

Analysis of Conversations in Gen Z WhatsApp Groups: Language Style, Emojis, and Pragmatic Meaning

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the dynamics of language style, emoji usage, and pragmatic meaning in Gen Z WhatsApp conversations through a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach. This study identifies how these linguistic and nonverbal elements function to build intimacy, solidarity, creativity, and digital identity. The research method involved collecting 26 reputable articles (2020–2025) from international and national databases. The data were analyzed through reduction, categorization, thematic synthesis, and pragmatic interpretation. The results show that language styles such as slang, acronyms, interjections, and phonological games serve to strengthen social closeness and create informal communication spaces for Gen Z. Emojis are used in multiple ways, both as emotional expressions, phatic markers, conflict mitigation, and tools to clarify the context of messages. The pragmatic meanings that emerge tend to be fluid, flexible, and often involve maxim violations, especially relevance, but this actually strengthens group identity. Synthesis tables and graphs show that phatic functions and identity construction are the most dominant elements in Gen Z's WhatsApp communication. The research conclusion confirms that Gen Z conversations are a complex pragmatic ecosystem, highly contextual, and constantly evolving in line with the dynamics of digital culture.

Keywords: WhatsApp, Language Style, Emoji, Pragmatics, Digital Communication

INTRODUCTION

The development of communication technology has fundamentally changed the way the digital generation interacts, especially Generation Z who grew up in a fully connected environment. WhatsApp, as one of the most popular communication platforms in Indonesia, has become the main space for Gen Z to form and negotiate their social identity. Unlike previous generations who relied more on formal language structures, Gen Z leverages multimodal features such as emojis, stickers, voice notes, and concise text to communicate more expressively and efficiently. The communication that takes place within these platforms is not just an exchange of information, but has evolved into a complex social practice, reflective of the dynamics of their digital culture. Preliminary studies reveal that Gen Z interactions are strongly influenced by linguistic creativity, emotional expression play, and fluid and adaptive relational dynamics in online spaces (Wulandari et al., 2024).

This transformation of language style is seen through the use of slang, acronyms, word cutting, and phonological games that do not follow the standard rules of the Indonesian language, but are accepted as internal norms of the digital community. For example, terms such as "gesss", "omaygat", "capekk bet", "idk", or "bestieeee" not only serve as verbal variations, but also as symbols of group identity that hint at social



closeness and emotional belonging (Yusuf et al., 2023). This form shows the phenomenon of youth linguistics, in which language is not only seen as a means of communication, but also as a representation of social membership and generational identity. Translanguaging practices such as mixing Indonesian and English are not indicators of weak language competence, but rather adaptive communication strategies that reflect Gen Z's linguistic flexibility.

In addition to the linguistic aspect, visual symbols such as emojis play a central role in shaping pragmatic meanings in WhatsApp conversations. Previous research has revealed that the meaning of emojis often shifts from their literal meaning. The "😂" emoji, for example, has evolved into a symbol of excessive laughter or hyperbolic expressions, while the "😏" emoji is used to convey irony, sarcasm, or subtle teasing. The "🙏" emoji, which originally meant prayer, is actually used as a symbol of manners and gratitude in several cultural communities such as the Javanese people (Widiana et al., 2024). This phenomenon confirms the existence of a semiotic reinterpretation carried out by Gen Z, where digital symbols are interpreted based on social context and group cultural norms, rather than based on their original visual representation. This is in line with the view of cyberpragmatics (Yus), which emphasizes that meaning in digital communication is formed through the interaction between text, images, and dynamic social contexts.

