

Concept Paper: Exploring Gen Z's Communication Tools in Enhancing Post-COVID Educational Settings Through the Lens of Media Richness Theory

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has transformed global education by compelling a rapid shift to digital platforms. The shift requires redefined student-lecturer communication, particularly among Generation Z (Gen Z), who are deeply immersed in technology. This concept paper explored how Gen Z utilizes various digital communication tools in post-pandemic educational settings to determine the effectiveness of these tools in facilitating student-lecturer interpersonal interactions. Framed by the media richness theory (MRT), the study investigated how different media, from rich formats like video conferencing to lean tools like email, affect communication satisfaction, engagement, and educational rapport. Drawing on a qualitative methodology involving focus group discussions (FGD) with Gen Z students at University Poly-Tech Malaysia (UPTM), the research aimed to identify preferred communication tools, evaluate their perceived richness, and offer recommendations to enhance digital communication strategies in hybrid learning environments. By bridging theory and practice, this study contributes to more inclusive, responsive, and effective academic communication frameworks that align with the expectations and habits of a digitally native generation.

KEYWORDS: Generation Z, Communication tools, Post-COVID education, Media richness theory, Interpersonal communication

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1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has triggered a profound transformation in the education system globally. For example, the pandemic forced a swift shift from traditional physical interactions to digital and hybrid modalities. In Malaysia, this abrupt transition highlighted both the opportunities and limitations of technology-mediated learning. While the adoption of online platforms such as Zoom, Google Meet, WhatsApp, and institutional Learning Management Systems (LMS) ensured continuity of instruction, it exposed gaps in lecturer and student communication, specifically in relation to immediacy, rapport, and clarity of academic expectations in higher education institutions (HEIs). These challenges are especially relevant for Generation Z (Gen Z). Gen Z were born between 1997 and 2012 and are known for their digital fluency. Despite that, they experience varying levels of access, engagement, and satisfaction in post-pandemic academic interactions.

Much of the existing literature characterizes Gen Z

as a technologically adept, socially connected, and visually oriented generation. However, this portrayal often oversimplifies their communication behaviors by treating them as a homogenous group. In reality, Gen Z's communication preferences are shaped by intersecting factors such as socioeconomic background, educational attainment, geographical location (urban versus rural), and institutional culture (Garris & Fleck, 2022). For example, Gen Z students in rural Malaysia may face infrastructural challenges, such as unstable internet connectivity, that limit their ability to fully engage in rich, synchronous media. Conversely, urban-based Gen Z students may have greater access to diverse platforms but still experience issues of formality, responsiveness, or mismatched communication norms with lecturers. Acknowledging these intersecting factors is critical to developing more equitable and inclusive communication strategies.

In the post-COVID Malaysian HEI context, the urgency to address student-lecture communication gaps is underscored by several persistent challenges. First, many

lecturers continue to rely on “lean” communication channels, such as institutional emails and LMS announcements. Though the channels are suitable for routine information, they often lack the immediacy and relational depth preferred by Gen Z students (Greenhow & Chapman, 2020). Second, the absence of non-verbal cues and informal interaction opportunities in online and hybrid settings hinders the development of trust and rapport, particularly for first-year students or those transitioning into HEIs during the pandemic. Third, institutional policies sometimes discourage the use of informal or non-institutional platforms (e.g., WhatsApp, Telegram), creating a misalignment between student preferences and official communication protocols. The idea that communication media vary in their capacity to convey nuanced, complex, and affective information is framed in the media richness theory (MRT) (Huang et al., 2022a). To identify both the affordances and limitations of various media in fostering effective academic relationships, this study examines how Gen Z students at Universiti Poly-Tech Malaysia (UPTM) select, evaluate, and respond to communication tools in their interactions with lecturers. The research objectives were as follows:

- I. To identify the primary communication tools used by Gen Z students in educational interactions.
- II. To evaluate the effectiveness of these tools in facilitating interpersonal communication between Gen Z students and their lecturers.
- III. To examine how the perceived richness of various media influences communication satisfaction and academic engagement.
- IV. To provide recommendations for HEIs on optimizing digital communication channels in hybrid or fully online settings.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Gen Z and Digital Communication Behaviour

Gen Z is typically defined as individuals born from 1997 to 2012. Since early childhood, they have been immersed in high-speed internet, smartphones, streaming services, and social media, making them the first cohort to have been entirely raised in the digital era. Consequently, they are regarded as authentic digital natives, exhibiting an innate proficiency with technology that fundamentally influences their communication, learning, and socialization (Prensky, 2010; Schroth, 2019). In return, they prioritize immediacy, interactivity, and visual involvement in communication, setting them apart from previous cohorts like Millennials or Generation X.

