Analyzing the Syntactic Patterns of Gen Z English: The Use of Non-Standard Sentence Structure in Digital Discourse

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Abstract. This study examines the distinctive syntactic patterns found in Gen Z English, particularly as they appear in digital communication across platforms such as TikTok comments, Twitter threads, Instagram captions, and personal chats. Drawing on examples including "so done," "me when I see food," "she kinda cute," and "staying delulu is the solulu," the research analyzes how fragment clauses, subject and auxiliary omission, meme-based constructions, and playful morphological innovations shape the linguistic style of contemporary youth discourse. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, the study identifies non-standard sentence structures, describes recurring syntactic patterns, and explores the influence of social media, meme culture, and digital register on their formation. The findings reveal that these forms, while structurally unconventional, function effectively within digital contexts and contribute to emerging shifts in Modern English. The study concludes that Gen Z English reflects not linguistic decay but a dynamic linguistic evolution driven by creativity, efficiency, and social identity.

Keywords: Gen Z English; syntax; digital discourse; fragment clauses; ellipsis; meme culture; linguistic variation; Modern English; online communication

1. INTRODUCTION

Now, Generation Z can access the internet and social media anytime and anywhere due to the development of high-speed mobile technology. Constant communication and the habit of absorbing information in this way have shaped how Gen Z interacts with each other and the world. (Fodor et al., 2017; Fodor et al., 2018) analyzed how Gen Z differs from other generations in terms of perspectives, goals, and habits. The results show that this generation has unique characteristics compared to previous generations. In recent years, the English used by Generation Z (aged ±12– 26) on social media such as TikTok, Twitter (X), Discord, and Instagram has shown new syntactic patterns that are often not found in standard English. A linguistics professor at a university discovered significant changes in the sentence structure of Gen Z students in both academic assignments and informal conversations. Students are unconsciously beginning to bring "digital English" patterns into formal writing.

The language of Generation Z on social media platforms is expressive, unrestrained, and free. This generation is considered the least conservative compared to previous generations in terms of language. They like to use emojis when talking. They enjoy creating new terms because they are very creative (Devlin, 2021). It seems that there are no limits for this generation to express their thoughts, concepts, and insights. As teenagers full of feelings and

ideas, their language on the internet reflects who they are, as well as the context in which the language is used. Additionally, Gen Z often uses informal language, which can include slang, jargon, and even uncommon language with the help of their circle (Pasa & Mahyuni, 2022). The language they use can be linked to the complex environment in which they continue to change and grow (Serbanescu, 2022).

Statistically, Generation Z is the group that uses social media the most, with 30.6% of the population aged 18-24. This supports the claim that social media accounts for half of Gen Z's time spent on the internet. It seems that Generation Z uses social media to avoid being considered "irrelevant" and marginalized from their friends' social activities. According to Kissinger (2019), this has evolved into a means of maintaining relationships with friends.

Gen Z English differs from conventional English, mainly due to the increasing speed of digital communication and social media. This generation often uses fragment clauses, subject or auxiliary omission, unusual word order, and sentence patterns derived from meme culture in everyday conversations on platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter. These structures are syntactically incomplete, but they are still understood pragmatically because of the visual and digital cultural context that supports them. This phenomenon shows that language continues to adapt to new communication media and create more expressive, concise, and identity-driven syntactic forms.

The purpose of this article is to analyze these syntactic patterns and explain how and why Generation Z uses unusual syntactic forms. These syntactic changes are not merely "grammatical errors"; they are part of language change driven by technology, creativity, and the need for social expression. By understanding these patterns, the article aims to provide insight into how modern language evolves, how digital culture influences language structure, and how this impacts communication, learning, and modern linguistics.

2. METHODOLOGY

Qualitative descriptive research is a type of research that uses qualitative data and describes them descriptively. Sugiyono (2016: 9) states that the qualitative descriptive method is an approach based on postpositivism philosophy to study the conditions of natural objects (as opposed to experiments). Data collection techniques use triangulation (combination), data analysis is inductive or qualitative, and qualitative research results emphasize meaning rather

than generalization. The purpose of qualitative descriptive research is to create accurate and systematic descriptions.

