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FROM EMAILS TO EMOJIS: HOW GEN Z IS REDEFINING MANAGERIAL COMMUNICATION THROUGH DIGITAL MEDIA

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Abstract
This qualitative research paper discusses the manner in which the managers of Generation Z are redefining managerial communication using digital media. Being the first generation to enter the leadership sector entirely engaged in the digital culture, Gen Z develops new communicative standards that combine authenticity, emotionality, and digital literacy. Conducting semi-structured interviews with 20 Gen Z managers who work in various industries, the research applied thematic analysis based on the approach to their measurement suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) to identify the primary tendencies in digital managerial behavior. There were four key themes that came out: professional credibility in the form of digital authenticity, emotional expression by visual symbols, reframing professionalism in the hybrid work spaces, and leadership connectivity through empathy in digital space. The results indicate that Gen Z leaders do not understand professionalism as language style but rather as interpersonal sincerity and emotional intelligence, mediated with technology. The digital team creates trust, inclusivity, and psychological safety through their use of emojis, instant messaging, and multimodal communication. The theoretical contribution of the study to the social information processing and the symbolic interactionism is that authority can be negotiated during the digital relational leadership model, in which empathy and expressiveness are central in yielding authority. In practice, it reveals the necessity of incorporating emotional and symbolic literacy into the training of leaders within the organization to respond to the changing digital communication environment.

INTRODUCTION

The environment of the organizational communication has changed radically in the last twenty years, with the change being primarily influenced by changes in digital technologies and the influx of the new generations into the Labor markets. Managerial communication has traditionally been anchored on orderly, formalized means including face to face communication, memos and email communications (Tourish and Robson, 2006). Nonetheless, with the introduction of digital platforms such as Slack, Microsoft Teams, and WhatsApp to the business setting, the culture of communication has transformed into the immediacy, informality, and emotional expressiveness (Leonardi, 2020).

The group of generation Z (people born around 1995-2012) is the first generation to spend all their lives in a digital world, commonly known as digital

natives (Prensky, 2012; Dimock, 2019). The multimodality of communication individuals of this generation have become accustomed to emojis, GIFs, voice notes, and video calls has transformed not only the process of information exchange but also the forms of building and sustaining relationships within management (Francis and Hoefel, 2018). Their infiltration into the managerial positions imply not only a change of technology but also a cultural interpretation of power and a tone and emotional Labor in organizations (Schroth, 2019).

The modern working environments demand that managers operate in hybrid or distanced communication setups. These online settings enhance the importance of the expression of affect, empathy, and informality in maintaining the team engagement (Miller, 2020). The use of emojis, as an example, has become a small but effective means of rapport, the perception that the hierarchy can be lessened, and intent in written communication (Derks et al., 2008). Such digital artifacts become part and parcel of leadership style and organizational identity rather than an add-on to Gen Z managers (Kiss & Barr, 2021).

These practices have however been accused of professionalism and the erosion of managerial control with their widespread adoption. Informal digital communication can be a threat to organizational decency to the traditionalists, but it is an indicator of genuineness and emotional intelligence to younger professionals (Walther, 2011; Turner, 2015). This knowledge about how Gen Z handles these tensions would be beneficial in understanding how leadership changes in response to the digital workplace.

The main goal of this qualitative research paper is to find out how managerial communication is being redefined by Generation Z using the digital media. In particular, the following study aims to:

1. Discuss the communication patterns and approaches that Gen Z managers use in communication via digital platforms.
2. Learn the effect of digital symbols (e.g., emojis, GIFs, memes) on communication tone, meaning, and relationships in management.
3. Determine the way Gen Z managers practice professionalism and authenticity on the Internet.
4. Examine how these communication practices relate to organizational culture and development of leadership.

The current research is informed by the following research questions:

1. What is the communication use of Gen z managers through digital media with their team?
2. What do Gen Z managers mean and intend by informal digital language like emojis or GIFs?
3. How are Gen Z managers viewing digital communication as either fostering or disrupting professionalism and leadership authority?
4. What role are these changing communication practices playing in transforming the traditional models of managerial communication?