Digital communication among Gen Z is defined by a desire for brevity, speed, and multimedia-enhanced exchanges. Social platforms like Instagram, TikTok, Telegram, and WhatsApp serve not only as

entertainment mediums but also as vital avenues for Gen Z's daily contacts, particularly those in educational contexts (Turner, 2015; Mohr & Mohr, 2017). Visual elements, including emojis, stickers, GIFs, and brief movies, are frequently preferred over text-dense formats. This visual-centric method of communication embodies the generation's cognitive preference for dynamic and immersive digital experiences. They highly value asynchronous resources, like voice notes and learning management system forums, which enable them to interact with content and instructors at their convenience, demonstrating a preference for flexibility and autonomy (Chicca & Shellenbarger, 2018). However, Gen Z conflates official and informal communication in educational settings by employing the same techniques for academic collaboration as they do in their social interactions. As a result, they regard circumventing institutional means such as email or LMS as overly formal or sluggish (Greenhow & Lewin, 2016).

Seemiller and Grace (2016) discovered that Gen Z students anticipate regular, timely feedback and prioritize direct communication with instructors via digital media. They are less likely to wait for office hours or reply to emails when instant messaging provides more immediate interaction. This practice indicates that Gen Z values convenience and quickness more than formality, which has considerable consequences for communication between students and lecturers. Moreover, Gen Z's communication patterns are shaped by a demand for customization and significance. They are more inclined to interact with communications that appear customized and participative, as opposed to passive or generic (Oh & Reeves, 2014). Their engagement with interactive features on platforms like Instagram polls and YouTube comments demonstrates their expectation of meaningful contributions. Accordingly, fostering collaborative communication between educators and Gen Z students is more likely to establish strong connections. This circumstance highlights the importance of clear digital communication protocols in order to maintain academic professionalism in conducting Gen Z's communication activities. Understanding how Gen Z communicates is key to keeping them engaged and helping them succeed academically.

According to Bao (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated reliance on digital communication tools in education, accelerating the adoption of virtual classrooms, remote cooperation, and online consultations. This transition was rather seamless for Gen Z owing to their prior acquaintance with digital tools. This generation is known for its preference for instant responses, rich visuals, interactive tools, and ease in switching between platforms. Gen Z often uses multiple apps at once and leans toward casual, real-time conversations. For schools to connect effectively,

they need to adapt their communication styles to match Gen Z's tech-savviness while also encouraging deeper, more thoughtful academic discussions. However, the omnipresence of digital instruments also poses disadvantages. Gen Z's preference for informal communication styles sometimes might lead to misunderstandings pertaining to academic boundaries and professionalism. They might interact with their lecturers through social media using inappropriate and informal language (Greenhow & Lewin, 2016).

2.2 Communication in Post-COVID Educational Settings

The COVID-19 pandemic brought major changes to how education works around the world. To keep learning going, schools and universities had to quickly switch from face-to-face classes to online teaching. Tools like Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Meet, and Google Classroom became essential during this shift (Dhawan, 2020). While these platforms helped make the transition possible, they also introduced new problems, especially with how well people could communicate, stay engaged, and feel connected in a virtual classroom. The shift to online learning during the pandemic brought both advantages and challenges. On the positive side, digital tools allowed educators to continue teaching through live virtual classes, enabled students to collaborate in real time, and offered access to course materials from almost anywhere. These platforms also made it easier to invite guest speakers from different parts of the world and encouraged group work across locations (Rapanta et al., 2020). However, the quick move to emergency remote teaching (ERT) also exposed some gaps. Many schools weren't fully prepared with teaching strategies or communication plans, which became especially noticeable when dealing with Gen Z students.