This study attempts to understand these syntactic patterns, their social functions, and their implications for Modern English, with the following research objectives:

1. To identify types of non-standard sentence structures in Gen Z English.

2. To describe the most frequently occurring syntactic patterns.

3. To explain the contributing factors (social media, meme culture, digital register).

4. To formulate the linguistic implications for the development of Modern English.

Using purposive sampling, which only took sentences that showed unique, non-standard syntactic forms or represented characteristics of digital language. Each piece of data was then analyzed using qualitative coding techniques to identify types of non-standard sentence structures, such as fragment clauses, subject omission, auxiliary deletion, meme-based structures, or unconventional word order.

After the initial coding was done, the researchers grouped these patterns into broader syntactic categories, so they could describe which patterns were most frequently used by Gen Z and how these forms worked structurally. This analysis was then followed by an investigation into the factors causing these patterns to emerge, such as the use of social media, meme culture, the need for rapid expression, and the formation of a "digital register" with its own language norms. In the final stage, the study formulated the linguistic implications of these findings for the development of Modern English—both in terms of changes in sentence structure, shifts between spoken and written language, and the potential for these digital patterns to enter formal language use. Thus, this methodology not only describes the syntactic forms of Gen Z English, but also understands the causes and effects in contemporary language studies.

3. **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

   RESULT

Various TikTok comments, Instagram captions, and hashtags on Threads show many examples of Gen Z slang that has unique syntactic patterns and differs from standard English. Expressions such as "so done," "literally me," "me when I see food," and "she kinda cute" demonstrate the use of fragment clauses, copula deletion, and non-standard word order that is still pragmatically understood. Meanwhile, forms such as "no sleep, just stress," "wanna eat?" and "feeling sick" reflect the omission of subjects and auxiliaries, which is characteristic of fast-paced digital communication. More creative expressions such as "let him cook," "do better," and "staying delulu is the solulu" show how meme culture shapes new sentence structures that are expressive, humorous, and identity-driven. This data set illustrates how Gen Z actively creates and uses nonstandard syntactic patterns as part of their language style in the digital space. These observations serve as evidence for the research findings. Below are the results of observations from several slang users found on social media.

3.1 SO DONE
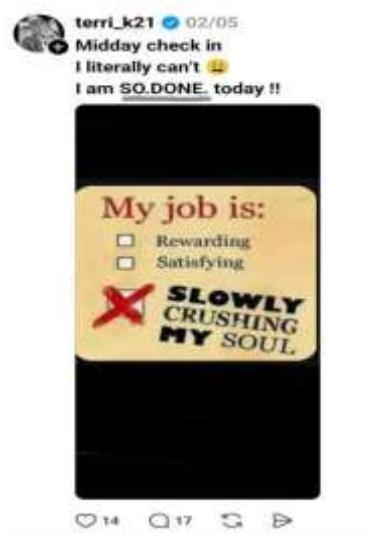
This slang falls under the category of "fragment clause/subject omission." This sentence has no subject or verb. Syntactically, it is a standalone adjective phrase. Gen Z uses it as an emotional expression whose context is understood by the reader.

3.2 LITERALLY ME
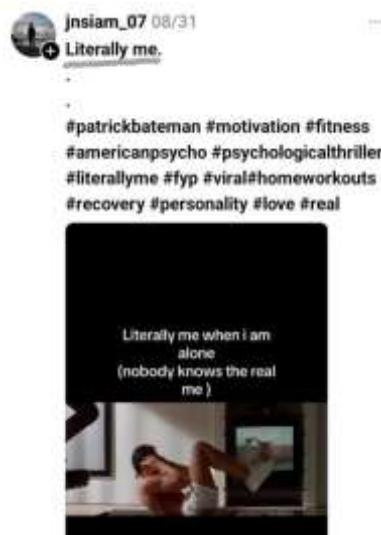
Literally me is a category of copula deletion. With a full analysis of the form "That is literally me," Gen Z deletes the copula "is" to create a shorter and more expressive structure. Syntactically, this becomes a noun phrase with a predicative function.