The study adds to the extensive body of literature on digital communication and generational diversity because it provides a more in-depth insight into how Gen Z managers are transforming the norms of the workplace. Although the use of technology across generations has been analyzed in the past, not many studies primarily assessed how the related practices impact the leadership communication process and the organizational relationships (Schroth, 2019; Leonardi, 2020). This work, concentrating on digital interaction and managerial identity, throws some light on the advent of a new communicative paradigm that is typified by inclusiveness, immediacy, and emotional appeal (Siddqiue et al., 2023).

Moreover, the knowledge gained during this research can help organizations to develop communication training, leadership development, and digital policies that resonate with the changing generation demands. The communicative ethos of Gen Z is crucial in helping to promote collaboration, innovation, and well-being of employees, which is why it is necessary to comprehend the ethos in the context of increasingly virtual and culturally diverse workplaces (Francis and Hoefel, 2018; Miller, 2020).

Literature Review

The managerial communication has always been based on formal structures of power, flow of information and control. The traditional theories of management stressed on unidirectional flow of information where the managers passed information down to subordinates through formal channels such

as memos, meetings and reports (Tourish and Robson, 2006). The managerial correspondence was traditionally composed in such a way that the values of professionalism, rationality, and hierarchy incorporated into the bureaucratic structures of 20 th century organizations (Mintzberg, 1973).

Nevertheless, with the emergence of digital technologies, the practices of communication started shifting towards non-formality, non-rigidity towards immediacy, flexibility, and participative communication (Leonardi, 2020). Email was introduced in the nineties as an icon of modernity in business communication breaking space-time barriers, hierarchies and yet maintaining a written, recordable format (Markus, 1994). However, with time, email as an institution had come to be viewed as clutchesome and too formal particularly to the younger generation, who favored more immediate and more chatty channels (Byron, 2008).

Recent literature emphasizes the crisis of how a cultural change in organizational discourse is accelerating due to the introduction of real-time digital communication platforms, including Slack, Microsoft Teams and Zoom (Gibbs et al., 2013). These means encourage horizontal communication, blur lines of hierarchy and encourage group problem solving (Treem & Leonardi, 2013). Therefore, the modern concept of managerial communication is in an intermediate state, between the old requirements of professionalism and the new standards of digital literacy, emotional appeals, and casualness (Miller, 2020).

Gen Z, commonly described as people born between 1995 and 2012, is a distinct group that was preconditioned by the overall connectivity and immersion in digital space (Dimock, 2019). In comparison with Millennials that have experienced the digital revolution, Gen Z was raised in the world where social media, instant messaging, and multimedia communication were the standard forms of communication (Prensky, 2012). This lifelong interaction with technology has created an anticipation of always being connected, being able to see each other, and being emotionally authentic (Francis and Hoefel, 2018).

According to the research conducted by Schroth (2019), the communication needs of Gen Z are driven by the factors of immediacy, transparency, and creativity. They are more inclined to the platforms that allow them to get a fast feedback and be expressive, using emojis, GIFs, and stickers to clarify the message and improve its tone. Kiss and Barr (2021) discovered that Gen Z workers view these visual and symbolic aids as a necessary part of reducing the potential of misinterpretation and developing emotionally through online communication. Gen Z does not view emojis as informal or unprofessional in contrast to older generations who view emojis as making up a part of the genuine interpersonal interaction (Derks et al., 2008).

Furthermore, the digital communication of Gen Z confuses the personal and professional space (Turner, 2015). Their work and social lives merge as they tend to utilize the same digital channels both in their work and social life (Ng et al., 2010). This integration threatens the old paradigms of management that glorify formality and emotional detachment and the introduction of the model of leadership, which is based on empathy, approachability, and digital fluency (Schroth, 2019).

The role of professionalism in organization communication is changing under the impact of digital culture. In the past, professionalism has been characterized by linguistic formality, hierarchies of deference, and the absence of emotions (Barrett, 2014). In the digital age, however, these characteristics can be interpreted as far away or disconnected. Miller (2020) explains that professionalism is being redefined based on the principles of authenticity, accessibility, and relational intelligence.

