner, 2017).

As the current world is coined as electronic global village that emerges from the evolution of communication that moves from formal spoken or written language to computer-mediated communication, visual language is becoming atypical (Wang,

2019). Distinct sociolects often referred to as "e-discourse," "Netspeak," or "Textisms," which create a hybrid between spoken and written language (Sabri et al., 2020). Digital language change is characterised by rapid word-formation processes, predominantly through blending (e.g., finfluencer for financial influencer), affixation (e.g., deplatform), and compounding. Furthermore, words from specialised fields, such as IT jargon (e.g., bug, cloud, hack), have evolved into standardised everyday terminology due to digital saturation. Language evolution in this space manifests through several unique structural and syntactic adaptations like morphological innovation and respelling in which users frequently truncate words, drop vowels (e.g., thx, ppl), and use phonetic and alphanumeric replacements (e.g., every1, 4eva, m8) and sentence fragments with omitted subjects or objects (e.g., "Doesn't want to load" instead of "It doesn't want to load"). to save space and typing effort (Sabri et al., 2020). Moreover, such language 'violation' is also applied for the purpose of brevity or comedic effect. Platforms like TikTok often feature intentionally simplified or ironic grammar (e.g., "he do be vibin'") to create stylised digital humour. Apart from the use of simplified grammar, the use of fillers, abbreviations, emojis, and hashtags also serve as digital markers of tone, emphasis, or emotional stance to compensate the absence of non-verbal cues (Babayiğit, 2025).

Constraints, such as character limits on Twitter, is one of the direct influences on this evolution, forcing users to invent abbreviations, acronyms, and shortcuts to communicate ideas more efficiently and quickly (Obasi and Obasi, 2025). Content moderation algorithms are also another factor that compel users to reinvent words through creative spelling and word substitution, linguistically termed as algospeak as well as emojis for algorithms are unable to interpret nuanced visual metaphors or highly contextual slang, enabling coded messages to pass through the moderation filters undetected (Adeoye, 2026). For example, terms like unalive are used instead of "kill," and seggs or camping replace "sex" or "abortion". The success of algospeak, which leverages human linguistic creativity, relies on the fact that human users can easily interpret context and shared cultural shorthand, thus despite the elusive use of algospeak, users can understand the underlying message, allowing the digital community to maintain mutual comprehension while discussing restricted topics and maintain their content from being blocked, hidden, or demonetised (Adeoye, 2026).

Code switching and hybridity is another language innovation in digital communication applied by Gen Z. In multicultural and bilingual communities, online communication facilitates seamless code-switching. Users merge global English slang with their native languages, resulting in hybrid digital vernaculars like "Hinglish" (Hindi-English), "Spanglish," or "Namlish" (Namibian English) (Suganya, 2025). Crystal (2011) argues that within the environment of online discourse multilingual users do not merely alternate languages randomly, instead code-switching is resourceful feature of netspeak to mark solidarity, intimacy, or shared cultural knowledge (Myers-Scotton, 1993). The localisation of global trends allows users to navigate multiple cultural identities simultaneously. Code-switching on social media functions as a strategic resource in which users construct and embrace hybrid identities. It is a dynamic practice that allows multilingual Gen Z to utilise their linguistic repertoires. The blending of languages reflects cultural duality and belonging. By moving fluidly between languages, Gen Zs can participate in global digital culture while remaining alleged to their local heritage and community bonds. Moreover, those who share the same linguistic repertoire can access the full meaning of the message, while outsiders

may only grasp the English portions, hence the insider status as members of their own cultural group is achieved (Adeoye, 2026).

