

Analyzing the Language Style of Generation Z Teenagers in Their Instagram Posts

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Abstract

This research aimed to (i) analyze the predominant language styles used by Generation Z teenagers in their Instagram posts and (ii) identify the factors influencing these language styles. This qualitative research employed a constructivism approach, utilizing interviews and document analysis as instruments for data collection. The research participants comprised 10 Generation Z teenagers, and the study focused on their Instagram posts from January 2023 to June 2024. Data were analyzed using condensation, display, and conclusion drawing/verifying stages. The findings indicated that Generation Z teenagers predominantly use casual language styles in their Instagram posts, characterized by the frequent use of slang, colloquial language, abbreviations, and informal greetings and farewells. Several factors influencing these language styles were identified, including technological affordances, social factors, and linguistic trends. This research contributes to the theoretical understanding of language evolution in digital contexts, particularly among digital natives, offering insights into how social media platforms like Instagram influence language use and the emergence of new linguistic trends within specific generational cohorts.

Key words

Gen-Z Teenagers, Instagram Post, Language Styles, Sociolinguistics

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INTRODUCTION

Language is a fundamental aspect of human interaction, enabling people to communicate and interact in both spoken and written forms. Language serves as a window into the mind, allowing us to see what's going on inside someone's head. This is supported by Hutabarat et al. (2020) in Yusuf et al., (2022), who state that language is commonly used as a tool to convey information, thoughts, ideas, and feelings, and to obtain information from others. Language is the most important medium for interacting with others in society. Thao and Herman (2020) further emphasize that language serves as a vital communication tool. (Purba & Sinurat, 2021)

In using language, particularly English in this context, individuals must understand the appropriate use of language in various circumstances and with different audiences. Different levels of formality are used in communication, such as when students talk to teachers at school versus when they talk to peers outside of school. This variation in formality is referred to as language styles. Joos (1976), as cited in Febriani et al., (2019) identifies five language styles: frozen, formal, consultative, casual, and intimate.

Language is commonly used in two primary channels: spoken and written communications (Febriani et al., 2019). One effective way to examine language style is through social media. Kapoor et al. (2017), cited in Wolf et al., (2018) describe social media as a significant IT phenomenon that encompasses digital platforms enabling users to create, share, and exchange information, ideas, and content within virtual communities. Popular platforms include Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, Pinterest, and Twitter.

In this modern era where technology has progressed significantly, it brings many benefits to the pedagogical aspect (Astuti & Chakim, 2023). It such as also the rise of social media has transformed communication patterns, with Instagram playing a crucial role in this evolution. For Generation Z—those born between the late 1990s and early 2010s—Instagram is more than a tool for interaction; it is a canvas for self-expression and identity formation. The platform's visual-centric nature and interactive features foster a unique environment where language evolves rapidly, influenced by the immediacy and connectivity of social media.

Generation Z, known for their digital fluency and constant connectivity, employs a distinctive linguistic style on Instagram. This style includes frequent use of slang, abbreviations, and innovative spellings, blending visual and textual communication. These linguistic choices are embedded in the cultural and social contexts of this generation, serving as markers of identity, solidarity, and group membership.

Social and situational factors also impact language use. Factors such as social standing, education level, age, and gender influence language use, while situational factors include the context of the conversation and the relationship between the speakers. Holmes (2013) as cited in Purba & Sinurat, (2021), notes that different styles are used based on the addressee's age, social background, and context. On social media platforms like Instagram, language styles are employed in daily communication,

including commenting and sending messages (D'Onofrio, 2020). As communication technology evolves, so does language. Teenagers often use modern language styles influenced by prestige to avoid sounding outdated, making their captions engaging and appealing.

Understanding the language style of Generation Z on Instagram is crucial for several reasons. It provides insights into their communication preferences and the cultural and social dynamics at play. It also helps decode how digital natives construct their identities and perceive social realities. As Instagram remains a dominant platform among young people, analyzing their language use reveals broader trends in digital communication and cultural evolution.