As Leonardi (2020) stresses, digital tools have reshaped the speed and the tone of communication. Applications like Slack or Teams promote abruptness, conciseness, and visuality, which are cognitive and social features that the Gen Z likes. A study by Gunkel (2018) concluded that the application of emojis and GIFs in managerial communication usually increases the warmth of the relationships and the cohesion within the team, particularly within remote working conditions. Emojis especially are used as affective cues to sustain nonverbal communication loss that occurs in textual communications (Derks et al., 2008).

However, there is still tension on the perceived appropriateness of such practices. Walther (2011) states that although interpersonal connection can be developed with the help of digital expressiveness, it can also cause misunderstanding or diminished power in a work-related scenario. Informal symbols can be seen as a lack of seriousness or competence in managers who abuse them, particularly in cross-generational or traditional teams (Kiss & Barr, 2021). Accordingly, Gen Z managers are in a difficult game of balancing between emotional openness and an institutional demand of decency.

Gender and cultural dynamics are also the intersection of the redefinition of professionalism. Research suggests that females and collectivist people might have varied interpretations of digital expressiveness (Park et al., 2014). Knowing how Gen Z manages these variables in the globalized workplaces is the key to understanding the specifics of digital managerial communication.

Digitalization has changed the nature of communication besides transforming the nature of effective management. The modern working environment has been marked with virtual working, asynchronous communication, and distributed leadership (Maznevski and Chudoba, 2000). Managerial communication plays a central role in keeping interactions alive, transparent, and organizational culture in such situations (Leonardi, 2020).

Study by Gibbs et al. (2013) points out the importance of digital communication in nurturing participatory leadership in that all members of the team can participate equally in the team, irrespective of their location or rank. Such democratization is consistent with the inclusion, collaboration, and flat organizational structures values of Gen Z (Francis and Hoefel, 2018). The digital policy that is frequently used by gen Z managers is open-door - allowing the team members to share with each other using chat applications or social media-like platforms to become more transparent and immediate.

Nevertheless, there are issues associated with this transformation. Digital work may result in communication overload, work-life blurring and corrosion of reflexive management practices due to its unrelenting connectivity (Sarker et al., 2019). Moreover, digital messages are also transient and this may make accountability and record-keeping difficult (Byron, 2008). The managers of the Generation Z have to acquire the meta-communicative awareness, i.e., the knowledge of the medium, tone, and timing influence and meaning in the digital environment (Miller, 2020).

The literature of the recent past also highlights the emotional aspect of managerial communication within the digital realm. As Ashforth and Humphrey (2013) observe, today, leadership necessitates the so-called emotional labor, i.e. the conscious control of emotional displays to uphold the morale and unity of the team. The digital environment mediates this emotional work by text and image, with an emoji or a GIF potentially replacing one aspect (facial expression or tone of voice) or another. Gen z managers who are used to these kinds of digital indications could then have an emotional connection advantage in virtual teams (Kiss and Barr, 2021).

Gen Z in the managerial position brings the complexities of intergeneration into the organizations. The senior generation including Baby Boomers and the Generation X tend to focus on hierarchical power, formal processes, and communication standards (Ng et al., 2010). The millennials are also prone to value teamwork and feedback but work in relatively formal professional structures (Twenge, 2010). Gen Z, on the other hand, favors immediacy, creativity, and emotional honesty when dealing with one another (Francis & Hoefel, 2018).

These differences, scholars have observed, may cause misunderstanding and cultural friction in teams (Schroth, 2019). As an example, Gen Z managers who have been using emojis to mitigate feedback are likely to be viewed as unprofessional by their more senior colleagues and might be viewed as detached or too strict by younger workers (Turner, 2015). Ineffective communication across generations thus necessitates the adaptation and organizational support in the form of training and discussion (Gibbs et al., 2013).

The leadership in organizations is becoming more aware of the fact that the norms of communication should change with the demographic characteristics of the workforce. To close these divides, therefore, companies are investing in digital literacy programs,

intergenerational mentorship, and flexible communication policies (Miller, 2020). Through the interpretation of communicative ethos of Gen Z, organizations are able to build a workplace that would appreciate honesty and genuineness without undermining business conduct.