In addition to structural modifications in language, the rise of informality and the integration of multimodal elements are two ways in which digital communication is advancing. As interaction shifts to social media platforms, written communication must compensate for the absence of physical paralinguistic cues such as tone of voice, facial expressions, and gestures. Consequently, online linguistics now significantly depends on multimodality (Suganya, 2025). Rather than relying solely on alphabetic text, users incorporate visual, symbolic, and typographic resources to express meaning and clarify intent. Concurrently, digital environments frequently promote a relaxed, jovial, and emotionally expressive mode of communication. This informality has blurred the boundaries between casual and formal registers, subsequently reconstructing conventional expectations of written English. Within this landscape, emojis and emoticons have become prominent paralinguistic tools. Their function extends far beyond decorative embellishment: they may replace words, mitigate criticism, convey irony, or signal solidarity and relational closeness (Adeoye, 2026; Suganya, 2025). In many instances, emojis operate as visual metaphors with layered meanings. For example, the eggplant (🍆) and peach (🍑) are frequently used as sexual references, while the brain (🧠) symbolises intelligence. This usage demonstrates the semantic sophistication embedded in digital speech.

In addition to emojis, memes function as another powerful multimodal resource. Memes combine images and concise text to compress complex emotions, political commentary, or social critique into highly shareable formats (Adeoye, 2026; Obasi and Obasi, 2025). Their communicative effectiveness relies heavily on intertextuality and shared cultural knowledge, thereby reinforcing in-group belonging and collective identity. Through memes, users participate in culturally situated conversations that extend beyond literal textual meaning. Orthographic stylisation further illustrates how digital users visually simulate the prosodic features of spoken language. Techniques such as letter elongation (sooooo), repeated punctuation (!!!!!), and capitalisation (ALL CAPS) serve to convey emphasis, excitement, shock, or anger. In this way, auditory intensity is translated into graphic form, enabling written text to approximate spoken expressiveness. While these multimodal and informal practices enhance communicative creativity and nuance, they also generate debate among educators and linguists. Linguists are concerned with the potential erosion of traditional literacy standards, academic writing proficiency, and integrity of regional language (Bukhari et al., 2025). Nevertheless, the anxieties are present alongside the growing recognition that digital discourse represents not deterioration, but adaptation to new communicative environments.

In contemporary sociolinguistics, digital English that is typified by textisms, abbreviations, emojis, and neologisms is progressively recognised as a legitimate and highly functional language variation, rather than a mere corruption of standard English. Digital communication platforms are not just technological mediums for casual talk; they are discursive arenas where language is continuously reshaped to accommodate the need for brevity, multimodality, and rapid interactivity (Adeoye, 2026). Terms and expressions that are formerly restricted as niche internet slang have been integrated as mainstream, everyday lexicons because they effectively capture new digital experiences and concepts (Suganya, 2025). This digital lingo is driven by linguistic economy and

human creativity which are necessary for identity construction, self-expression, and social bonding among digital natives (Gulnazir and Zainuddin 2025).

The digital era has profoundly expanded the paradigm of World Englishes. As English functions as a global lingua franca, social media behaves as a powerful catalyst for "glocalisation", a process where global linguistic trends are seamlessly hybridised with local languages and cultural norms. For example, linguistic blending are pervasive across different cultures: the emergence of "Namlish" in Namibia, where users mix global English with Oshiwambo and Afrikaans; the prevalent Arabic-English code-switching among Jordanian Gen Z, who view English as a marker of modernity and Arabic as their cultural heritage and the rise of hybrid forms like Hinglish (Hindi-English), Spanglish (Spanish-English), and Tamlish (Tamil-English) (Suganya, 2025). These hybrid languages have clearly demonstrated that global English does not erase or compromise local identities; instead it merges and blends seamlessly to create rich, multicultural digital discourses (Suganya, 2025).

Theoretical underpinning

This study is framed by two complementary theoretical perspectives: Internet Linguistics and Netspeak as conceptualised by Crystal (2011), and the Semiotics of Visual Language by Danesi (2017a; 2017b). These frameworks provide the lens for analysing the linguistic and multimodal dimensions of Gen Z's digital communication practices across social media platforms.