Despite extensive research on language styles and social media, there is a gap in understanding the specific linguistic practices of Generation Z on Instagram. Foundational studies by Joos (1976) and Holmes (2013) have categorized language styles and explored social influences on language use, but they do not fully address the unique digital communication practices of Generation Z, who have grown up as digital natives. This generation's use of language on Instagram is shaped by the platform's visual and textual affordances, evolving internet slang, and global online communities, creating a need for a more nuanced understanding of how these factors influence their language styles. Addressing this gap will enhance theoretical frameworks in sociolinguistics and digital communication by providing insights into contemporary language evolution and the digital practices of younger generations.

In addition, Prensky (2001) says that concept of "digital natives" suggests that Generation Z, having grown up with digital technology, may have distinct communication patterns that differ from previous generations. This could manifest in their language use on platforms like Instagram. However, these studies do not fully address the contemporary digital contexts and the unique linguistic behaviors of Generation Z. Therefore, this research aims to fill this gap by analyzing and describing the language styles of Generation Z teenagers in their Instagram posts, providing new insights into the evolving nature of digital communication. In conducting this research, we have formulated key questions to guide our investigation into the language styles of Generation Z on Instagram. These questions aim to identify the predominant language styles used by Generation Z teenagers in their Instagram posts and to explore the factors influencing the language styles they employ on the platform. By addressing these questions, the research seeks to uncover the specific linguistic patterns and underlying influences that characterize Generation Z's digital communication practices on Instagram.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Media and Its Impact on Language

The term "social media" was first used in 1994 on a Tokyo online media environment, called Matisse. It was in these early days of the commercial Internet that the first social media platforms were developed and launched. Over time, both the

number of social media platforms and the number of active social media users have increased significantly, making it one of the most important applications of the Internet. (Aichner et al., 2021)

Kapoor et al. (2018) in (Wolf et al., 2018), say social media is made up of various user-driven platforms that facilitate the diffusion of compelling content, dialogue creation, and communication with a broader audience. Meanwhile, Davis (2016) states that social media are defined as the set of interactive Internet applications that facilitate (collaborative or individual) creation, curation, and sharing of user-generated content. They are an increasingly pervasive aspect of everyday life.

Based on the various definitions above, it can be concluded that social media refers to digital platforms and technologies that enable individuals and communities to create, share, and exchange information, ideas, and interests in virtual networks and communities. These platforms typically allow users to generate content, interact with others through comments, likes, and shares, and engage in real-time communication, thereby fostering social interactions and connections online.

Here are several kinds of social media explained by (András & Papp, 2022):

- Facebook: With roughly 2.89 billion monthly active users as of the second quarter of 2021, Facebook is still the biggest social network worldwide, although there are fears that people slowly abandon Facebook, since over the last 4 years it has eliminated organic reach for content creators, thus many of them shifted to other platforms, and people under the age of 24 are not actively using Facebook.
- Instagram: also owned by Meta, is primarily a communication platform for sharing images and videos, but we can also run ads on it.
- YouTube: (owned by Google) as social media platform with its 2.29 billion users in 2021, it also acts as a search engine, with many referring to it as the second largest search engine after Google, launching millions of searches a day. However, it is not just a video-sharing platform: it also has attributes typical of social media: it can be used for building a community, liking or disliking videos, allowing users to comment, and responding to comments.
- TikTok: the bottom line is that users were able to upload “lip-synch” videos to it. This means presenting a performance on well-known songs or other audio material. In 2021 it is available in 155 countries and has 800 million active users.
- Twitter: a real-time microblogging platform with which enables users to write short text messages to each other or post it on Twitter’s homepage, or other programs using Twitter APIs.
- LinkedIn: a social networking platform created specifically for professionals and currently it has more than 660 million users in more than 200 countries around the world.

- Pinterest: a social network, it is also a visual search engine and bookmarking tool. This platform can best be described as a virtual discovery system where we find ideas for almost every walk of life.
- Snapchat: allows us to send fleeting images, videos, and text to each other and, also, share a story. The app was launched in 2011 and changed immediately the way people communicated on social media.

