

Sociocultural and Media Influence on Gen Z Communication Practices

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Abstract

This study examines the influence of sociocultural factors and digital media on communication practices among Gen Z users. The research is based on a percentage-based survey conducted with 94 respondents, of whom 91.5% belong to the Gen Z age group. Using a structured questionnaire, the study analyses patterns of media usage, preferred communication modes, and language choices in formal and informal contexts. The findings indicate a strong preference for informal digital communication, frequent use of slang and emojis, and conscious adjustment of tone based on audience and setting. While most respondents retain formal language in academic or professional situations, many report lower confidence in formal communication compared to informal communication. The study highlights how continuous exposure to informal digital environments shapes communication habits among Gen Z users.

Key words

Gen Z Communication, Digital Media Influence, Sociocultural Factors, Informal Digital Language, Register Switching, Communication Practices

Introduction

Communication practices are shaped by sociocultural environments and digital media rather than by formal instruction alone (Crystal, 2008; Thurlow, 2006). Platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, and TikTok encourage brief and informal interactions, which have become normalized through repeated use. As a result, younger generations have developed strong fluency in casual expression but often experience difficulty using structured and formal language in academic or professional contexts (Herring, 2012). This shift affects the authenticity and professionalism of communication.

This study focuses on how media influence correlates with cultural norms and peer influence within the community. It also examines how and why younger generations choose different modes of communication and how continuous exposure to informal digital language affects confidence, accuracy, and professionalism in formal communication settings.

Research Objectives

The objectives of this study are to:

- Examine the influence of daily social media exposure on spoken and written communication styles among Gen Z users.
- Analyse how Gen Z respondents differentiate between formal and informal communication contexts.
- Evaluate the sociocultural factors that contribute to greater comfort with informal digital language over formal language use.
- Identify patterns of language adaptation and register switching shaped by digital media practices.

Literature Review

David Crystal (2008), in *Txtng: The gr8 db8*, argues that texting and digital language do not damage linguistic ability but instead introduce new ways of communication that coexist with standard forms. He emphasizes that problems arise when users are not explicitly taught when and how to shift between communicative settings. This perspective directly informs the present study's focus on switching between formal and informal communication contexts.

Tagliamonte and Denis (2008), in their analysis of instant messaging among teenagers, demonstrate that the use of acronyms, shortened words, and informal syntax follows consistent linguistic patterns rather than occurring randomly. Their findings support the view that digital language is socially meaningful and rule-governed, which aligns with the patterned use of slang and emojis reported by respondents in the present study.

Thurlow (2006) challenges the notion that digital media damages language, describing such concerns as a form of “moral panic.” He argues that linguistic change reflects broader social and cultural shifts rather than linguistic decline. This view relates closely to the present study, which shows that most respondents continue to use formal language in academic and professional contexts, while informal digital language is largely restricted to casual settings.

Herring (2012) highlights how digital communication reshapes conversational structures and levels of formality, particularly when writing is framed as interaction rather than documentation. This explains why respondents in the present study demonstrate stronger media influence on spoken communication and casual writing than on formal texts.

Kachru (1983), through the concept of *World Englishes*, explains how English adapts to local cultural contexts. In multilingual environments, speakers often develop strong informal communicative competence, alongside variability in formal written expression. This framework supports respondents' perceptions that native English speakers in other countries demonstrate stronger formal writing skills due to differing educational practices and sociolinguistic exposure.

Taken together, these studies emphasize digital and vernacular language as socioculturally shaped systems that require instructional support to maintain formal proficiency (Crystal, 2008; Thurlow, 2006; Tagliamonte & Denis, 2008). Prior research suggests that digital language practices are not indicators of linguistic decline but reflections of sociocultural adaptation and contextual communication. While Crystal (2008) and Thurlow (2006) challenge deficit-based views of digital language, Tagliamonte and Denis (2008) demonstrate its structured and patterned nature. Herring (2012) further explains how digital platforms redefine writing as interaction rather than formal documentation. The present study extends this body of research by demonstrating that although informal digital language is widely embraced, awareness of formal norms persists, albeit with reduced confidence.

Methodology

This study follows a quantitative descriptive research design using a survey method. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire distributed via Google Forms in November 2025. A total of 94 responses were obtained, with Gen Z participants comprising 91.5% of the sample.