Crystal (2011) notion of Internet Linguistics positions online language not as a corrupted form of standard English, but as a distinctive linguistic variety shaped by the affordances and constraints of screen-based communication. Internet linguistics explores how the internet has introduced a new form of communication that defies traditional grammar rules, promotes rapid linguistic innovation, and encourages a dynamic, informal approach to writing (Suganya, 2025; Crystal, 2011). Digital communication is perceived as a new variety of language that leads to many variations in traditional written structures and an expansion of expressive options available in a language. The internet is considered as the fourth medium that created a hybrid form of "semi-speech" that exists somewhere between spoken and written communication, possessing its own unique linguistic features, conventions, and graphology. However, it poses a challenge in communication such as the lack of simultaneous feedback (the inability to read facial expressions or hear interruptions in real-time) and technological length limits (e.g., 140-character limits) (Crystal, 2011). This phenomenon is known as Netspeak, in which its use is heavily driven by the need to communicate as briefly and efficiently as possible due to technological constraints (Sabri et al., 2020).

Nevertheless, analysing digital conversation just through textual aspects is inadequate without exploring its multimodal characteristics. Contemporary online communication integrates visual, symbolic, and typographic elements that operate semiotically in conjunction with text. This study also utilises the notion of the Semiotics of Visual Language, which conceptualises meaning making as a process combining signs, symbols, and culturally shared interpretive frameworks (Danesi, 2017a; 2017b). In this context, emoticons, memes, typography, and visual cues are recognised as symbols that possess both denotative and connotative meanings. Their interpretation relies on shared cultural knowledge, intertextual references, and community-specific conventions. Visual features do not only enhance text as they also actively shape emotion, perspective, identity, and relational dynamics (Danesi, 2017a; 2017b)

The theory operationalises emojis and visual symbols as visual language that reshapes conventional linguistic practices in digital communication. Within computer-mediated discourse, emojis function as pragmatic and semiotic tool that significantly impact the processes of meaning construction. Visual cues are not only needed to accompany text but also to serve in constructing syntax, nuance, and semantic orientation, which extend the expressive capacity of Netspeak. In the absence of physical paralinguistic indicators like vocal intonation, facial emotions, and gestures, visual symbols serve a parallel function to fulfil communication objectives. An emoji can distinguish between a literal indication of fatigue and an emotionally laden statement of sadness, solidarity, irony, or humour (Danesi, 2017a; 2017b). Emojis function as indicators that convey emotional positioning and act as paralinguistic substitutes, reducing ambiguity and regulating relational significance in digital communications. This blend of visual and verbal components embodies what Danesi (2017a; 2017b) defines as a digital vernacular, a multimodal communicative framework that surpasses conventional linguistic limitations. By seamlessly blending symbolic imagery with conventional text, Gen Zs have created a multimodal form of communication that provides a mechanism for overcoming linguistic and cultural differences among digital global community.

The integration of Internet Linguistics with Visual Semiotics theories provides a comprehensive approach to further explore and analyse digital discourse among Gen Z users. The former provides a foundation for understanding the structural and functional features of Netspeak, while the latter explains how visual and symbolic resources operate as meaning-bearing signs in online environments. The constructs from these frameworks may support the argument that Generation Z's digital English is not to be perceived as a linguistic inadequacy or even deterioration, but a valid, multimodal variety characterised by creativity, social awareness, and communicative competence.

Materials and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative-dominant research design to systematically examine the creative linguistic and visual-semiotic elements employed by Gen Z users in natural social media and digital interactions. Grounded in the theoretical framework of Internet linguistics and Netspeak (Crystal, 2011) and the Semiotics of Visual Language (Danesi, 2017a; 2017b), the methodology is designed to capture the multimodal and context-dependent nature of digital communication. Qualitative content analysis enables an in-depth examination of the language use, meaning, and social practices instead of using only numerical data. Qualitative content analysis can be used to carry out systematic analysis of text-based information at the same time being sensitive to context. Content analysis enables researchers to examine theoretical issues and collected data by systematically organising textual material into condensed, meaning-based categories. It operates on the assumption that words and phrases grouped within the same category share similar meanings. Content analysis is a method for making replicable and valid inferences from data to their contexts, with the aim of generating knowledge, offering new insights, and producing a concise yet comprehensive description of a phenomenon through the development of categories or concepts. This contrasts with the purely quantitative methods where the researcher can analyse language features in their natural communicative and social contexts. Qualitative content analysis offers more detailed information about how creativity, flexibility, and meaning-making work within the

dynamics and settings of digital language depicted in social media and online interpersonal interactions.