Meanwhile, according to Nastiti et al., (2017) the social media available today is very diverse, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Youtube, Line, Whatsapp, Yahoo, Snapchat, and many more. It can be concluded that there are so many kinds of social media we can use to interact with others.

General Impact of Social Media on Language and Communication Styles

Baron (2018) in Jebaselvi et al., (2023) states that as a result of users on social media sites like Twitter and Instagram frequently condensing their views into shorter, more succinct messages, new abbreviations, acronyms, and emoticons have been created. Users constantly invent new words, expressions, and memes that quickly spread across platforms. Memes, in particular, have become a prominent form of online communication, conveying ideas, humor, and social commentary through visual images or videos accompanied by clever captions or text overlays (Thurlow & Poff, 2013 in (Jassim & Joshi, 2023).

It can be understood that the social media platforms have revolutionized language use and styles by fostering creativity in linguistic expression and encouraging succinct forms of communication tailored to digital environments. These changes reflect broader shifts in how individuals interact and communicate in the digital age, shaping both online and offline communication practices.

Language Style

Azhar & Fitrawati, (2023) say that language style is a beautiful language used to give effect in a way show and compare an object or other thing that is more general. Language style makes us easily to apprehend any characters and personalities. A language style is a technique of verbally or in writing expressing a thought (Gunawan, MayasarinMuna, & Masruddin, 2019 in Dwitamayanti et al., 2021).

Based on expert's opinion above, it can be concluded that language style refers to the choices made in using language to express thoughts and ideas in a particular way. It involves the selection of specific linguistic elements and techniques to achieve certain effects or convey desired impressions.

Joss (1976) in Febriani et al., (2019), states that there are five kinds of language styles namely:

- a. Frozen Style: a style used in a very formal setting such as in palace, church, speech of state ceremony, and some others occasions.
- b. Formal Style: defined as the style of language used for an important or serious situation.

- c. Consultative Style: a style that is used in semiformal communication situation such as talking to a stranger.
- d. Casual Style: a style that is used for the conversation in our relaxed or normal situation that is appropriate to the conversations among friends outside the classroom or sometimes members of a family.
- e. Intimate Style: a completely private language developed within families, lovers, and the closest friends.

According to Keraf (2007) in Rullyanti & Nurdianto (2019), there are two kinds of language styles, Rhetorical language style and Figurative language style. Each language style has many subs, for example Rhetorical language style has 10 styles and Figurative language style has 17 styles.

It can be concluded that there are several language style namely frozen style, formal style, consultative style, casual style, intimate style, rhetorical language style, and figurative language style.

Characteristics of Gen Z's Language Style

Gen Z is a group of people who were born in 1995-2010, in the era of digital (Bejtkovsky, 2016; Gaidhani, 2019) in Lihawa et al. (2021). In other word Gen Z (Generation Z) are the young age groups born after 1996. This generation is digital native (Parker 2020, in Yusuf et al., (2022). According to Rezeki et al. 2019 Generation Z nowadays is easily using social media to spread the message, causing a rapid development of slang.

Generation Z, also known as Gen Z, refers to the demographic cohort born between 1995 and 2010, in the midst of the digital era. As a generation deeply immersed in the world of social media, Gen Z are adept at utilizing these platforms to communicate and share messages. This generation's familiarity with digital technologies and their embrace of social media platforms have shaped their language patterns, leading to the emergence of unique linguistic expressions and slang that reflect their experiences and perspectives as digital natives (Yusuf et al., 2022).

It can be concluded that Gen-Z are as digital natives, having grown up surrounded by technology and the internet from a young age. There are some typical of Language Features Used by Gen Z, namely slang, abbreviation, and emoji.