The questionnaire consisted of closed-ended and multiple-choice questions and was divided into four sections: demographic details, digital media exposure, communication preferences, and language practices in formal and informal contexts. Most questions were designed to capture frequency, preference, and self-reported behavioural patterns.

Participation in the survey was voluntary and anonymous, and no personally identifiable information was collected. Respondents were informed of the academic purpose of the study prior to participation.

Data analysis was conducted using percentage-based analysis, which is appropriate for identifying dominant trends and patterns in descriptive survey research. Given the nature of the study and the limited sample size, percentage distribution was used instead of inferential statistical testing.

Results

The results indicate that a majority of respondents spend a substantial portion of their day on social media and messaging applications, making digital communication their primary mode of interaction. Text-based communication was preferred over face-to-face or voice-based communication, highlighting the dominance of written digital interaction among Gen Z users.

Most respondents reported adjusting their communication style based on the audience, particularly when interacting with elders or in formal situations. Specifically, 72 respondents (76.6%) confirmed that they consciously modify their communication style, demonstrating awareness of social hierarchies and cultural expectations.

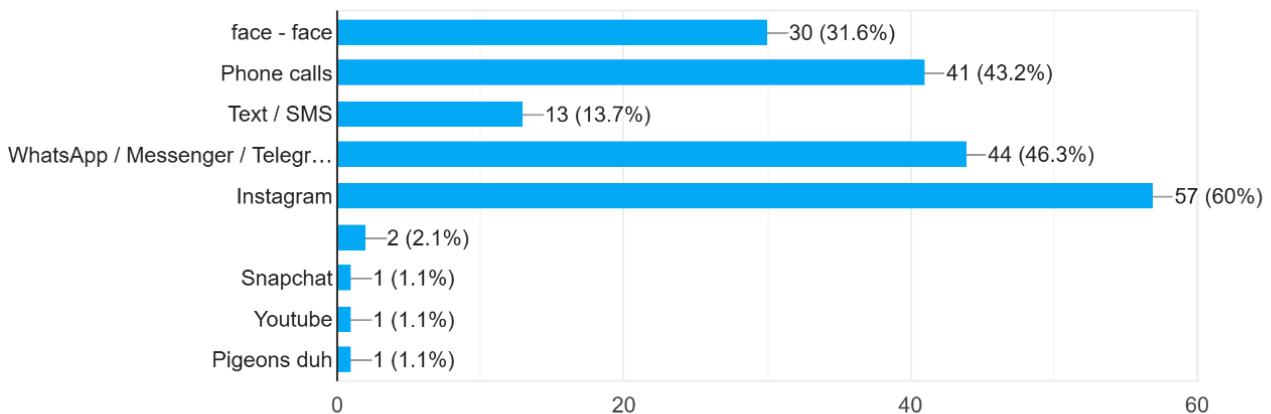
The findings further reveal that social media has significantly influenced both spoken and written communication, with a stronger impact on casual and informal contexts. Slang, emojis, and abbreviated forms are widely used and are perceived as effective tools for emotional expression. With respect to language choices during online interactions, 22 respondents (23.4%) reported frequent use of short forms (e.g., *u*, *btw*, *bc*), while 17 respondents (18.1%) primarily relied on emojis. Many respondents indicated using combinations of emojis and short forms, suggesting a multimodal approach to digital expression.

Although formal language continues to be used in academic and professional contexts, a considerable number of respondents reported lower confidence when engaging in formal writing compared to informal digital communication.

Q3 — Which communication platforms do you use most often?

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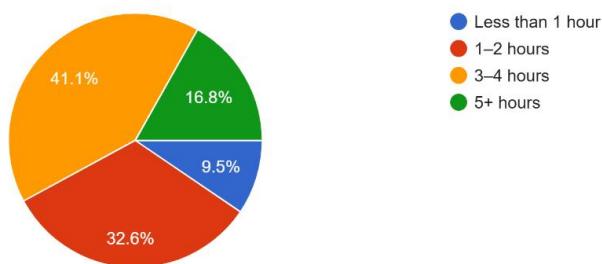
95 responses



Q4 — How much time do you spend daily on digital communication or social media?

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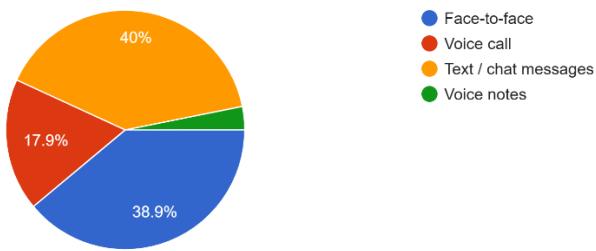
95 responses



Q5 — What mode of communication do you prefer the most?