This change in meaning also gives rise to a unique pragmatic ambiguity. In many cases, messages that contain specific emojis or language styles can have multiple meanings depending on social relationships, conversation situations, and the other person's interpretation. This ambiguity is not considered an obstacle to communication, but rather internalized as part of Gen Z's linguistic creativity, which prioritizes relational work and the play of meaning over literal clarity. The use of excessive punctuation, emotional capital letters, or the repetition of letters such as "ASTAGA 😭😭", "iyaaakk", or "plissss" also indicate an attempt to express emotional intensity that cannot be conveyed through plain text (Dahiya et al., 2022). Thus, WhatsApp no longer only serves as a medium to convey messages, but becomes a multimodal space where Gen Z negotiates social relations, expresses themselves, and builds group solidarity.

Although this phenomenon has been the concern of various researchers, most previous studies have focused on specific aspects separately. Some studies address interjection, others examine slang or informal language styles, while others focus on the interpretation and function of emojis. It is rare to find research that comprehensively integrates language styles, emojis, and pragmatic meanings in one unified analytical framework. As a result, there is no comprehensive picture of how these three elements work together to shape Gen Z's distinctive communication practices. It is at this point that this research provides novelty value. Different from previous research, this study applied a cross-thematic literature synthesis approach that combines pragmatic perspectives, digital discourse analysis, and cyberpragmatics to map how language styles, emojis, and pragmatic meanings interact with each other as a single communication system. This approach not only supports previous findings that emphasize the social function of digital language, but also criticizes the notion that ambiguity always interferes with communication. Instead, this study shows that ambiguity can be a productive social strategy in the context of Gen Z communication, while also revealing potential misconceptions in heterogeneous or large-scale group interactions. Based on that framework, this research has three main objectives:

- (1) mapping the dominant language styles used in Gen Z WhatsApp conversations;
- (2) identify the main function of emojis in shaping emotional and social meaning; and

(3) analyze the construction of pragmatic meaning that emerges as a result of the interaction between text, visual symbols, and the context of digital conversation. This research is expected to make a theoretical contribution to the study of digital linguistics and multimodal discourse, as well as provide a new understanding of how Gen Z communication reflects the transformation of contemporary culture, technology, and linguistic practices.

METHOD

This study uses the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method with a modified procedure from PRISMA to analyze scientific publications related to language styles, emojis, and pragmatics in WhatsApp conversations of Gen Z. Data sources were obtained from Google Scholar, Scopus, DOAJ, ResearchGate, and SINTA with the range of 2020–2025. Keywords include "WhatsApp discourse", "Gen Z communication", "emoji pragmatics", "digital slang", "cyberpragmatics". The stages of the research include: article identification, selection based on inclusion criteria, data extraction, thematic reduction, coding, and synthesis of findings.

To provide a comprehensive overview of the stages of the study, Figure 1 below presents the complete flow of the SLR procedure used in this study.

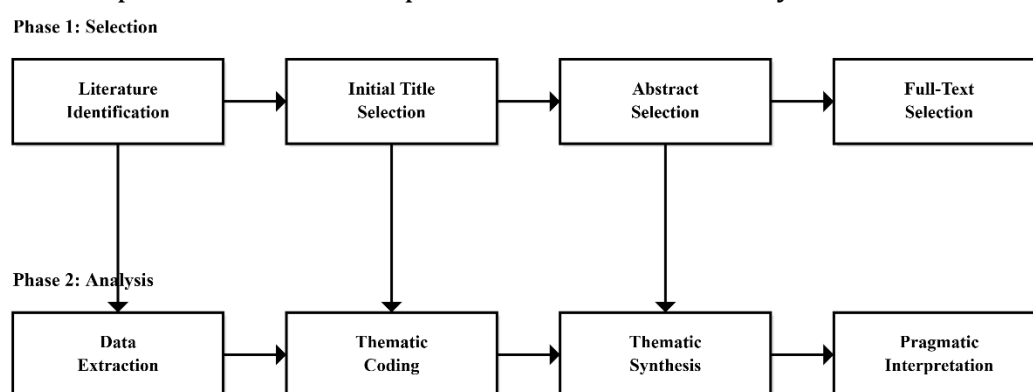


Figure 1. Diagram Alur Sistemik Literature Review (SLR)

Figure 1 illustrates the complete flow of the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) used in this study to examine the phenomenon of language style, emoji use, and pragmatic meaning in Gen Z WhatsApp conversations. Each stage is designed to ensure that the literature review process is systematic, transparent, and methodologically accountable.