Lihawa et al., (2019) states that slang is one of the informal languages that is used especially among teenagers. Slang is known as a kind of language that belongs to a group or a community in society, which is the meaning of slang may not be understood to all. Kridalaksana in Dilla & Agustina (2021) says that abbreviation is the process of dating one or more lexemes which causes the formation of a new form with the status. Emojis are visually-detailed graphics and are open to interpretation by the sender and the recipient (Ghazanfar, 2022).

Instagram as a Communication Platform

Instagram itself is an application for exchanging or sharing photos and videos (Adila, 2022). Instagram is one of the social media in the form of an application from a smartphone to disseminate information in the form of images or videos (Atmoko, 2012 in Astriani & Nanda, 2022). Instagram provides a new way of communicating on social networks through photos. According to Wallsbeck and Johansson, (2013) in Purba & Sinurat, (2021), Instagram connects the world with a photo in a fun and unique way to share life with friends through a series of images, through photo portraits and filter options to beautify images and make them a memory.

In summary, Instagram is a smartphone application and social media platform primarily focused on sharing photos and videos. Its key features include photo and video sharing, filters to enhance images, a unique way to connect with friends through visual content, easy updating and communication through images, and platform for users to share various messages on topics like health, economy, love, and peace.

Instagram's Features and its Impact on Language

According to András & Papp (2022), Instagram has recently updated its algorithm to prioritize posts based on a user's interaction history with the content creator, their typical response to different post formats (e.g., single images, carousels, videos), and the timing of the post. The algorithm also takes into account factors such as the user's check-in frequency, the number of pages they follow, and the duration of their Instagram sessions. Carousel posts, which feature multiple images in a single post, tend to generate higher engagement in the form of likes compared to single-image posts. The objective of these posts can vary, ranging from increasing brand awareness and conversions to encouraging sign-ups and growing the follower base.

So, it can be concluded that Instagram offers various video posting options, such as short videos in the feed or Stories, Reels (short-form video content), and IGTV (for longer videos). As Instagram continues to innovate and adapt, its impact on language and communication styles remains pivotal, reflecting broader shifts in digital media consumption and online interaction patterns.

RESEARCH METHOD

To conduct this research, the researcher used a qualitative research approach focusing on the descriptive analysis of language styles. Ezer et al. (2021) in Zega (2024), qualitative research involves examining certain cases and events in depth in their natural environments using qualitative data collection tools, following a qualitative process to understand the perceptions and experiences of individuals.

According to Jhonson & Christensen (2014) a variable is a condition or characteristic that can take on different values or categories. A much-studied educational variable is intelligence, which varies from low to high for different people. Leavy (2017) explains that a variable is a characteristic that can differ from one element to another or can change over time. She said that one of the variables use for qualitative

research is categorical variable. Categorical variables (also called discrete variables) are variables whose categories have names and distinguish among classes. This is supported by Flick (2018) that states in qualitative research, everything that varies could be a variable. For this study, the variables will be use categorical variables as following:

Categorical Variables:

- The types of language style : frozen style, formal style, consultative style, casual style and intimate style.
- Gen-Z teenagers : Instagram user
- Instagram Application : One of social media platform

The research will be conducted online, specifically focusing on Instagram posts made by Gen Z teenagers. The characteristics of a good key informant include the ability to be reflective and thoughtful, to communicate (orally, in writing, or both) effectively with the researcher, and to be comfortable with the researcher's presence at the research site. Sampling in qualitative research is almost always purposive. Purposive sampling, also referred to as judgment sampling, is the process of selecting a sample that is believed to be representative of a given population. In other words, the researcher selects the sample using his experience and knowledge of the group to be sampled. So, purposive sampling will be used in this research.

To obtain data that is used as a research object, researchers use several types of sources. The primary data source will be Instagram posts from a sample of Gen Z teenagers of English Education Study Program, especially the fourth semester (only instagram users). There are 10 participants for research and focus on posts from January 2023 to June 2024. These posts will be selected based on certain criteria such as public accessibility, relevance, and representativeness of the Gen Z demographic. Researchers use several previous research theories as initial data that can explain the phenomenon of language styles used by Generation Z teenagers in their Instagram posts. Gen-Z also acts as informants or respondents who are the main source of information in research because the success of research is determined by the responses they provide. Furthermore, researchers also use posting documentation as a data source for analysis related to the research focus.