What mode of communication do you prefer the most?

95 responses



Q6 — Do you use different communication styles with friends vs elders?

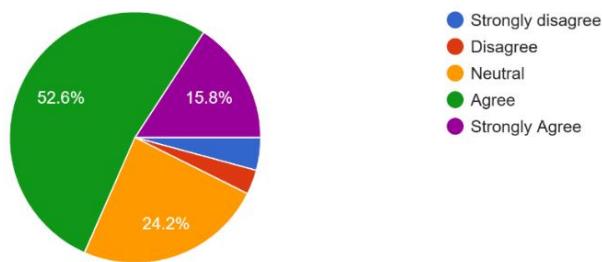
Results:

Yes: 72 (76.6%)
Maybe: 16 (17.0%)
No: 6 (6.4%)

Q7 — Language keeps evolving and that is natural.

Language keeps evolving and that is natural.

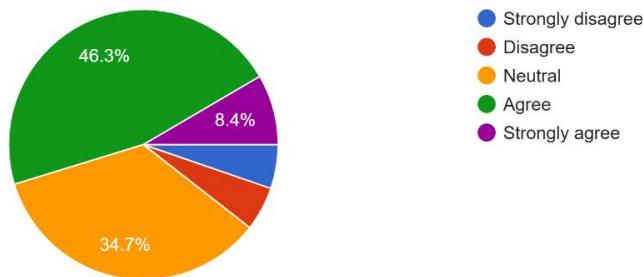
95 responses



Q8 — Social media has influenced the way I speak.

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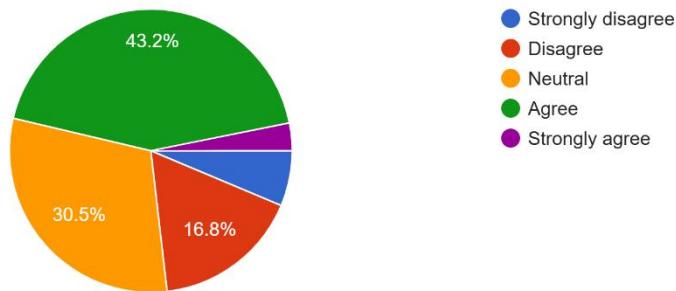
95 responses



Q9 — Social media has influenced the way I write.

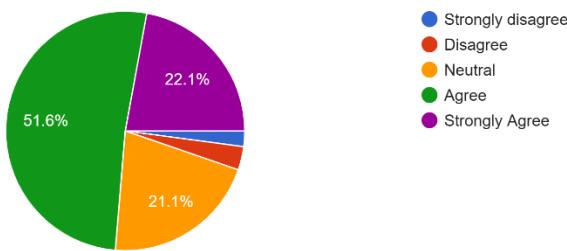
Social media has influenced the way I write.

95 responses



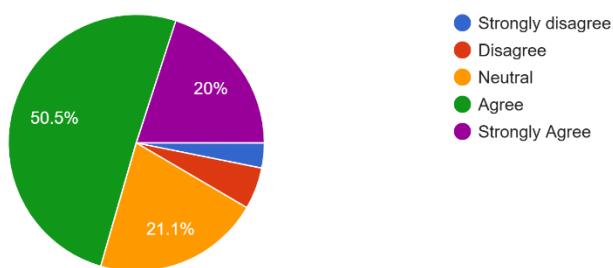
Q10 — I change the way I speak depending on the group or person I'm communicating with.

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95 responses



Q11 — Using modern expressions, slang or emojis makes communication more expressive.

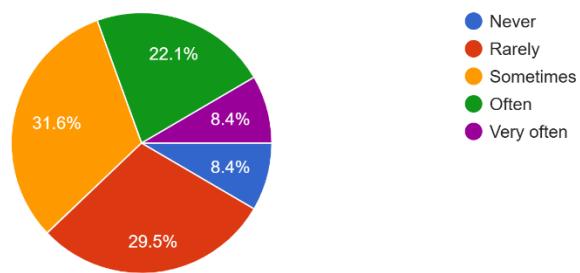
Using modern expressions, slang or emojis makes communication more expressive.
95 responses



Q12 — How often do you use slang or internet language (e.g., LOL, fr, vibe, slay)?

