

Vernacular Evolution: A Comparative Study of Language Use in Generation Z and Generation Alpha on Social Media

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Abstract:

The rapid growth of technology, accompanied by the accessibility of social media, has slowly shaped how newer generations interact. This study explores the differences in language use between Generation Z and Generation Alpha on social media, focusing on how technology and modern social contexts shape their communication. A mixed-methods approach was used, combining quantitative data from structured questionnaires distributed to 50 respondents with qualitative analyses of social media behavior. The research examined four key elements of vernacular language: memes, slang, emojis, and abbreviations. Results show that both generations frequently use these elements, but with distinct differences. Generation Z tends to have a deeper understanding of meme culture and slang, often referencing current trends and cultural moments. In contrast, Generation Alpha prefers simpler meme formats and uses slang in more limited ways. Both groups widely use emojis but serve different purposes: Generation Z uses them contextually to add emotional depth, while Generation Alpha uses them more freely as standalone expressions. Abbreviations are also common, with Generation Z creating new acronyms and Generation Alpha relying on established ones. Peer influence and social media trends play a significant role in the adoption of these vernacular forms, reflecting their digital upbringing and group identity.

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INTRODUCTION

In today's fast-changing world of online communication, the use of language has evolved dramatically, especially for the younger generations, such as Generation Z (1997-2012) and Generation Alpha (2010-2024). These groups have grown up in a digital environment and show unique ways of speaking that reflect their cultural backgrounds and social experiences. Social media platforms have played a big role in creating new styles of language. This language change is not just about new words; it also shows how these generations connect and communicate with each other.

The phenomenon of language change among Gen Z and Gen Alpha is particularly noteworthy because it highlights how technology influences communication. Unlike previous generations, these digital natives are not only consumers of content but also active creators who shape the language they use. Their interactions on social media often involve playful experimentation with language, leading to the emergence of new vernaculars that may differ significantly from traditional forms of communication. This evolution reflects broader cultural shifts and the need for efficient, relatable, and engaging ways to express thoughts and emotions in a fast-paced online environment.

Understanding how Generation Z and Generation Alpha use language on social media is essential for linguists, educators, marketers, and content creators who aim to engage effectively with these audiences. Their unique vernacular expressions not only reflect generational identity but also influence mainstream communication. As these cohorts are immersed in different phases of technological development—Gen Z witnessing the rise of smartphones and social platforms, and Gen Alpha growing up in a fully digitalized world—their language use becomes a reflection of their lived digital realities. Furthermore, the way they interact linguistically also reveals broader societal values, such as the importance of individuality, humor, speed, and emotional expression in online spaces. By studying their use of memes, slang, emojis, and abbreviations, we gain valuable insight into the dynamic nature of language evolution shaped by media, peer culture, and the need for rapid, relatable interaction.

This research aims to address several important questions about language use:

1. What vernacular language features are most commonly used by Generation Alpha and Generation Z on social media?
2. What are the key differences in vernacular language usage between Generation Alpha and Generation Z on social media?
3. What influences the adoption of specific vernacular terms among Generation Alpha and Generation Z users on social media?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is based on one important theory: Vernacular Language Theory by William Labov. Labov posits that language variation is inherently linked to social factors such as age, gender, and social class, which play crucial roles in the process of linguistic change (Labov, 2006). In his research, Labov identifies a phenomenon he terms "vernacular reorganization," which occurs predominantly during adolescence. This process involves an increase in the frequency and

specificity of linguistic changes as young speakers navigate their social environments (Denis et al., 2019). The implications of this are significant for understanding how Gen Z and Gen Alpha utilize social media platforms to experiment with and propagate new linguistic forms. The vernacular they adopt can serve as a marker of identity and group affiliation, as well as a means of resisting standard language norms (Rickford, 2016). This research aims to contribute to the study of language by looking at how Gen Z and Gen Alpha are changing communication through their online interactions. By focusing on the relationship between language, identity, and social media, this study hopes to provide insights into the future of communication in our connected world.