The researchers used two types of instruments there are, interviews and document analysis. Document analysis is a research method used to systematically evaluate and interpret documents to extract meaningful information. In this method, researchers examine various types of documents, such as written texts, images, or other forms of media, to understand their content, context, and significance. According to Miles et al. (2014) in Zega et al., (2023) analysis in qualitative research consists of three steps, namely: data condensation, data display, and verifying conclusion. To analyze the data use process data condensation, data display, verifying or drawing conclusions.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Research has been conducted on Instagram posts from Gen-Z teenagers, especially 4th semester students at Nias University who use Instagram as participants in this research. Based on the research design used, namely qualitative research, the researcher carried out document analysis of 20 data; posts from January 2023 to June 2024 to determine the predominant language styles used by Generation Z teenagers in their Instagram posts. Meanwhile, to analyze the factors that influence the language styles employed by Gen-Z on Instagram, interviews were conducted with 10 participants to answer research questions. The following findings were obtained:

1. Language styles used by Generation Z teenagers in their Instagram posts

Table of Language Styles used by Gen-Z Teenagers in their Instagram Posts

Types of Language Styles	Data of Gen-Z Teenagers	Percentage
Frozen style	0	0%
Formal styles	1	5%
Consultative styles	3	15%
Casual style	12	60%
Intimate style	4	20%
Total	20	100%

Based on the table above, it shows that the language styles used by Gen-Z teenagers are frozen style is 0%, formal style is 5%, consultative style is 15%, casual style is 60%, intimate style is 20%. It means that casual style of language is predominant.

There are several language features they use as below:

a) Use of Slang and Colloquial Language

- "Hey, what's up?"
- "That party was totally lit!"
- "She's always on fleek with her outfits."

b) Abbreviations

- "LOL - that was hilarious!"
- "FOMO - Fear of Missing Out, fear of missing something.
- "GOAT" - Greatest of All Time, the best of all time.
- "Slay" - Doing something really well or looking really good.
- "Flex" - Showing off something.

c) Informal Greetings and Farewells

- "Hey guys!"
- "Catch you later!"

2. Factors influence the language styles employed by Generation Z on Instagram

a) Technological Affordances

Hotham (2021) argues that platform affordances are not static but evolve over time, both through platform updates and changing user practices. Technological affordances refer to the features and functionalities provided by Instagram that shape how users communicate on the platform. The platform encourages visual and concise communication through its character limits for captions and comments, and the ability to share multimedia content like photos, videos, and stories. These features prompt Generation Z to develop a unique, visually-driven language style that often includes short phrases, emojis, and hashtags to maximize engagement and convey messages quickly. The algorithmic curation of content also influences language use, as users tailor their posts to increase visibility and interaction.

b) Social Factors

Boyd (2021) states the desire for social capital in digital spaces is driving new forms of communication and self-presentation among young users. The language styles of Generation Z are significantly shaped by their friends and social groups. Communication within these groups promotes a sense of belonging and identity, often leading to the adoption of similar language patterns, slang, and inside jokes. Popular figures on Instagram play a crucial role in setting trends. The language and styles used by influencers and celebrities are often mimicked by their followers, leading to widespread adoption of certain phrases, hashtags, and emojis. This trend-following behavior reinforces the linguistic norms within the Generation Z community.

c) Linguistic Trends

Linguistic trends encompass the evolving patterns of language use among Generation Z such as use slang. Herring (2021) argues that these trends often start as niche practices before potentially becoming widespread norms. Generation Z frequently creates and adopts new slang terms, which can spread rapidly across the platform. This constant innovation in language keeps their communication fresh and relevant to contemporary trends. Many Generation Z users are adept at code-switching, or alternating between different languages or dialects based on the context and audience. This flexibility reflects their multilingual and multicultural backgrounds, allowing them to navigate different social circles with ease.