3.3 ME WHEN I SEE FOOD

This includes meme syntax/non-standard word order. This structure does not form a complete clause. "Me" at the beginning does not function as a formal subject, but as a pragmatic device to indicate self-reaction. This is a pattern that emerged from meme culture.

3.4 SHE KINDA CUTE

She kinda cute falls into the category of auxiliary omission. The analysis is that this sentence omits is, so the complete form is "She is kinda cute." This omission of auxiliaries often appears in Gen Z English to create a relaxed and informal impression.

3.5 NO SLEEP JUST STRESS
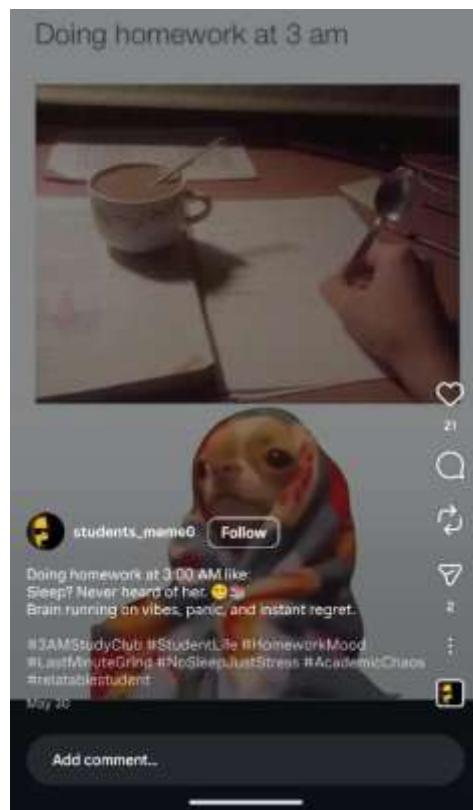
This slang falls under the category of "parallel fragment construction." Analysis of both parts shows that they are noun phrases that do not form complete clauses. This structure follows the meme pattern "No X, just Y." Syntactically, it is a fragment, but pragmatically, its meaning is very clear.

3.6 WANNA EAT???

The slang question "wanna eat?" falls under the category of subject drop. This is where the subject that should appear ("Do you..." or "Do you want to...") is omitted. The complete form would be "Do you wanna eat?" This is a characteristic of spoken language that has carried over into the digital realm.

3.7 FEELING SICK

Feeling sick falls under the category of "Subject + auxiliary omission." The complete sentence is "I'm feeling sick." However, Gen Z omits the subject and auxiliary to create a shorter structure. Syntactically, it is only a verb phrase without a subject.

3.8 LET HIM COOK
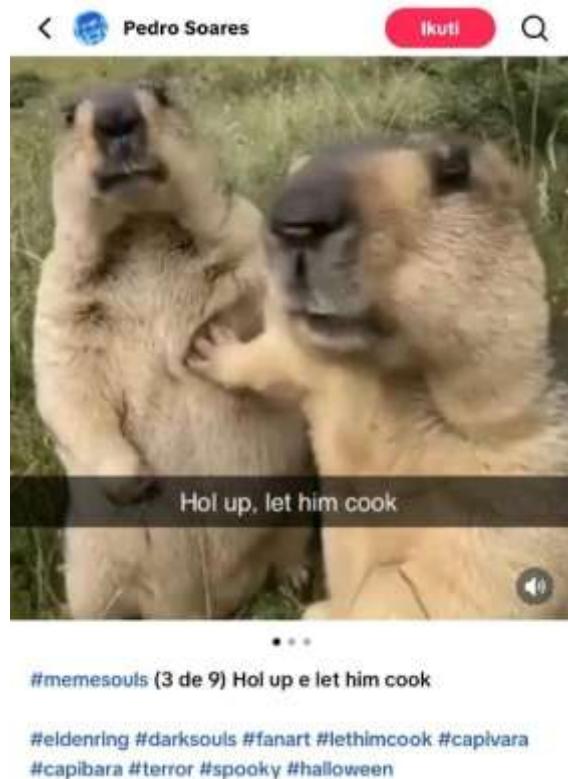
This slang is categorized as imperative slang/semantic shift. Structurally, the analysis is standard imperative. However, semantically, "cook" has undergone semantic expansion to mean "let him do something his way." This is an example of syntactic and semantic interaction.