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95 responses



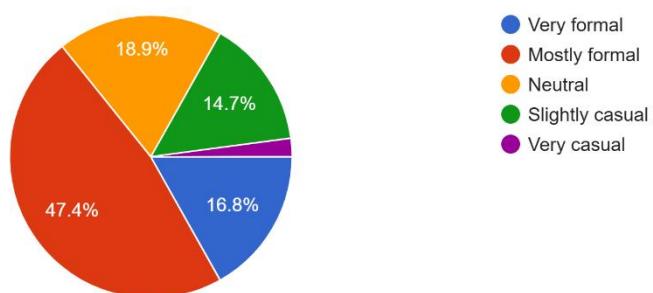
Q13 — What do you commonly use while chatting?

- Short forms (u, btw, bc, rn): 22 (23.4%)
- Emojis: 17 (18.1%)
- Combinations (emojis + short forms / acronyms, etc.) appear frequently across responses

Q14 — When communicating formally (work/school/elderly), how would you describe your tone?

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95 responses



Discussion

The findings demonstrate that sustained exposure to digital media plays a central role in shaping Gen Z communication practices. Frequent engagement with platforms designed for rapid and informal interaction normalizes the use of slang, abbreviations, and emojis. This observation supports Tagliamonte and Denis's (2008) argument that digital language is systematic and patterned rather than random.

More than three-fourths of the respondents reported modifying their communication style depending on the audience, indicating a clear understanding of contextual appropriateness, respect, and social hierarchy. This finding aligns with Crystal's (2008) assertion that the primary linguistic challenge in digital communication is not language deterioration, but the ability to switch effectively between registers.

Despite continued use of formal language in institutional settings, respondents' lower confidence in formal writing suggests uneven development in communicative competence. This supports Herring's (2012) view that digital spaces frame writing as interaction rather than formal documentation, potentially limiting regular practice in structured writing.

The widespread perception that informal digital language enhances emotional expression reflects changing social values, where immediacy and relatability are prioritized in casual communication (Thurlow, 2006; Tagliamonte & Denis, 2008). At the same time, the continued use of formal language in academic and professional contexts supports Thurlow's (2006) rejection of "moral panic" narratives, as respondents demonstrate conscious control over language choices.

The findings suggest that Gen Z communication styles are adaptive rather than deficient (Crystal, 2008). While informal digital language is widely embraced, the key challenge lies in strengthening confidence and proficiency in formal communication when required.

Key Findings

- Daily digital media exposure reinforces informal and creative communication habits among younger generations.

- Respondents demonstrate conscious and strategic register switching, adjusting language formality based on audience and context.
- Informal digital language is perceived as expressive and socially meaningful, rather than deficient or indicative of linguistic decline (Tagliamonte & Denis, 2008).
- Confidence in formal writing is noticeably weaker than confidence in informal digital communication.
- Sociocultural and educational contexts play a significant role in shaping formal language competence.

Limitations

- The survey sample is heavily concentrated on Gen Z respondents, limiting the representation of other generations.
- Rapid changes in digital platforms may affect the long-term applicability of the findings.
- The results may not fully represent all social or cultural groups.
- The study primarily focuses on digital media, excluding other influential factors such as classroom practices and family background.
- As the research reflects a specific context and time, communication patterns may evolve as media habits continue to change.
- As the responses reflect individuals' perceptions of their communication practices, they may not fully correspond to actual language use in real-world contexts.
- The study relies on self-reported data, which may be influenced by participants' subjective beliefs and attitudes.

Future Scope

Future research may incorporate authentic communication data, such as message samples or academic writing, to compare self-reported practices with actual language use. Comparative studies across regions or countries could further illuminate cultural differences in formal language competence. Longitudinal studies may also examine how evolving media habits influence communication skills over time.

Conclusion

This study highlights the significant role of sociocultural context and digital media in shaping communication practices among Gen Z users. The findings reveal a strong preference for informal digital language, driven by frequent media exposure and peer-based interaction, alongside a conscious adjustment of language based on audience and setting. Although formal communication is retained in academic and professional contexts, many respondents report lower confidence in formal writing compared to informal expression.

These patterns suggest that communication competence among Gen Z is not diminished but unevenly distributed across contexts. From an educational perspective, the findings underscore the importance of strengthening formal communication skills while recognising the sociocultural value of informal digital language.

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