Unlike in-person classes, where people can read someone's body language or pick up on tone and gestures, online sessions sometimes felt flat or impersonal. According to Adedoyin and Soykan (2020), in bigger virtual classes, students often kept their cameras and microphones off, which made it harder for lecturers to know whether students were following along or needed help. The absence of non-verbal cues, such as eye contact, nodding, or facial expression, substantially impeded spontaneous communication between lecturers and students. The absence of informal communication opportunities, such as casual conversations prior to class, complicated the process of relationship-building and trust establishment. This problem was especially pronounced for first-year students or those commencing university during the pandemic. In the absence of informal interaction possibilities, numerous students experienced feelings of disconnection, isolation, and disengagement from their academic communities (Garris & Fleck, 2022). From an educational perspective, it is evident that communication in post-COVID learning environments

must be deliberate, multifaceted, and attuned to varied student requirements. Online education is not merely a duplication of traditional classroom teaching; it necessitates a re-evaluation of the methods, timing, and rationale behind our communication. Synchronous video lectures facilitate real-time participation, whereas asynchronous resources such as discussion boards, recorded videos, and voice notes provide flexibility and mitigate screen fatigue. Hybrid methodologies that integrate synchronous and asynchronous communication are becoming recognized as effective solutions for tackling access and engagement challenges (Huang et al., 2022b).

2.4 Gaps in Research

Prior research has examined online learning technologies. However, a few concentrated on specific communication methods used by Gen Z and their effects on interpersonal ties with lecturers. Although extensive research has been conducted on online learning technology and student involvement, limited studies have explored the communication preferences of Generation Z from a theoretical perspective. This is because empirical research is required to merge Gen Z's digital behaviour with communication theory to enhance instructional practice and institutional policy.

The media richness theory (MRT) can be used to evaluate the impact of various tools on interpersonal interaction and happiness in post-pandemic academic environments. However, the use of MRT to examine Gen Z's communication behaviors in educational settings, particularly in the post-COVID hybrid learning environment, has not been explored. This study examines how Gen Z students choose and evaluate the communication tools they use, especially when interacting with their lecturers. It aims to understand which platforms they see as "rich" (good for detailed, personal communication) and "lean" (better for simple, quick messages). The goal is to find out how these preferences affect the communication between students and lecturers.

2.5 Theoretical Framework: Media Richness Theory (MRT)

MRT, introduced by Daft and Lengel (1986), helps explain how effective different communication tools are in handling complex information. According to the theory, a "rich" medium allows for more non-verbal cues, quick feedback, natural conversation, and personalized communication, which makes it easier to clear up confusion or uncertainty. On the other hand, "lean" media lack these features and are better suited for simple, routine messages.

2.5.1 Key Dimensions of Media Richness

MRT offers a helpful way to think about how well different communication tools work, especially when the message is complex or emotional. According to the

theory, some forms of communication are “richer” than others because they allow for features that can avoid misunderstandings and build stronger connections, such as quick responses, body language, tone of voice, natural conversation, and a personal touch. Face-to-face conversation is considered the richest form of communication because it includes features that allow people to see someone’s expressions, hear their tone, and respond right away. Therefore, video calls on platforms like Zoom or Microsoft Teams are close to face-to-face conversations, as they offer visual and audio cues, quick feedback, and fairly natural interaction. Phone calls are a bit less rich since they lack visual elements. Meanwhile, text-based tools like email or LMS messages are the least rich. These lean tools are fine for short, simple updates but not ideal for more personal or sensitive communication (Daft & Lengel, 1986; Trevino et al., 1987). This theory is especially useful to explain how students and lecturers communicate in post-COVID education. Now that most communication happens online, choosing the right tools is important.

2.5.2 Application in Educational Contexts

Recent studies continue to affirm that communication media differ in their capacity to convey complex and emotionally nuanced information and that aligning media choice with message demands can enhance understanding, engagement, and relational rapport in education (Rapanta et al., 2020; Huang et al., 2022b). Rich media are suitable for ambiguous and sensitive messages that contain multiple cues, real-time feedback, and personal focus. For example, the use of a synchronous platform such as Zoom to provide detailed feedback on a final-year project allows lecturers to convey tone, facial expressions, and clarification in real time, reducing potential misinterpretations and reinforcing rapport. In contrast, sending the same feedback, especially when addressing performance issues, via email may lead to perceived detachment or ambiguity. Similarly, class announcements sent as WhatsApp voice notes can convey enthusiasm and urgency, whereas identical announcements on an LMS may feel less engaging.

In Malaysia, infrastructural and policy considerations further shape media choice. Students in urban settings with stable internet may favor live video discussions for complex topics. In contrast, those in rural areas facing unstable connectivity may prefer asynchronous but still rich media, such as recorded video feedback or annotated slides. Additionally, institutional restrictions on informal platforms such as WhatsApp or Telegram can reduce opportunities for immediate, relational communication.