The first stage, article identification, involves searching for scientific publications using a combination of keywords related to digital linguistics, pragmatics, language styles, and emoji use by Gen Z. This process includes exploring a database of relevant national and international journals. Initial identification results in a large number of articles that are then included in the list of candidates before further screening.

The second stage, screening, is carried out by reviewing the title and abstract of each article to determine its suitability for the research topic. Irrelevant articles for example, studies on different platforms, other age groups, or unrelated theoretical focuses are excluded from the process. This filtering serves to ensure that only articles directly related to the WhatsApp Gen Z communication phenomenon proceed to the next stage.

The third stage is full-text eligibility, which is an in-depth examination of the content of the article to ensure methodological suitability, depth of analysis, and theoretical contribution. At this stage, articles that do not provide empirical data or do not contain analysis of language styles, emojis, or pragmatic meanings are significantly

eliminated. Only publications that meet academic quality standards and thematic relevance are retained for further analysis.

The fourth stage, data extraction, is a systematic process of gathering important information from selected articles. This information includes the object of the study, the research method, the main findings, as well as the linguistic and pragmatic categories that emerge. The data obtained was then processed through thematic coding techniques, which is the process of grouping findings into three broad categories: (1) language style, (2) emoji, and (3) pragmatic meaning. This coding helps organize the data so that it can be analyzed across studies in a more structured way.

The final stage is theoretical synthesis and interpretation, where thematic findings are analyzed using the lenses of pragmatic theory, cyberpragmatics, and multimodal discourse analysis. This cross-thematic synthesis allowed researchers not only to describe the findings, but also to conceptually understand Gen Z's communication patterns. At this stage, the relationship between language styles, visual symbols, and pragmatic strategies is mapped to produce a comprehensive understanding of the Gen Z communication ecosystem on WhatsApp.

Overall, the diagram in Figure 1 not only shows the operational flow of SLR, but also highlights how the study ensured the validity of the findings through a careful process of selection, categorization, and interpretation. This systematic approach provides a solid methodological basis for drawing conclusions regarding the communication dynamics of WhatsApp Gen Z.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the literature review revealed three main findings: (1) the dominant language style patterns used by Gen Z in WhatsApp conversations, (2) the pragmatic function and meaning of emojis in creating interpersonal and emotional nuances, and (3) the characteristics of pragmatic meanings that emerge as a result of the flexibility of digital language. These three findings are interrelated and form a very distinctive communication ecosystem in the Gen Z environment.

An analysis of 26 articles showed that Gen Z's language style in WhatsApp was dominated by the use of slang, acronyms, word cutting, creative phonetic forms, interjections, and expressive punctuation. Various studies show that this pattern is not just a linguistic variation, but a way to express digital identity, social closeness, and emotional attitudes in conversation (Boutet et al., 2021; Erle et al., 2022). In addition, the use of emojis is found in almost every message, both as a complement to the text and as a stand-alone main message. Emojis serve to refine meaning, add emotional context, and strengthen interpersonal relationships and even in some cases replace verbal expressions completely (Alharbi & Mahzari, 2022; Kirschbaum & Ramírez-Gelbes, 2022).

Table 1. Synthesis of Language and Emoji Style Functions in WhatsApp Gen Z.