3.9 DO BETTER

Do better falls into the category of "imperative minimalism." Imperative analysis without an explicit object. This shortening makes the expression more direct and evaluative in tone.

Syntactically, it is a complete sentence, but with an ellipsis of the object.

3.10 STAYING DELULU IS THE SOLULU
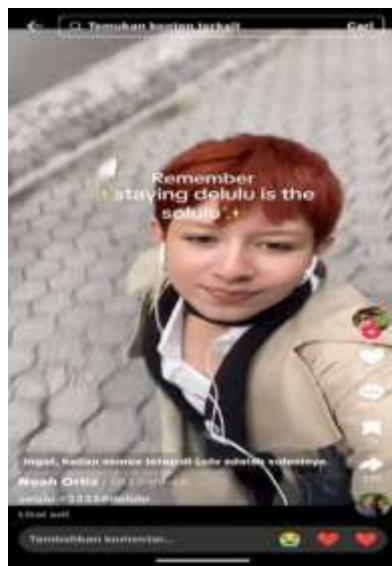
The slang phrase "staying delulu is the solulu" falls under the category of playful syntax + rhyme-based morphology. It follows standard grammar ("X is Y"), but replaces words with playful expressions typical of Gen Z. The syntax remains intact, but the lexicon is modified for humorous effect.

DISCUSSION

To analyze the syntactic patterns found in Gen Z expressions such as "so done," "me when I see food," "she kinda cute," and "staying delulu is the solulu," this study draws on several linguistic theories that help explain the structural shifts occurring in contemporary digital English. Phrase Structure Theory provides a foundation for understanding why many of these forms appear as fragments or phrasal expressions without full clause structure, while Transformational Grammar and Ellipsis Theory account for the omission of subjects, auxiliaries, and copulas in examples like "feeling sick" and "wanna eat?". Additionally, the Minimalist Program and discourse-based approaches highlight Gen Z's preference for brevity, efficiency, and expressive forms shaped by social media interaction and meme culture. Together, these syntactic frameworks offer a comprehensive lens to examine how and why Gen Z English develops distinctive structures within digital communication

No.	Example	Syntactic Category	Explanation
1.	So Done	Fragment clause / Subject omission	An adjective phrase functioning as a full utterance without subject or verb; used for emotional expression.

2.	Literally me	Copula deletion	The verb ''is'' is ommited, creating a reduced predicative noun phrase.
3.	Me when I see food	Meme syntax / Non-standard word order	A meme-based construction where ''me'' doesn't serve as a formal subject; expresses reaction rather than full propositional meaning.
4.	She kinda cute	Auxiliary omission	Missing copula ''is''; reflects informal, speech-like reduction.
5.	No sleep just stress	Parallel fragment construction	Two noun phrases forming a formulaic pattern ''No X, just Y.'' without a full clause.
6.	Wanna eat???	Subject drop	The subject (''you'' or ''do you'') is omitted, typical in highly informal digital communication.
7.	Feeling sick	Subject + auxiliary omission	Reduced verb phrase without the expected ''I'm''.
8.	Let him cook	Imperative slang / Semantic shift	Imperative structure with culturaly shifted meaning (''let him do his thing'').
9.	Do better	Minimal imperative / Ellipsis	Imperative with an omitted object, often used evaluatively.
10.	Staying delulu is the solulu	Playful syntax + rhymebased morphology	Standard copular structure with lexically modified forms for humor and identify expression.