Sampling, data collection and data analysis

The primary samples for this study are purposively selected from four social media and digital communication screenshots created by the users among Gen Z. Purposive sampling was chosen because the research aims to examine specific linguistic features used by Generation Z students in naturally occurring digital communication. Therefore, only data that met clearly defined criteria relevant to the research objectives were selected. Purposive sampling allows the researcher to deliberately select information-rich cases that can provide deep insight into the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Since the focus of this study is on creative linguistic features and English variation in Gen Z social media communication, it was necessary to identify posts that clearly demonstrate these characteristics.

The unit of analysis in this study was individual social media posts and chat excerpts. The selection of posts was guided by the following inclusion criteria: a) the post must contain English language elements, either fully in English or mixed with Malay (code-mixing), b) the post must demonstrate at least one creative linguistic feature, c) the post must represent naturally occurring communication, not content produced specifically for the research, d) the post must be personal communication or public caption/comment created by the Gen Z users, e) the post must be produced within the current academic year to ensure contemporaneity of digital language practices. To ensure validity, posts were excluded if they; a) contained only images without textual elements, b) were purely academic or formal institutional announcements, c) were copied quotations without original linguistic modification by the user, d) contained sensitive or confidential information. Screenshots were collected directly from participants and anonymised during data management to protect identity. Names, profile pictures, and identifiable details were removed or blurred before analysis.

This study employed inductive qualitative content analysis following the three-phase process of preparation, organising, and reporting as outlined by Elo and Kyngäs (2008) (see *Figure 1*). The analysis begins with the preparation phase as the unit of analysis was defined as a single social media post, caption, comment, or chat excerpt produced by a Generation Z student at UPNM containing at least one creative linguistic feature. Complete posts were selected to preserve contextual meaning and avoid fragmentation. The selected posts must contain English elements (full English or English–Malay code-mixing), demonstrate at least one creative linguistic feature (e.g., abbreviation, stylised spelling, capitalisation, emoji use, or code-mixing), represent naturally occurring communication, and be produced within the current academic year. The researchers exclude any posts that were purely formal, institutional, reposted without modification, or containing sensitive information were excluded. All data were anonymised prior to analysis. Once, all data have been gathered, the researchers move to the next phase, organising. In this phase, the process of data analysis followed three inductive steps: open coding, grouping, and abstraction. In During the process of open coding, each post was read multiple times. Notes were made to identify linguistic forms, communicative functions, emotional cues, and identity markers. All the screen shots and marginal notes and grouped and categorised. Codes with similar meanings were grouped into subcategories. Subcategories were further condensed into generic categories. Finally, during the process of abstraction, all generic categories were abstracted into broader

main categories representing conceptual dimensions of Gen Z digital communication. The final abstraction were thematically categorised into emotional intensification strategies, digital informality practices and peer solidarity markers. These categories would form the conceptual basis for interpreting creative linguistic practices among Gen Z's digital discourse.

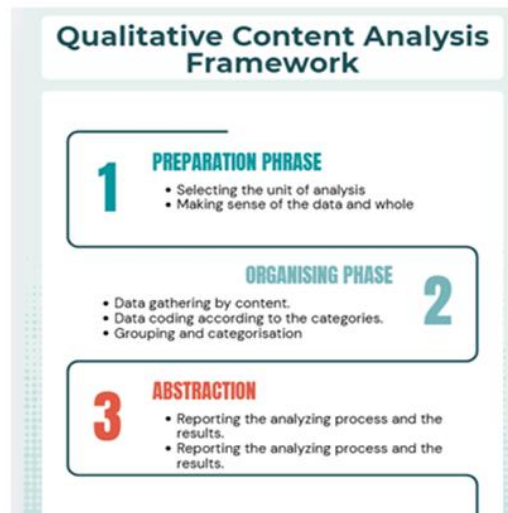


Figure 1. Preparation, organising and resulting phases in the content analysis process
 Source: Elo and Kyngäs (2008).

