

RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Generational Linguistics in the Digital Age: A Comparative Study of Gen Z and Gen Alpha English

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Abstract

This paper examines the evolving dynamics of English usage among Generation Z (born approximately 1997–2012) and Generation Alpha (born 2013 onwards), highlighting the linguistic, cultural, and technological factors that differentiate their modes of communication. While Generation Z has been extensively studied as the first generation of true digital natives, Generation Alpha represents the first cohort to be born entirely into an environment of ubiquitous artificial intelligence, short-form content, and immersive digital ecosystems. This study uses a qualitative and comparative approach, analyzing digital discourse, slang, and stylistic tendencies across both generations. Drawing from existing scholarship in sociolinguistics, media studies, and cultural theory, the paper argues that linguistic practices are shifting not incrementally but ecologically, with Gen Alpha redefining communication as a multimodal, hyper-visual, and memetic experience. The findings emphasize that understanding this shift is crucial for educators, parents, and organizations seeking to bridge intergenerational divides in communication. The paper also situates these linguistic changes within global and Indian contexts, engaging voices from both spheres to demonstrate the universality and locality of generational language transformation. Ultimately, the research suggests that English is evolving not merely in its vocabulary but in its very grammar of interaction, reflecting humor, chaos, and creativity as the new norms of generational identity.

Keywords: Digital linguistics, Gen Z, Gen Alpha, memes, Indian English.

1. Introduction

English, like a seasoned actor, has survived many costume changes: from Old English sagas to Shakespeare's wit, from

colonial bureaucracy to global business lingua franca. In the 21st century, however, the language finds itself on TikTok, in Roblox

chatrooms¹, and inside memes that often read like surrealist poetry.

Generation Z, born between 1997 and 2012, came of age during the rise of smartphones, social media, and meme culture. They are the “true digital natives,” using slang such as lit, no cap, or vibe check to compress meaning, signal identity, and sometimes confuse their parents. Generation Alpha, born from 2013 onwards, are the children who never knew a world without touchscreens, AI assistants, or algorithm-driven platforms like TikTok and YouTube Shorts. Their linguistic patterns are even more visual, chaotic, and meme-driven, filled with expressions like skibidi toilet, NPC energy, or Ohio moment.

This research positions itself within the emerging field of generational linguistics, aiming to compare Gen Z and Gen Alpha language practices. The problem lies in the gap of scholarship: while Gen Z has been analyzed extensively, studies on Gen Alpha are still embryonic due to their age. Yet, their communication already signals a linguistic ecology shift, altering how English functions as a tool of identity, performance, and belonging.

The objectives of this study are:

1. To identify linguistic features unique to Gen Z and Gen Alpha.
2. To compare stylistic tendencies across both generations.
3. To analyze the influence of technology and digital platforms on linguistic innovation.
4. To situate these changes in the global and Indian contexts.

This paper argues that English is not declining but reinventing itself through

multimodal, meme-infused, and hyper-visual forms of communication.

2. Literature Review

Linguistic scholars have long recognized the impact of technology on language. David Crystal’s *Language and the Internet* (2003) coined “Netspeak” to describe how online communication reshaped English. His *Internet Linguistics* (2011) reinforced the adaptability of English, showing that instead of degrading, the language thrives on digital creativity.

Danah Boyd, in *It’s Complicated* (2014), examined how young people use digital spaces to construct identity, relying on hashtags, shared jokes, and coded language. Similarly, John McWhorter argued in *Nine Nasty Words* (2021) that texting and online language are not sloppy mistakes but “fingered speech,” a form of spoken immediacy.

In the Indian context, Braj B. Kachru’s *The Alchemy of English* (1986) introduced the influential “Three Circles of English” framework, recognizing the localized creativity of non-native users. Rita Kothari’s *A Multilingual Nation* (2016) highlighted how Indian youth blend English with regional languages—producing Hinglish, Tanglish, and Benglish. This multilingual play mirrors global generational creativity.

Studies on Gen Z note their use of slang (lit, simp, no cap) and irony as defining characteristics (Crystal 2011). But Gen Alpha’s linguistic world is more absurdist and algorithmic. Consider the rise of TikTok memes: phrases such as skibidi toilet² or rizz (short for charisma) spread rapidly without logical meaning, becoming insider codes. This meme-driven chaos is not yet fully studied in

¹ Roblox chatrooms are online text spaces within the Roblox platform where players—mostly children and teens—communicate, share slang, and interact while playing games.