Building upon Labov's Vernacular Language Theory, this study also considers the concept of *communities of practice* as developed by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992), which views language as shaped by social interaction within specific groups. This perspective is particularly relevant in understanding how Generation Z and Generation Alpha develop distinct linguistic identities within online environments. On platforms like Twitter, TikTok, and Instagram, users often belong to niche digital communities—such as fandoms, gaming groups, or meme circles—where specific forms of slang, emoji use, and abbreviations are developed, reinforced, and rapidly shared. These communities become arenas for linguistic innovation, with members adopting vernacular features that signal group belonging and digital fluency.

In addition, the theory of *computer-mediated discourse analysis* (Herring, 2004) contributes to this framework by highlighting how the medium of communication affects language use. In fast-paced, text-heavy environments like social media, brevity and emotional expressiveness become critical, leading to the preference for emojis, abbreviations, and meme-based language. Generation Z and Alpha adapt their communication to fit these constraints, resulting in a dynamic and hybrid vernacular shaped by both social influences and technological affordances. These combined frameworks allow us to understand not just *what* linguistic forms are used, but *why* they emerge and persist within these specific generational and digital contexts.

METHOD

The study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative research to explore social media usage on platforms like social media. Quantitative data was collected through structured questionnaires distributed to 50 respondents. The survey included questions on:

- Memes;
- Slang;
- Emojis;
- Abbreviation.

Qualitative Analysis was used to understand the context behind the usage of these elements. Participants provided insights into why they use memes, slang, emojis, and abbreviations, highlighting the social norms and emotional expressions that influence their online communication. In addition, content analyses were conducted to examine the usage of key elements such as memes, slang, emojis, and abbreviations. This analysis focused on how these elements are integrated into social media interactions. This mixed-methods approach allowed for a comprehensive understanding of social media behavior, combining numerical data with personal experiences.

To ensure the depth and reliability of the findings, the study implemented a triangulation strategy by integrating survey data, content analysis, and participant observation. The structured questionnaires provided quantifiable insights into the frequency and preference of vernacular usage among the participants, while the qualitative component explored the motivations and contextual meanings behind their language choices. Additionally, researchers conducted digital ethnography by observing how respondents interacted within their preferred platforms—primarily Twitter and TikTok—focusing on language forms in naturally occurring posts and comments. This multimethod approach strengthened the validity of the study by capturing both the statistical trends and the lived linguistic experiences of Generation Z and Generation Alpha in their digital environments. Data interpretation was further supported using thematic coding to identify patterns related to identity expression, group belonging, and emotional tone in vernacular use.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. What vernacular language features are most commonly used by Generation Alpha and Generation Z on social media?

In social media, there are four key elements of language evolution found among Generation Z and Generation Alpha: memes, slang, emojis, and abbreviations. These elements are commonly used for commenting and communicating with one another, distinguishing their communication style from that of Millennials and previous generations. The digital realm acts as a space where language is continuously negotiated and redefined, allowing for the emergence of new communicative practices that reflect the values and experiences of Generation Z and Generation Alpha (Lee, 2020; Thorne et al., 2015). As a result, older generations may struggle to understand these vernacular expressions that have emerged within the digital field.

Memes are funny images, videos, or texts that people share online. For Gen Z, memes often reflect current trends and social issues, helping them connect with friends and express their views. They function as a communal language, fostering a sense of belonging among users who share similar cultural backgrounds or interests (Aliева Khabibullaevna & Nurjakhon Ilkhomjon kizi, 2023). Generation Alpha also uses memes, especially on platforms like TikTok, where they create and share short, catchy content that goes viral.

Slang. Each generation has its own slang words. Gen Z uses terms like "lit" and "slay" to describe fun experiences and close friends. Generation Alpha has started using newer slang like "cap" (meaning a lie) and "sus" (short for suspicious), which they pick up from videos and social media. This generational divide in language comprehension can lead to misunderstandings and a sense of alienation among older individuals, as they struggle to decode the vernacular expressions prevalent in digital communication (Suizo, 2024).