Trustworthiness of the findings

In accordance with Elo and Kyngäs (2008) recommendations on ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative content analysis, several measures were undertaken to enhance the credibility and dependability of this study. First, the analysis process was described systematically and transparently, following the preparation, organising, and reporting phases. Each step, from selection of the unit of analysis to abstraction was clearly documented to allow readers to understand how categories were derived from the data. Second, a clear link between raw data and the resulting categories was established. The progression from original social media excerpts to open codes, subcategories, generic categories, and main categories was demonstrated through structured tables and figures. This transparent analytical trail strengthens the confirmability of the findings. Third, authentic excerpts from participants' social media posts are presented in the findings section. These excerpts illustrate how categories were grounded in actual data, thereby enhancing credibility. All excerpts were carefully anonymised to protect participants' identities. Names, profile images, usernames, and any identifiable institutional references were removed or modified to ensure confidentiality. Furthermore, the categories were reviewed repeatedly throughout the analysis process to ensure that they adequately represented the dataset. Continuous comparison between data and emerging categories was conducted to confirm consistency and coherence. Where necessary, categories were refined to avoid overlap and to maintain conceptual clarity. To ensure the study is carried out ethically, the researchers meticulously ensured that no sensitive information was included in the dataset. The analysis is only limited to only naturally occurring communication relevant

to the research objectives and all data were handled responsibly to protect participants' dignity, privacy, and well-being.

Results and Discussion

This section aims at examining the use of English in digital communication among Gen Z students and describing the linguistic creativity patterns that arise from their online interactions. The findings for this study are derived from detailed qualitative content analysis on real-life examples of digital communication obtained from various social media platforms that represent the real usage of English by Generation Z.

Findings for research objective 1

The following are the findings for research objective 1: to identify the creative linguistic elements utilised by Generation Z learners on social media. The analysis is based on qualitative content analysis of social media screenshots collected focussing on how English language is used creatively in online communication. The findings show that Gen Z users do not use the conventional presentation of the English language, instead they have adapted and reshaped the language to suit with the digital environments that emphasise on speed, emotion and social connection. Their online communication reflects a relaxed and expressive style, where meaning is conveyed not only through words but also through symbols, visuals, and creative language forms. From the content analysis, several recurring creative linguistic features were identified. These include the use of abbreviations and shortened forms, emojis and emotive symbols, creative spelling and stylistic variation, code mixing between English and Malay, and the use of informal digital expressions. These features appear frequently across different platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok, and X, showing that they are not random but part of a shared digital communication practice among the respondents.

Abbreviations and emojis

Figure 2 shows the abbreviation 'dnd' is used in the user bio on the Instagram account to articulate a personal interactional position. The word signals the message of 'do not disturb' meaning that the user might be unavailable or he or she would not want to interact much at some given time. This indicates the way that Instagram bios is utilised as multifunctional rooms, in which users can display their preferences in interactions and comfort levels minimum of linguistic investment. Instead of using long sentences, the user uses this standard of abbreviations to send the message implicitly. Apart from expediting fast communication, the term 'dnd' also serves as a low-profile boundary-setting which signals emotional or social separation without being disrespectful. The option gives the user the opportunity to remain informal and non-confrontational yet specifying the expected behaviour of others. This underscores preference of Gen Z who use language in a flexible, fast, and expressive way, which are most appropriate to digitally mediated communication. to fit fast, casual, and expressive online conversations. This usage also highlights the argument that abbreviation in digital realm reflects cultural values and social connection in digital interactions Pebriyanti and Rosyidah (2026).

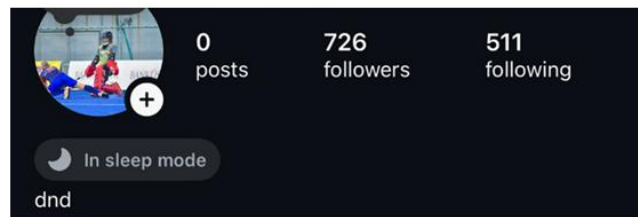


Figure 2. Abbreviation on Instagram platform.