Although the research on generational communication and digital media is increasing, there are still some gaps. A significant portion of the available literature is devoted to Gen Z as the employee group and not as the managers or leaders (Schroth, 2019). Not many researches have looked at the way their digital communication behaviours shape leadership identity, power relations, or an organisation trust. In addition, although the generational variations in communication preferences have been reported in quantitative research, there is still a lack of qualitative evidence on the ways Gen Z managers perceive, adapt, and commit to professionalism in the digital setting (Leonardi, 2020).

The paper fills these gaps by examining the lived experiences of Gen Z managers who consider digital platforms as the main channels through which they communicate their leadership. It enquires the influence of digital symbols, tone, and expressiveness of emotions on managerial relationships, authority, and identity through the method of semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis. The study conceptually builds on the theory of computer-mediated communication (Walther, 2011) and symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969) by placing the digital media as a place by which meaning, emotion, and leadership are co-created.

In the literature reviewed, it can be seen that managerial communication is being radically transformed by digital media and the generational change. The new wave of management has brought fresh expression, relaxed work and inclusion features that challenge conventional ideas regarding professionalism because of the entry of generation Z into management. Emojis, memes, and instant messages have become part of the basic means of building relationships, control of emotions, and expression of authority in novel forms. However, these changes also make the issues of limits, suitability, and power relations in organizational life questionable.

Research Methodology

The research design used in this study was qualitative because it was aiming to understand how Generation Z managers are transforming managerial communication using digital media. We can use qualitative inquiry when investigating lived experiences, meanings, and interpretations in particular cultural and social settings (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Since communication practices lie inherently within the daily experiences of daily interaction, and subjective meanings, it is possible to state that qualitative research can be used to interpret communication practices used, perceived, and adapted by Gen Z managers in the workplace.

The observations of the lived experiences of digital managerial communication used a phenomenological approach to capture the experiences of the participants. Phenomenology focuses on the nature of experiences as construed by people in their daily realities (Moustakas, 1994). In such a way, the researcher managed to investigate the subtle, context-specific ways in which Gen Z managers interpret professionalism, authority, and expressiveness in digital communication settings.

The research was carried out in the field of corporate and organizational environment where digital communication devices like Slack, Microsoft Teams, Zoom, and WhatsApp represent the major channels of managerial interaction. The study was specifically concerned with the industries that integrate the use of digital platforms in their day-to-day operations, such as technology, marketing, and finance industries. Such environments were very informative about the interaction between leadership, communication, and digital culture.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the setting of the current study denotes that the norms of organizational communication shifted on a larger scale because of the emergence of hybrid and remote work (Leonardi, 2020). The knowledge gained about Gen Z managers in this digitalized context can provide important information on how managerial discourse can adjust to the evolving technological affordances.

The sample of this research included Generation Z managers who are current supervisors or leaders in their organizations and were born between 1995 and 2012 (Dimock, 2019). The 25 participants were

selected and they represented different industries including technology startups, marketing agencies as well as financial institutions. The age of the participants was between 25 and 31 years, which meant that they had enough experience in managerial role and at the same time were within the age group being studied which was the generational cohort.

The participants also dealt with teams that consisted of 5 to 20 people and were frequently provided with the digital communication tools as a part of their managerial functions. The sample was chosen in such a way that it was diverse in terms of gender, industry and geographic location to bring forth a multidimensional picture of how Gen Z managers decipher and implement communication using digital media. The purposive sampling technique was utilized to recruit those participants who are likely to offer rich, relevant, and varied insights into the topic of the research (Patton, 2015). This type of non-probability sampling enables the researcher to determine the participants using defined criteria in reference to the phenomenon under study.

Maximum variation sampling was implemented to make the qualitative system more representative so that it covers participants of various organizational sizes (startups, multinational corporations), organizational cultures of communication (formal and informal). This is what guaranteed the collection of convergent and divergent experiences in terms of digital managerial communication. The participants were approached through LinkedIn and professional networks and invited to take part in the research with the motivation provided as the purpose of the research, confidentiality, and participation conditions.