Syntactic Theory Explanations

1. Phrase Structure Theory

Phrase Structure Theory explains that sentences are built from hierarchical units such as noun phrases, verb phrases, and adjective phrases. Many Gen Z expressions—like "so done," "literally me," or "no sleep, just stress"—function only as phrases rather than complete clauses, demonstrating how phrasal structures are used as full communicative units in digital discourse.

2. Transformational Grammar

Transformational Grammar accounts for structural manipulations such as deletion, movement, and reduction. In Gen Z English, transformations often involve deleting expected grammatical elements, as seen in "she kinda cute" (missing "is") or "wanna eat?" (missing "do you"). These forms reflect simplified but meaningful transformations of underlying full sentences.

3. Ellipsis Theory

Ellipsis involves omitting parts of a sentence that can be inferred from context. Gen Z frequently omits subjects, auxiliaries, or objects, resulting in expressions like "feeling sick," "wanna eat?" or "do better." These structures rely on shared contextual knowledge between speakers in digital environments.

4. Minimalist Program

The Minimalist Program proposes that language favors the least costly, most economical form to convey meaning. Gen Z English illustrates this principle through highly reduced structures such as "so done" or "kinda cute," showing a preference for efficiency, speed, and expressive minimalism in online communication.

5. Discourse-Based Syntax

Discourse-based syntax emphasizes how meaning is shaped by social context, interaction, and communicative function. Expressions like "me when I see food" and "let him cook" are syntactically unconventional but pragmatically meaningful within meme culture and digital communities. Their structure is motivated by discourse, not prescriptive grammar.

6. Sociolinguistic Syntax (Register Variation)

Gen Z has developed a "digital register" with its own syntactic norms shaped by platforms like TikTok, Threads, and Instagram. This explains the widespread acceptance of fragments, subject omission, and playful forms such as "staying delulu is the solulu." These variations reflect identity, creativity, and cultural belonging rather than grammatical error.

7. Valency Theory

Valency Theory focuses on how verbs require certain arguments (subject, object, etc.). In Gen Z English, valency patterns are often ignored or altered—for example, "she kinda cute" lacks the required copula. Semantic shifts like "cook" in "let him cook" also show how digital culture influences verb valency and argument structure.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Gen Z English exhibits a set of distinctive syntactic patterns that differ significantly from Standard English, driven primarily by the communicative demands of digital platforms. Through the analysis of expressions such as "so done," "she kinda cute," "me when I see food," and "staying delulu is the solulu," the research identifies several recurring structures including fragment clauses, subject and auxiliary omission, meme-based constructions, and playful lexical manipulation. These forms reflect a grammar that prioritizes speed, expressiveness, and shared cultural context rather than adherence to traditional prescriptive norms. The findings also reveal that the non-standard structures used by Gen Z are not random or ungrammatical, but follow consistent syntactic and pragmatic patterns shaped by digital interaction. Fragment clauses function as compressed emotional expressions, ellipsis forms arise from the efficiency of online conversation, and meme-derived constructions rely on shared interpretive frameworks within online communities. These features show how Gen Z language practices are deeply intertwined with social media platforms such as TikTok, Twitter, and Instagram, which encourage brevity, humor, and identity performance. Furthermore, the study demonstrates that the emergence of these patterns is influenced by broader sociolinguistic forces, including meme culture, multimodal communication, and the development of a distinct digital register. Rather than indicating linguistic decline, Gen Z syntax represents a natural process of language evolution in response to shifting communicative environments. It highlights how younger speakers reshape grammatical conventions to fit new media ecologies, while still maintaining mutual intelligibility and functional coherence within their communities. Overall, the research emphasizes the importance of recognizing Gen Z English as a legitimate and meaningful linguistic variety. Its influence on Modern English is likely to grow as digital communication becomes increasingly dominant. Understanding these syntactic innovations provides valuable insight into ongoing changes in English grammar, the interplay between technology and language, and the ways contemporary youth construct identity through linguistic creativity.

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