Next, the term “YOLO” is another example of abbreviation as illustrated in *Figure 3*. The Instagram profile header “YOLO □□□□” reflects the principles of Semiotics of Visual Language. The findings show how contemporary digital English operates as a multimodal semiotic system rather than a purely textual one. The term “YOLO” is an internet slang of the abbreviated expression “You only live once” is associated to the values of enjoying the moment, being open, or being relaxed in life (Mohammed et al., 2025). The user summarises these meanings into one culturally understandable phrase that simultaneously expressing the personality of the user within restricted textual space. The abbreviation is further accompanied by clusters of emojis of a red high-heeled shoe, a red lipstick, a pink coin purse and a diamond ring. Digital visual markers, apart from loaded with elusive meaning, also establish the trait of peer communication among Gen Z that either highlights their search for emotional resonance or as an expression of individuality. The visual markers further not only embellish the identity of the user, also reinforces social gender norms, in which all the visual markers are atypical to women’s accessories and beauty products that centred on glamour and femininity. According to Azad et al. (2023), symbols or emojis are utilised by Gen Z to express emotions, intentions and nuances efficiently, which text alone cannot capture. The absence of connective text between emojis further reinforces the shift from grammatical cohesion to visual association. The insinuated meaning emerges through symbolic clustering rather than conventional syntactic structure. The multimodal nature of social media communication, which blends text, visuals, and symbols echoes Generation Z’s familiarity with this dynamic form of communication and reflects their ability to navigate both linguistic and visual literacies (Tahir and Litta, 2025).

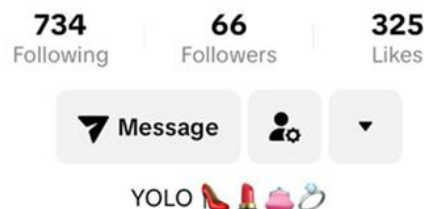


Figure 3. Abbreviation on Instagram platform.

Figure 4 illustrates dual types of visual markers; exaggerated spelling of words and emoji. This letter repetition linguistic form is a phenomenon that often appears on social media interaction, especially in the more casual and expressive context. Users tend to lengthen or repeat certain letters in words to emphasise certain feelings, such as excitement, admiration, or surprise, while the exclamation mark at the end of the comment indicates strong emotional tone. The use of emoji □ in this TikTok comment is a form of expression to support the feelings and the attitude of the sender and not a

mere visual decoration. The emoji is a visual depiction of the pleading or soft facial expression, which is an indication of vulnerability, affection or appeal of emotions. Emoji helps to enhance communicative meaning and capture the interlocutor's frame of mind that echoes Goffman's construct of "framing" (Danesi, 2017a; 2017b). The framing of one's perspective is delivered through the choice of visual tokens (emojis), with their inherent nuances that are more comprehensible because it involves the placement of the icons at strategic points in the message (Danesi, 2017a; 2017b).



Figure 4. The use of emoji on Tik Tok platform.

Code-mixing and stylistic variations

The interaction above that was extracted from the social media platform, Thread demonstrates an example of intra-sentential code-mixing between Malay and English which reflects the hybrid linguistic practices characteristic of contemporary digital communication in multilingual contexts (Das and Gambäck, 2013). In the interaction between the two users, Malay serves as the dominant matrix language such as "Cortisol spike tu salah satu sebabnya masalah sleep disturbance" and "Fix masalah tu naturally dulu tak perlu pun terus nak ke magnesium". Within these Malay syntactic structures, English lexical items are embedded, including "cortisol spike," "sleep disturbance," "uncontrolled stress," "fix," "naturally," "share," and "pharmacy."