Main Functions	Usage Examples	Pragmatic Implications	Source
Intimacy	Slang, Interjection, Emoji	solidarity, intimacy	Boutet et al., 2021; Erle et al., 2022
Express	Expressive emojis, punctuation	Conflict mitigation, message clarification	Alharbi & Mahzari, 2022; McShane et al., 2021
Language creativity	acronyms, word cutting, creative phonetics	Digital identity, linguistic innovation	Veytia-Bucheli, 2020; Kutsuzawa et al., 2022

Ambiguity	Multi-Interpretation Emoji	Flexible interpretation, meaning play	Kirschbaum & Ramírez-Gelbes, 2022; You, 2024
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Table 1 clearly shows that language styles and emojis in WhatsApp Gen Z conversations perform multi-layered and interconnected pragmatic functions. The most dominant function is the intimacy function, which is reflected through the use of slang, interjection, letter repetition, as well as expressive emojis such as 😭 , 😊 , , 😊 or ❤️ . The use of these forms is not just linguistic variation, but rather a strategy to build solidarity, create an atmosphere of familiarity, and mark warm interpersonal relationships within digital communities (Boutet et al., 2021; Erle et al., 2022). Pragmatically, these elements work as *phatic expressions* that maintain the continuity of interactions, strengthen social bonds, and reduce emotional distance between participants.

The second function is the expressive function, which is mainly mediated by expressive emojis, repetitive punctuation, or capitalization to mark the intensity of emotions. This function appears in the use of visual symbols to clarify the intent or adjust the tone of the message so that it is easier for the recipient to understand, especially in a digital context with minimal non-verbal expression. In many cases, emojis are used as a tool to mitigate conflict or clarify meaning, for example 😊 use or 😊 to defuse tension or to show that the message is joking, not aggressive (Alharbi & Mahzari, 2022; McShane et al., 2021). This reinforces the finding that emojis serve as a substitute for intonation and gestures that are missing in online communication.

The third function, namely language creativity, reflects Gen Z's tendency to develop innovative new forms of language. Acronyms, word cutting, creative phonetic writing, and translanguaging become tools to create digital identities while marking modernity and generational affiliation. This creativity does not appear randomly, but is a product of *the language innovation* process which is influenced by expressive needs and the desire to show membership of a certain group (Veytia-Bucheli, 2020; Kutsuzawa et al., 2022). Thus, Generation Z uses linguistic creativity as a form of *identity performance*, which is displaying a distinctive digital persona that is easily recognizable by their community.

The last function is ambiguity, which is mainly due to the use of multi-interpretive emojis or non-literal language. Emojis such as 😭 , 😊 , 🤔 , 😊👉👉 , or 😊 often have meanings depending on the context, relationships between participants, or the norms of a particular digital community. This ambiguity allows for the flexibility of interpretation and the play of meaning, while also opening up space for humor, irony, or *soft criticism* (Kirschbaum & Ramírez-Gelbes, 2022; Du, 2024). From a pragmatic perspective, ambiguity is not simply a lack of communication, but a social strategy to build closeness, soften criticism, or create *in-group exclusivity*.

Overall, Table 1 confirms that the dominant functions of language and emoji styles are interpersonal maintaining social relationships, creating intimacy, and negotiating identity. Expressive functions reinforce the emotional layers of interaction, while language creativity and ambiguity reveal the dynamics of the rapid evolution of digital language in the Gen Z community.

After the language and emoji style function mapping is shown in Table 1, additional visualization is needed to show the proportions and dominance of each finding more clearly. Therefore, the following Figure 2 presents a percentage distribution of the four main categories of intimacy, expression, language creativity, and pragmatic ambiguity as graphical representations that reinforce the findings patterns and facilitate the interpretation of WhatsApp Gen Z's communication tendencies.