Emojis are small pictures that show emotions or ideas. Both generations use emojis to add feelings to their messages. For example, a smiley face can show happiness. Generation Alpha often uses emojis in videos and posts to make their communication more colorful and expressive.

Abbreviations are shortened forms of words or phrases. Gen Z popularized terms like "LOL" (laugh out loud), "BTW" (by the way) and "BRB" (be right back). Generation Alpha continues to use these but also creates new ones that fit their fast-paced online conversations. These shortcuts help them communicate quickly but can be confusing for older generations. Together, these

elements create a unique communication style that not only facilitates interaction but also reinforces group identity and cultural affiliation among younger users (Biró, 2020).

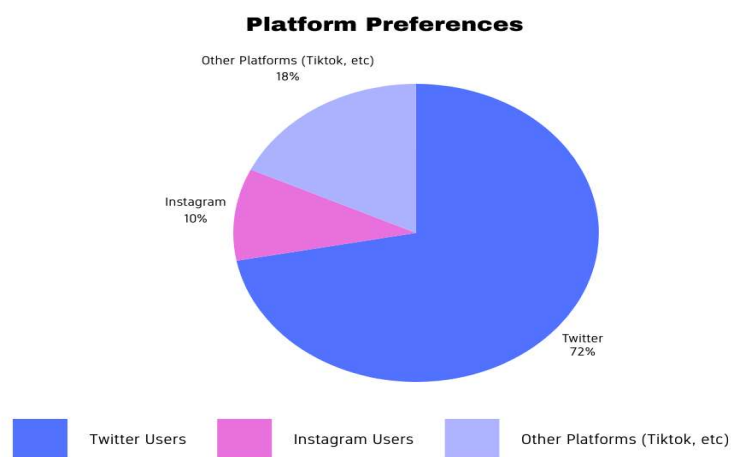
Analysis of Survey Data: Frequency of Language Elements Used by Generation Z and Generation Alpha on Social Media

This graphic shows how often Generation Z and Generation Alpha use four important language elements: memes, slang, emojis, and abbreviations.

Total Respondents: 50

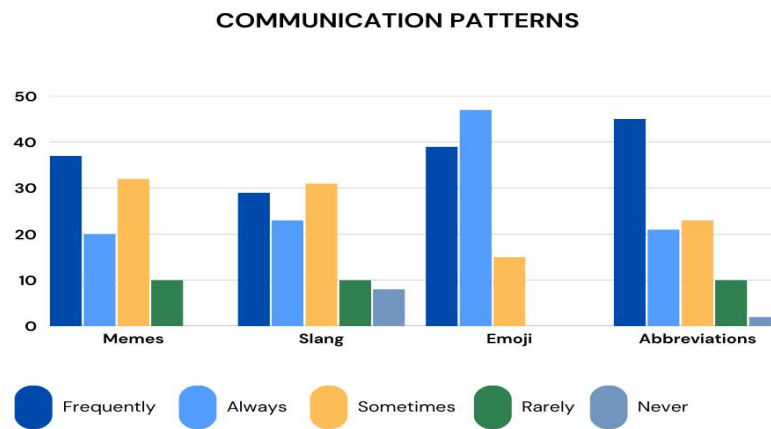
Respondents identified as 97% of Generation Z (1997-2009) and 3% of Generation Alpha (2010-2024), primarily from urban areas in Indonesia, including Bandung, Bogor, and Palembang.

Diagram 1. Platform Preferences



In the study, it is found clear patterns in social media usage among the respondents. The preferred platform is Twitter, with 72% of users choosing it for their online interactions. Instagram follows with 10%, while other platforms, such as Tiktok, Facebook and YouTube, make up only 2%. This data shows that Twitter is the dominant choice for communication among the participants.