The use of intra-sentential code-mixing show how linguistic elements from one language is embedded into the morphosyntactic frame of another language within a single clause or sentence (Poplack, 2013; Myers-Scotton, 1993). This type of mixing is structurally constrained and requires bilingual competence, as speakers need to negotiate the grammatical systems of both languages simultaneously. Insertions of words or phrases from another language occur at permissible points without violating syntactic rules. The English terms largely represent technical, biomedical, or advisory vocabulary, suggesting that English functions as a lexical resource associated with modernity, expertise, and specialised knowledge. English is also preferred by the digital natives, Gen Z as the language provides clarity and ease of expression, thus influencing their language habits (Tarihoran et al., 2022). On the other hand, the use of Malay language maintains interpersonal flow and contextual grounding. The alternation between these two languages is not random but functional. The use of English in the interaction conveys precision and authority in health-related discourse, while the mixing of the Malay language sustains relational warmth and accessibility. Within Malaysia's multilingual environment, blending native language (i.e. Malay) with English is perceived to be atypical as it facilitates effective communication and social cohesion among Malaysians. Also, code-mixing within the context of multilingualism helps the users maintain their cultural identity (Adnan and Serip Mohamad, 2024) (Figure 5).



Figure 5. The use of code-mixing on Threads.

The Figure 6 screen shot illustrates an example of stylistic variation within the digital language of Gen Z users. Stylistic variation refers to the artistic means with which individuals play around and ‘have fun’ with the language to communicate with each other in social media platforms. To Gen Z, whose upbringing has been surrounded by social media and messaging apps, such use of language play is perceived to be natural. As previously mentioned, social media provides an open, participatory, and fast-paced environment where language evolves rapidly. The fast paced of online communication encourages brevity, creativity, and informality to fulfil communicative demands of the digital age (Crystal, 2011). The expression “Wanna streak” is the current Tik Tok trend which highlights the digital culture among youth. The lexis ‘streak’ is conventionally defined as a continuous series of similar events, successes, or behaviours happening one after another. However, in digital context, the word is recontextualised and transformed into a verb rather than a noun which means to continue having engagement with someone for consecutive days. The nominal-to-verbal conversion of “streak” further illustrates morphological creativity in youth-mediated social media communication. This is an example of how online language permits creativity, and non-standard grammar. This informal register is not random but is governed by its own implicit rules, shaped by shared user practices and evolving trends (Umurzakova, 2025). Additionally, the word ‘streak’ is preceded by the word ‘wanna’, a shortened version of ‘want to’. which is another example of digital language immediacy. This marks the process of language evolution in digital society. This view aligns with Crystal (2011) constructs of Internet Linguistics that perceive the Internet as the avenue of language change initiated by digital natives as a form for expression, identity and linguistic creativity (Umurzakova, 2025). However, Crystal (2011) argues that these changes has had a very limited effect on linguistic integrity and grammatical structures of individual languages.

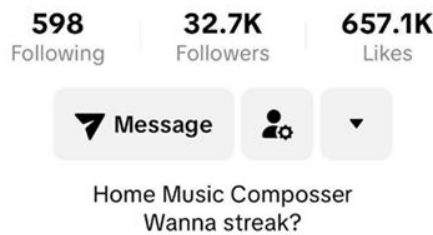


Figure 6. *The use of stylistic variation on Tik Tok.*

Findings for research objective 2

The following are the findings for research objective 2: to analyse the emerging trends that characterise contemporary digital English. The analysis of data demonstrates that contemporary digital English among Gen Z is characterised by patterned linguistic innovation rather than deviation from standard norms. The findings in 3.2.1 provide empirical evidence of systematic trends that align with theoretical insights from Internet Linguistics and Visual Semiotics. The use of abbreviations and emojis reflects Crystal's concept where written discourse adapts to the speed and immediacy of online environments. The findings show that students deliberately employ shortened lexical items to maintain interactional flow. Rather than indicating linguistic deficiency, abbreviation functions as a deliberate strategy of communicative economy, a marker of peer-group alignment, and as a reaction to platform affordances that privilege rapid exchange. The findings confirm that digital English among Gen Z users is structurally compressed yet semantically efficient. In another aspect, the findings as presented in xxxxx highlight that emojis extend textual meaning by clarifying tone, reinforcing emotional intent, and preventing misinterpretation. From the perspectives of Visual Semiotics framework, emojis function as culturally recognisable visual signs embedded within linguistic structures. The data show that emoji usage is not ornamental but communicatively strategic. They operate to manage interpersonal relationships, mitigate potential ambiguity, and to enhance affective clarity. The findings for the category's abbreviations and emojis confirm that contemporary digital English is inherently multimodal as text and image co-construct meaning to achieve varied communicative purposes.