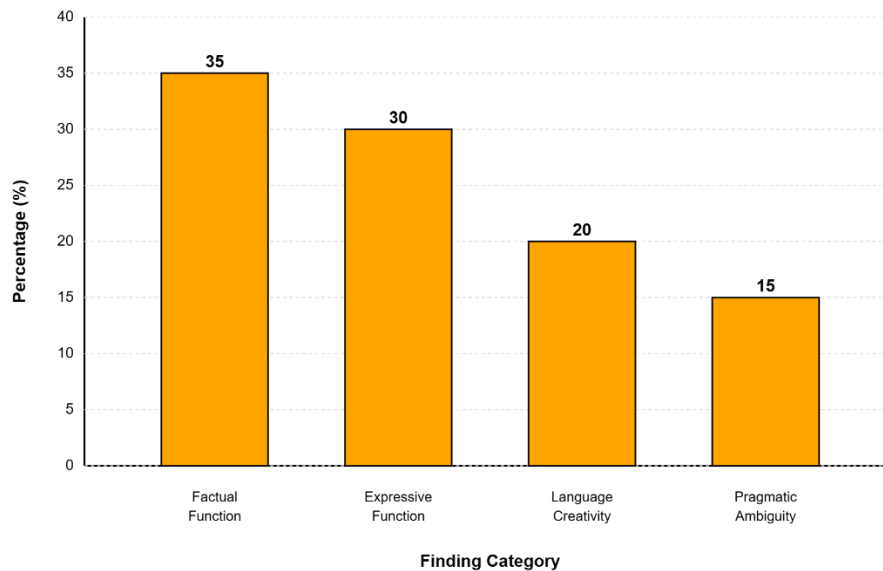


Figure 2. Dominance Chart of Language, Emoji, and Pragmatic Style Findings

Figure 2 shows the dominance distribution of the four main findings in the analysis of WhatsApp communication of Gen Z. Factual or interpersonal functions occupy the highest position at 35%, confirming that the main goal of Gen Z communication in the digital space is to maintain closeness, build familiarity, and maintain continuity of interaction. The dominance of this function is also in line with the characteristics of digital media that emphasize speed, spontaneity, and the need to maintain social connections even in the form of short or symbolic messages.

Expressive function is in second place at 30%, indicating that emotional expression is an important aspect of online conversations. The use of expressive emojis, excessive punctuation, and visual manipulation of text (e.g. capital letters or repeated letters) are Gen Z's strategies in compensating for the absence of nonverbal cues that usually appear in face-to-face communication. These findings reinforce the view that WhatsApp is a space to articulate emotions quickly and multimodally, where visual symbols replace intonation, gestures, and facial expressions.

The language creativity function of 20% reflects the high level of linguistic innovation in this group. Forms such as acronyms, word decapitation, phonetic plays, and translanguaging show that Gen Z does not only use language as a means of communication, but also as a means to display group membership identity and personal style. This linguistic creativity creates a social code of its own that is often exclusive, understandable only by their internal community.

Meanwhile, pragmatic ambiguity of 15% still shows a significant portion. This ambiguity often arises through the use of multi-interpreted emojis, irony, subtle sarcasm, and violations of the maximum relevance and quality. Instead of being considered an obstacle in communication, ambiguity is understood as a pragmatic strategy that is deliberately used to play on meaning, reinforce internal humor, or maintain politeness in a particular context. Thus, ambiguity has become an integral part of Gen Z's communication flexibility.

Overall, the graph illustrates the Gen Z communication landscape that is highly interpersonal and emotionally oriented, yet still full of creativity and meaning play. These proportions reinforce the interpretation that language styles and emojis are not merely

complementary to communication, but are the main structures that make up their digital pragmatic ecosystem.

Discussion

The following discussion integrates research findings with pragmatic theory, sociolinguistics, and visual semiotics to uncover the deeper dynamics of Gen Z communication.

2.1 Language Style as a Form of Digital Identity

The language style used by Gen Z emphasizes that digital language is no longer understood simply as a tool to convey messages, but as a medium for forming social identity in the online space. Through the use of slang, acronyms, and distinctive terms such as "*bestie*," "*ngab*," or "*wkwk land*," Gen Z marks their existence in a group that shares a common cultural reference. The linguistic variation establishes a symbolic boundary between "we" and "them," which is in line with the concept of a *speech community* in which group members adopt a particular linguistic form as a symbol of affiliation and differentiation.