This study applies these principles by mapping communication tools along a richness continuum, from rich media (video conferencing) to lean media

(text messages, LMS announcements), and evaluating how their use aligns with both lecturer intentions and student expectations. Analyzing these alignments and mismatches can reveal how media choice influences Gen Z’s communication satisfaction, engagement, and the development of academic rapport in post-pandemic Malaysian HEIs.

2.5.3 Justification for Using MRT in This Study

MRT offers powerful insights into how different digital tools can either support or weaken educational engagement. It helps educators and researchers evaluate communication platforms by looking at how well they deal with complex topics and minimize confusion. According to Daft and Lengel (1986), a medium is considered rich if it allows for quick feedback, includes multiple cues (like tone of voice or body language), supports natural and expressive language, and feels personal.

The current study uses MRT to examine how common platforms like Zoom, WhatsApp, institutional emails, and LMS tools support different types of communications. For example, Zoom may be more effective for emotional support or detailed academic discussions, while email might be more suited to straightforward administrative messages. By categorizing these tools based on their communication strengths, educators can better match the platform to the message, which leads to clearer, more engaging interactions with students.

Secondly, MRT bridges the gap between the increasing use of digital tools and the core principles of interpersonal communication. While much research looks at the functionality of technology in education, fewer studies focus on how these tools shape personal connections, such as student motivation, engagement, and the sense of instructor presence. MRT provides a balanced framework that looks not only at how messages are delivered but also at how they feel. This is especially relevant for Gen Z students, who value communication that is both efficient and emotionally meaningful.

Thirdly, MRT supports analysis at both the personal and institutional levels. This study uses richness to explain lecturers’ choice of communication tools and understand how Gen Z students interpret and respond to those choices. Misalignment between what lecturers use and what students prefer can cause confusion or disengagement. Institutional policies, like requiring all communication to go through LMS or email, can also be assessed using MRT to see if they truly meet student needs.

By grounding this research in MRT, the study contributes both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, it extends MRT to a Gen Z learning environment and adds to the conversation about media selection and

communication in education. Practically, it offers clear recommendations for educators and institutions aiming to improve how they engage students, especially in digital or hybrid classrooms. MRT in this study is not just an academic theory; it becomes a tool for real-world improvements in communication that reflect both evidence and student experience.

As illustrated in **Figure 1**, MRT forms the central framework of this study, linking two key dimensions: interpersonal communication and communication activities. This framework emphasizes that the richness of different media influences not only the relational quality of lecturer–student interactions but also the effectiveness of digital communication practices in educational settings.

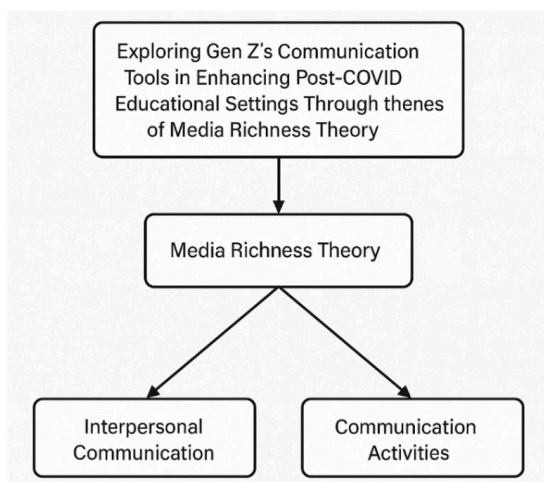


Figure 1: Conceptual framework linking Media Richness Theory with interpersonal communication and communication activities in post-COVID educational settings.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design using focus group discussions (FGDs) to explore Gen Z students' communication tool preferences and perceptions within the framework of MRT. As this is a concept paper, the methodological description reflects the intended design for future empirical data collection, rather than reporting completed findings.

3.1 Sampling Strategy

Participants will be purposefully selected from undergraduate programs at Universiti Poly-Tech Malaysia (UPTM), Kuala Lumpur, to ensure diversity in gender, program of study, socioeconomic background, and geographical origin (urban versus rural). The planned sample ranges between 24 and 30 students. They will be divided into four focus groups of six to eight participants each. Inclusion criteria include: (i) belonging to Gen Z (born 1997–2012), (ii) currently enroll at UPTM, and (iii) experience in hybrid or online learning during or after the COVID-19 pandemic. Students who

do not meet these criteria will be excluded.