The findings on code mixing and stylistic variation reveal the second and third trend where code-mixing is perceived as structured linguistic hybridity and stylistic variation is utilised as emotional amplification. First, the findings reveal that the adoption of code-mixing is not random but recurrent. This supports the interpretation that contemporary digital English in this context is hybridised which aligns with Crystal's argument that English is localised within multilingual digital ecologies. The integration of Malay particles and expressions serves multiple functions which mark indexing cultural belonging, softening tone, and to enhance relational closeness. Second, different stylistic variations like the use of letter elongation, unconventional spelling, and capitalisation. These orthographic manipulations function as substitutes for prosodic and paralinguistic cues absent in text-based communication. From a Visual Semiotics perspective, these visual alterations operate as semiotic resources. Meaning is conveyed not solely through lexical choice but through graphic design of text. The findings show that such stylistic variations are systematically employed to: intensify emotional expression, signal humour or exaggeration, and to emphasise frustration or excitement.

This indicates that contemporary digital English is visually performative. Writing becomes a site of expressive design rather than a neutral transcription of speech.

Conclusion

The study established that Gen Z are keen users of the broad range of creative linguistic features in their social media communications. It was found that emojis and emoticons are important tools to convey tone, emotion, and social cues which a text-based communication lack. In addition, code-mixing, enables the users (i.e. Gen Z) to find a balance between the formality and informality, navigating between the hierarchical relationships and demonstrating their cultural identity. There was also creative spelling, long vowels, irregular capitalisation, and phonetics adapted by Gen Z users to express their emotions, humour, or be playful. This phenomenon is not accidental, but its adaptation is very much meaningful and based on sensitivity to social norms and communicative demands of peer interaction. Results from this study have clearly demonstrate that the digital language of Gen Z is purposeful, versatile, expressive, and socially inclined, challenging the argument that Gen Z digital language is a form of laziness or deterioration of linguistic skills. Also, this study has foregrounded communicative styles of Gen Z across social media that are distinctively structured and governed by rules in its own subculture of the digital world.

The analysis also indicated that there are definite patterns of the usage of creative linguistic features. A major number of messages used a combination of several elements at the same time, including using abbreviations, emojis, code-mixing, and stylised characters, to create subtle meaning, humour, or social solidarity. The code-mixing was context-specific in its use of the English language to promote formality, academic earnestness, or hierarchy consciousness, and that of the Malay language to promote friendliness, peer intimacy, and cooperation. The proxies of vocal prosody were longer use of vowels, repetition of punctuations and smashing of keyboards so that readers could experience emotion, tone, and intensity. These tendencies prove that the communication of Gen Z is socially governed, and unspoken rules are used to determine what aspects are acceptable in various settings. Typography, emojis, and abbreviations serve to enable users to express their individual personality, attitudes, whilst maintaining social connection with their peer group.

To explore the broader implications of these findings, further studies are needed. A key recommendation is to compare platforms to explore the consistency of language economics across social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Threads. Also, as language has rapidly evolved on social media, longitudinal studies can be established to track how these linguistic shifts evolve over time, particularly as new social media platforms emerge. An exploration on how digital language affects cross-generation within academic and professional domains. Lastly, further research can be conducted to delve on psychological and sociocultural impacts of linguistic shifts among its users.

To sum up, this research highlights the innovation of digital language as initiated by Gen Z on online platforms, shifting the view of traditionalist linguists who perceive it as linguistic deterioration, instead Gen Z's digital language is intentional, purposeful, and culturally significant. Language as used by the Gen Z is dynamic and living medium to help them experience and express emotion, identity and social belonging while they are negotiating between local and global cultural trends.

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Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involve with any parties in this research study.

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