Diagram 2. Communication Patterns



The study shows that Generation Z dominates the respondents, with Twitter being their preferred platform. Memes are used frequently or always by over 57% of participants, while slang is similarly popular, though 8.16% never use it. Emojis are the most commonly used, with 85.72% using them frequently or always. Abbreviations are also widely used, with 65.31% using them frequently or always. These findings highlight a strong preference for informal and expressive communication styles in online interactions.

2. What are the key differences in vernacular language usage between Generation Alpha and Generation Z on social media?

The vernacular language usage on Twitter shows clear differences between Generation Alpha and Generation Z, especially in memes, slang, emojis, and abbreviations. These differences come from their unique cultural backgrounds and experiences with technology.

Memes are a popular way to express ideas for both generations. Generation Z has played a big role in creating meme culture, using memes for humor and social commentary (Azad, 2023). Their memes often reference internet trends and cultural moments, showing a deep understanding of context. In contrast, Generation Alpha uses memes in a more playful way, often choosing simple and visually appealing formats like the viral "Skibidi" meme.

Slang also differs between the two generations. Generation Z has a rich slang vocabulary influenced by social media and pop culture (Mahfouz, 2018). Their slang changes quickly as new words come in and old ones fade (Conny, 2024). On the other hand, Generation Alpha adopts some slang from Gen Z but uses it in more limited ways. For example, they might use the term "sus" (suspicious) without fully understanding its background.

When it comes to emojis, Generation Z uses them to add emotional depth to their messages (Azad, 2023). They understand that different emojis can have different meanings depending on the

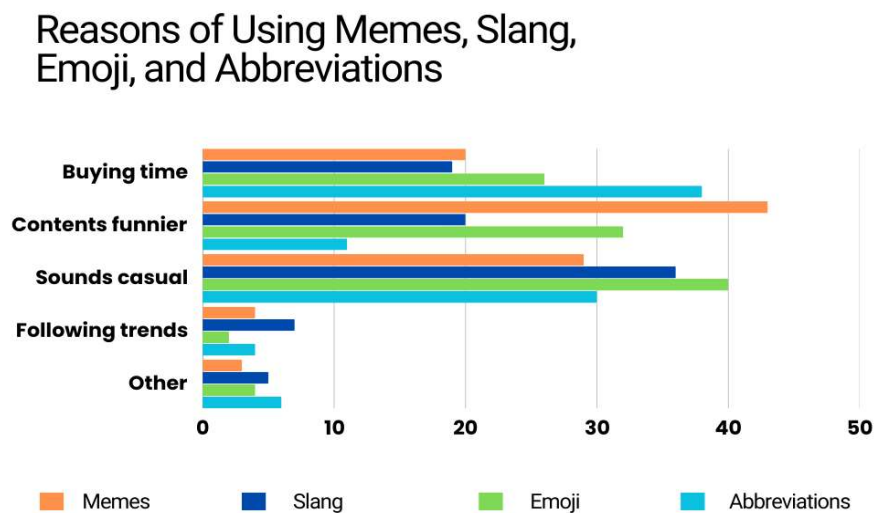
situation. For example, the skull emoji (💀) can mean laughter or feeling overwhelmed. In contrast, Generation Alpha tends to use emojis more freely and often as standalone expressions rather than adding context to their text.

Finally, abbreviations are common in both generations but used differently. Generation Z often creates new acronyms like "FOMO" (fear of missing out) or "SMH" (shaking my head) to communicate quickly (Mahfouz, 2018). Meanwhile, Generation Alpha relies more on established abbreviations showing they are still learning the more creative abbreviation styles of Gen Z.

3. What influences the adoption of specific vernacular terms among Generation Alpha and Generation Z users on social media?