In addition, linguistic creativity such as letter lengthening ("*iyaa bangettt*"), phonetic modification ("*ciyusss*," "*gemayyy*"), and the use of emotional capitalization ("*CRAZY THIS* 🤔🤔🤔") show that Gen Z prioritizes the performative dimension of language over structural clarity. This style reflects their orientation on expressiveness, emotional intensity, as well as the digital aesthetic that makes up the "online persona." This is in line with the findings of Erle et al. (2022) who stated that digital language allows users to build a more fluid and varied identity than offline communication. Thus, Gen Z's language style is not only a linguistic innovation, but also a representation of identity and social membership in the digital ecosystem.

2.2 Emojis as the New Semiotic System

Emojis evolved into *semiotic resources* that held more complex functions than just visual symbols of facial expressions. In digital communication, emojis play a role in replacing the intonation, voice pressure, and gesture functions that are usually present in face-to-face interactions. Therefore, its meaning is not literal, but rather depends heavily on the social and cultural context of the group that uses it. Multi-interpreted emojis such as 🤔, 🤔👉👉, or 🤔👉 often do not represent actual crying, but rather hyperbolic emotions, shame, or irony that are shared by certain digital communities.

From a *cyberpragmatics* perspective, emojis become part of communication strategies to maintain politeness, reduce potential conflicts, indicate humor play, or frame certain attitudes such as familiarity. Widianita et al. (2024) even show that the use of emojis adapts to local norms; For example, in Javanese-speaking communities, emojis can serve as a marker of humility or an effort to maintain harmony (*harmony*) in conversation. Thus, emojis can be understood as a new semiotic system that forms the pragmatic dynamics of digital communication across cultures.

2.3 Ambiguity as a Solidarity Mechanism

Ambiguity is one of the main characteristics of Gen Z communication and is often used intentionally as a form of relational strategy. When Gen Z uses emojis non-literally or consciously violates Grice's maxim, they are not creating miscommunication, but rather strengthening group bonds through *shared understanding* that can only be understood by fellow users. For example, the phrase "tired 🤔" does not really indicate sadness, but rather a dramatic expression that is humorous in nature and is often used to

thaw the situation. Similarly, phrases like "ok 👍😊" can contain insincerity, sarcasm, or even covert complaints depending on the relationship and context of the conversation.

In a modern pragmatic perspective, ambiguity is no longer seen as a failure to communicate, but rather as part of *relational work*, which is the effort made by the speaker to build, maintain, or negotiate social relationships (Locher & Graham, 2021). The use of ambiguity allows for flexibility in interpretation, provides space for language play, and creates a sense of belonging among members of the digital community. Thus, ambiguity functions not only as a linguistic phenomenon, but as a mechanism of social solidarity that enriches the communication dynamics of Gen Z.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that Gen Z's communication patterns in WhatsApp conversations are shaped by three main elements of creative language styles, the use of intense and multi-interpreted emojis, and flexible and layered pragmatic meanings. Digital language styles such as slang, acronyms, word cutting, and translanguaging are not only a means of conveying messages, but also serve as markers of group identity and solidarity. Emojis act as visual semiotic devices that enrich emotional expression, refine messages, and maintain harmony of interactions in the context of digital culture. Meanwhile, the pragmatic meanings that emerge are often ambiguous and rely on shared cultural codes, suggesting that Gen Z uses ambiguity as a social strategy, not as a barrier to communication.

Overall, WhatsApp Gen Z's communication forms a multimodal pragmatic ecosystem that emphasizes self-expression, interpersonal relationships, and linguistic creativity over structural clarity. These findings make an important contribution to the study of digital pragmatics and media linguistics, as well as open up opportunities for further research related to the evolution of language in the digital age, shifts in online politeness norms, and the influence of local culture on the use of visual symbols.

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