3.2 Focus Group Procedures

Each FGD will be conducted via video conferencing platforms (e.g., Zoom or Microsoft Teams) to accommodate both on-campus and remote participants. Sessions will last approximately 60 to 90 minutes and be moderated by the researcher, using a semi-structured discussion guide aligned with the research objectives. Topics will include (i) preferred communication tools for academic interactions with lecturers, (ii) perceived richness or limitations of each tool and (iii) challenges and successes in lecturer–student communication post-COVID. Following consent, the audio- and video-recordings are made for transcription and analysis.

3.3 Data Analysis

Data will be analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis follows Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: (i) familiarization, (ii) coding, (iii) theme development, (iv) theme review, (v) theme definition, and (vi) reporting. Coding will be conducted manually, with the potential use of qualitative analysis software such as NVivo to manage and organize data. Themes will be developed with reference to MRT, classifying communication tools as "rich" or "lean" and examining their perceived effectiveness in different interaction contexts.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval will be sought from the UPTM Research Ethics Committee prior to data collection. Participants will be provided with an information sheet and informed consent form detailing the study's purpose, voluntary participation, confidentiality measures, and right to withdraw without penalty. All data will be anonymized, and recordings will be stored securely on password-protected devices accessible only to the research team.

4. CONCLUSION

Gen Z is entirely immersed in digital technology from an early age, thereby demonstrating unique communication habits that markedly diverge from those of preceding student cohorts. Comprehending how Gen Z students utilize and assess communication tools, especially in their interactions with lecturers, is crucial for fostering inclusive, responsive, and effective academic settings. Therefore, this study is theoretically and practically relevant, as it contextualizes MRT within the evolving communication behaviors of Gen Z in post-pandemic educational environments. This research theoretically broadens the use of MRT by contextualizing it inside a modern, digitally saturated educational environment influenced by the COVID-19 epidemic. Although MRT has been extensively utilized in organizational and administrative settings, its

application in education, particularly concerning Gen Z learners, is yet to be thoroughly examined.

This study enhances the literature by illustrating how MRT may be utilized to assess communication media not only on technical functionality but also on the emotional, social, and pedagogical requirements of learners. It connects interpersonal communication theory with educational practice, providing a paradigm that accounts for the complexity of media and the aspirations of a technologically proficient generation. In addition, the study offers relevant and practical insights for educators, institutional leaders, and instructional designers. The results can guide the formulation of communication strategies that correspond with Gen Z's demands for immediacy, personalization, and visual engagement. Furthermore, the findings may inform institutional policies and digital infrastructure strategies, including decisions on the selection or prioritization of platforms for various communication kinds (e.g., feedback, academic assistance, administrative notifications).

This research has ramifications for the professional development of educators. The study underscores the discrepancy between the communication preferences of lecturers and Gen Z students, underlining the necessity for digital communication training that enables lecturers to adjust to the changing requirements of their students while maintaining academic integrity and bounds. This study enhances student engagement, satisfaction, and retention in hybrid and online learning environments, ensuring that communication is a relational, responsive, and pedagogically effective element of post-pandemic education.

4.1 Limitations

As a concept paper, this study does not present empirical findings but instead outlines the theoretical and methodological framework for investigating Gen Z's communication preferences in post-COVID Malaysian HEIs. While this provides a focused discussion of relevant literature and research design, the practical implications remain to be validated through empirical data collection and analysis.

First, the study's reliance on a single institutional context may limit the generalizability of its insights to other universities with different student demographics, technological infrastructures, or communication cultures. Second, although the proposed purposive sampling strategy is designed to capture diversity within Gen Z, qualitative approaches are inherently context-specific and may not reflect the full spectrum of communication behaviors across Malaysia.

Third, self-reported data from focus groups are subject to potential biases, such as social desirability or selective

recall, which may affect the accuracy of reported experiences. Finally, institutional policies, cultural norms, and infrastructural disparities, such as unequal internet access between urban and rural areas, may shape both the choice of communication tools and students' perceptions of their effectiveness, thus limiting the broader applicability of MRT.

Future research should therefore adopt multi-institutional sampling, triangulate focus group data with complementary sources such as classroom observations or digital communication records, and consider longitudinal designs to capture how Gen Z's communication preferences evolve as post-pandemic educational practices mature.

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