Discussion

In creating Instagram posts, teenagers often use language style in their captions. There are five kinds of language style explained by Joss (1976) in Febriani et al., (2019), namely frozen style, formal style, consultative style, casual style, and intimate style. Based on the result of the research, the researchers found that the type of language style

more often used by teenagers to post the captions in their Instagram is casual style. Casual style is the style used for conversation in casual or normal situations which is suitable for conversation with our friends or sometimes family members, such as when on vacation, recreation, sports, and so on (Hayuningtias, 2022). According to Ridianto (2018) in Apriyani & Asmawati (2019) casual style is a style used in informal (casual) situation and using informal language.

The predominant language style identified in the research is the casual style, which aligns with previous studies highlighting Generation Z's preference for informal and relaxed communication modes (Smith & Page, 2020). This finding underscores how Gen-Z utilizes Instagram as a platform for self-expression and social interaction, where the casual style fosters a sense of immediacy and authenticity in their posts.

Features of Language Use

Generation Z's frequent use of slang and colloquialisms reflects their desire for social currency and cultural belonging within their peer groups (Danet & Herring, 2007). Slang terms like "lit," "fleek," and "GOAT" are not only linguistic markers but also signify shared meanings and values among Gen-Z users.

The use of abbreviations such as "LOL" and "FOMO" serves to condense communication and aligns with the platform's emphasis on brevity and quick engagement (Ling, 2008). These abbreviations facilitate efficient expression of emotions and reactions within the constraints of Instagram's character limits.

Informal greetings and farewells like "Hey guys!" and "Catch you later!" create a sense of familiarity and informality, enhancing the social aspect of their interactions (Tagg, 2012). These linguistic choices contribute to the relational dynamics that Gen-Z values in their online interactions.

Factors Influencing Language Styles on Instagram

Technological Affordances

Instagram's technological features shape how Generation Z communicates on the platform. The emphasis on visual content and short-form text encourages the use of emojis, hashtags, and concise language to maximize engagement (boyd, 2010). The algorithmic nature of content curation also influences language styles, as users adapt their posts to increase visibility and reach.

Social Factors

Social influences, including peer groups and influencers, play a crucial role in shaping Gen-Z language use on Instagram (Marwick & boyd, 2011). Social networks provide a context for shared language practices, where the adoption of slang and linguistic trends reinforces group identities and affiliations (Eckert, 2000). Celebrities and influencers further amplify these trends, influencing a broader audience to adopt specific language styles.

Linguistic Trends

Generation Z's language use reflects broader linguistic trends characterized by rapid innovation and adaptation (Crystal, 2006). Their ability to create and popularize new slang terms demonstrates a dynamic approach to language that responds to cultural shifts and current events (Thurlow & Mroczek, 2011). This trend-setting behavior contributes to the evolution of digital communication practices among younger generations.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that Generation Z teenagers predominantly use casual language styles in their Instagram posts, characterized by frequent use of slang, colloquial language, abbreviations, and informal greetings and farewells. For example, one common slang term used by participants was "slay", which means to do something exceptionally well or look very attractive. These linguistic choices reflect Gen Z's digital fluency and the influence of social media on language evolution. Practical implications include insights for marketers seeking to effectively engage with this demographic on Instagram. By understanding the casual, slang-heavy style preferred by Gen Z, brands can craft more relatable and impactful content. However, the study is limited by its relatively small sample size of 10 participants and its focus on a single social media platform. Future research could expand the sample and analyze language styles across multiple platforms to provide a more comprehensive picture. The qualitative, constructivist approach employed was effective in uncovering the nuances of Gen Z's language use. Incorporating quantitative analysis of post metrics could further illuminate the relationship between linguistic style and audience engagement. This study contributes to sociolinguistic theories by demonstrating how digital natives' language is shaped by technological affordances, social factors, and linguistic trends. As Gen Z comes of age, their distinctive communication patterns on Instagram will continue to influence the evolution of digital language.

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