² “Skibidi Toilet” is a viral meme and YouTube series featuring bizarre, surreal videos of dancing toilets and strange characters, popular among Gen Alpha for humor and absurdity.

academia, leaving space for this paper's comparative approach.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Data Collection

This study employs digital ethnography and discourse analysis. Specifically, I immersed myself in native digital environments – TikTok, Instagram Reels, and Roblox chatrooms – where communication among Gen Z and Gen Alpha unfolds in real time and often organically. For instance, I observed comment threads, meme responses, and platform-specific slang emerging in situ, guided by netnographic principles as outlined by Kozinets³.

3.2 Method

- First, I conducted a qualitative comparison of slang usage, stylistic tendencies, and multimodal communication across both cohorts.
- Next, I performed cross-analysis with secondary literature on digital communication, such as net-focused ethnography and cyberculture scholarship.
- Finally, observations were contextualized within both global and Indian youth culture, accounting for code-switching and hybrid language, as seen in Hinglish and other blends.

3.3 Limitations

Importantly, Gen Alpha is still emerging – thus, scholarship remains limited, and their evolving discourse renders this study exploratory rather than definitive. Moreover, as noted by researchers evaluating AI tools, misinterpretation may occur due to opaque or masked usage in Gen Alpha's communication.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Slang and Vocabulary

Unsurprisingly, Gen Z slang often springs from early internet culture and has roots in AAVE and subcultures. For example, terms like no cap (meaning "no lie") or bussin' (meaning "tasty" or "excellent") are used globally as shorthand for nuanced expression.

By contrast, Gen Alpha slang leans sharply toward absurdist, meme-driven vocabulary. Consider skibidi, recently added to the Cambridge Dictionary but without any firm definition – it may mean "cool" or literally nothing at all. Similarly, rizz – short for charisma – was named Oxford's Word of the Year in 2023, and functions as a metric of attractiveness or charm: to have "W rizz" is to be highly charismatic. Other playful terms like delulu (from "delusional," popularized by K-pop fandoms) and Ohio (meaning "cringe" or "weird") further illustrate this trend.

4.2 Stylistic Differences

Gen Z tends toward minimalist, ironic brevity – e.g., "That's a whole mood 🥰." Their language often packages emotion in a meme-ready phrase. However, Gen Alpha ramps up chaotic layering – blending emojis, slang, and meme references in visually dense bursts, such as "Skibidi Ohio rizz moment 🧠🔥🤪👉." This style aligns with their native comfort in multimodal digital storytelling.

4.3 Technology and Medium

While Gen Z witnessed the shift from text-heavy platforms like Facebook to visual-first apps like Instagram and short-form TikTok, Gen Alpha never experienced the transition – they were born into AI-integrated digital ecosystems where emojis, GIFs, stickers, voice-to-text, and algorithmic prompts serve as

³ Kozinets is the **researcher** who coined or popularized the term "netnography," which is

online ethnography – studying communities and cultures through the internet.

defaults. In effect, they treat multimodality as language itself.

Furthermore, Gen Alpha's meme-driven style serves as social currency. A recent YouTube Shorts study categorized Gen Alpha slang by prominence: Rizz and Sigma made up 35% of primary slang usage, while Ohio and Fanumtax appeared as secondary slang within niche online subculture contexts.

5. Conclusion and Suggestions

This study demonstrates that generational linguistics is not a linear progression but an ecological shift in communication practices. Generation Z employs irony, brevity, and culturally coded slang, often relying on text-based cues such as no cap or lowkey to signal identity, humor, or social alignment. In contrast, Generation Alpha integrates words, visuals, emojis, GIFs, and memes into chaotic yet socially meaningful discourse, reflecting McWhorter's concept of "fingered speech."

The rise of meme-driven slang among Gen Alpha functions as social currency: terms like Rizz and Sigma circulate widely, while niche expressions such as Ohio moment or Fanumtax signal belonging within subcultural networks. This indicates that English, rather than deteriorating, is being reinvented through playful creativity and adaptive multimodality, particularly in digital youth culture.

Suggestions

- Educators should expand literacy teaching to include multimodal fluency, helping students interpret visual, textual, and memetic cues simultaneously. Incorporating meme analysis, social media discourse, and online gaming communication can bridge generational gaps.
- Workplaces must adapt to employees who increasingly communicate through hybrid modes. Understanding GIFs, emojis, and algorithmically influenced

shorthand enhances team cohesion and prevents miscommunication.

- Policymakers and parents should recognize that these linguistic shifts reflect creativity, adaptability, and social negotiation rather than deterioration. Encouraging safe digital spaces for observation and study promotes cross-generational understanding.

As Kachru argued, English thrives because it adapts to local needs and cultural contexts. In the meme era, adaptability requires fluency not only in grammar and vocabulary but also in multimodal, performative, and algorithmically influenced forms of communication. Recognizing these shifts ensures that English education, workplace communication, and social engagement remain relevant and inclusive across generations.

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