One key influence on the adoption of vernacular terms is the peer group dynamics that Labov discusses. As children and adolescents interact with their peers, they are likely to adopt linguistic features that are prevalent within their social circles. This phenomenon is supported by research indicating that children's use of vernacular forms increases with age, as they become more attuned to the linguistic preferences of their peers (Ladegaard & Bleses, 2003). In the case of Generation Z and Generation Alpha, the rapid spread of memes, slang, and abbreviations on platforms like Twitter can be seen as a reflection of this peer influence, where specific terms gain popularity through social interactions and shared cultural references. Additionally, the concept of "vernacularisation" as discussed by O'Sullivan and Kelly-Holmes highlights how media, including social media platforms, play a crucial role in promoting vernacular forms (O'sullivan & Kelly-Holmes, 2017).

Diagram 3. Reasons of Using Memes, Slang, Emoji, and Abbreviations



Notably, 84.3% of respondents indicate that memes make the content funnier. Memes are a crucial aspect of online communication that enhances engagement and humor. According to

Petrova, memes contribute to digital culture and collective thinking, suggesting that they serve as carriers of communication that can influence language and cultural expressions (Petrova, 2021).

Slang is another vital component of vernacular evolution, with a significant number of respondents using it to sound casual among peers. In this context, 70.6% of respondents use slang to achieve a casual tone among their peers. This informal language fosters a sense of belonging and identity within social groups. Lin's research highlights that internet slang and memes significantly affect teenagers, indicating that these linguistic forms are essential tools for social interaction and cultural expression (Lin, 2023).

In Duffett's study emphasizes that Generation Z prefers emojis over words because they convey emotions and ideas succinctly, enhancing engagement and perceived usefulness in digital interactions (Duffett & Maraule, 2024). In line with this, 78.4% of participants use emojis to maintain a casual tone. This preference is similar in other studies, which suggest that emojis serve as a modern visual language, facilitating emotional expression and social connection (Alshenqeeti, 2016).

Here, 74.5% of respondents report using abbreviations for cutting time or buying time. Abbreviations reflect a broader trend towards brevity in digital interactions. This phenomenon is supported by the concept of textual paralinguage, which is similar to non-verbal cues that supplement written communication (Luangrath et al., 2017). The rapid pace of online communication necessitates the use of abbreviations, enabling users to convey messages quickly while maintaining engagement.

CONCLUSION

This study shows how Generation Z and Generation Alpha are shaping social media language, especially on Twitter. Their informal, fast-paced, and visually expressive communication reflects their digital culture. While older generations may struggle to understand these changes, peer influence and social trends drive their adoption. As social media evolves, so will its language, highlighting the need to understand these shifts for future communication.

This study demonstrates that memes, slang, emojis, and abbreviations are the most commonly used vernacular features by Generation Z and Generation Alpha on social media platforms, particularly Twitter. These language elements are central to their daily communication and serve as tools for humor, identity expression, emotional connection, and efficiency. While both generations utilize the same core features, their preferences and depth of usage differ: Generation Z exhibits a more layered, contextual understanding of digital expressions—especially memes and slang—whereas Generation Alpha, still developing their linguistic repertoire, tends to use simpler forms and established expressions more frequently.

The contrast in language usage between these generations reflects differences in digital maturity and cultural exposure. Generation Z, having grown up during the formative stages of social media, are digital content shapers and active contributors to linguistic trends. In contrast, Generation Alpha, being younger and more exposed to algorithm-curated content, often adopt language passively from influencers and peer groups. These differences emphasize how media consumption patterns, access to online subcultures, and generational peer norms influence linguistic behavior.

Moreover, the findings underline the social forces that drive the adoption of vernacular language forms. Peer influence, viral content, and the desire for social inclusion significantly contribute to the spread and persistence of specific terms within each generation. As digital platforms continue to evolve and diversify, so too will the vernaculars used by young users. For educators, language analysts, and media practitioners, staying attuned to these linguistic shifts is crucial not only to understand youth culture but also to foster meaningful engagement in increasingly virtual and linguistically diverse environments.

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