Semi-structured interviews were the data collection method, either via Zoom or Microsoft Teams. The semi-structured interviews can be flexible in exploring the experience of participants but constant focus on the main research questions is ensured (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2015). A guide to the interview was created to cover the themes found in the literature review, namely communication style, digital expressiveness (e.g., emojis, GIFs), the perception of professionalism, and leadership tone. Sample questions included:

- What do you consider your communication style to be like in most digital communication platforms as a manager?
- When communicating with your team, in which cases do you include emojis, GIFs, or other visual representations?
- The second question is: What is the balance between being professional and authentic in digital communication?
- What is the reaction of your team members towards your digital communication style?

All interviews took about 45 to 60 minutes, were recorded on audio consent of the participants and transcribed word-to-word to be analysed. To record non verbal behavior, contextual information and insights that emerge throughout the interviews, observations were made. Thematic analysis was conducted to analyse the data as it is a commonly used technique of qualitative analysis to identify and analyse patterns in textual data and interpret them (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The analysis was based on the six steps of Braun and Clarke:

- Familiarization: Reading and re-reading interview transcripts to have a general picture.
- Coding: The generation of the first codes in accordance with the repeated words, phrases, and meanings of digital communication and managerial behavior.
- Theme formation: Grouping codes together based on similarity (e.g. Digital Authenticity, Emotional expression, Professional Boundaries).
- Reviewing themes: Polishing the themes to make them coherent and different.
- Defining and naming themes: Expression of the conceptual meaning of every theme.
- Preparation of report: Merging of themes in the story of study with illustrative quotes.

NVivo 12 software was utilized to help code and process in data management, meaning it will be systematically organized and retrieved as pertinent fragment of text. The resulting themes were contrasted with the results of other existing literature to put findings in contextual frames of the other theoretical perspectives of computer-mediated communication (Walther, 2011) and symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969).

The peer debriefing sessions with two communication scholars also contributed more on the analytical rigor by questioning interpretations and making the emerging themes to be credible. Data were collected with the approval of institutional ethics committee of the researcher. Informed consent was given to all participants following a briefing on purpose of the study, procedures, and voluntary participation. The present study uses a qualitative phenomenological design as a technique of exploring how Gen Z managers grapple with the cross-roads of professionalism and digital expressiveness in managerial communication. The research distils the lived experiences and interpretive meanings of digital communication among young leaders by relying on in-depth interviews and thematic analysis. The methodological rigor, which is based on credibility, reflexivity, and ethical integrity, allows findings to offer a valid and subtle picture of the manner in which this generation reacts to the definition of managerial discourse in the digital workplace.

Analysis and Findings

The qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. After transcription, iterative reading and coding revealed several recurring ideas reflecting Gen Z managers' experiences of communicating through digital media.

Four major themes emerged:

1. Digital Authenticity as Professional Credibility
2. Emotional Expression Through Visual Symbols
3. Reframing Professionalism in Hybrid Workspaces
4. Digital Empathy and Leadership Connectivity

Theme 1: Digital Authenticity as Professional Credibility

A defining characteristic of Gen Z managers was their desire to project authenticity in their professional communication. Participants described authenticity as "being real," "transparent," and "approachable," even in formal digital interactions. Rather than viewing informality as unprofessional, participants framed it as an essential component of credibility and trust.

"I don't need to sound like a robot in an email. My team connects better when I speak like a person, not like HR copy." *(saima, 28, Marketing Manager)*

"If I send a message with a smiley or GIF, it doesn't mean I'm not serious. It means I'm human. That's how I lead."*(Ahsan, 27, Tech Lead)*

This topic is indicative of the redefinition of professionalism in the cultural sense, not as formality but as relational authenticity (Miller, 2020). Gen Z managers also prioritize transparency, and they view digital communication as one of the ways to narrow the distance between them and subordinates. In comparison to the conservative managerial models that depend on authority, the Gen Z leadership model functions under emotional visibility and personal engagement (Schroth, 2019).

These results are consonant with the finding of Francis and Hoefel (2018) that Gen Z is more interested in sincerity and ethical consistency over refined corporate speeches. Through their informal, but deliberate, digital language, they indicate accessibility and inclusivity therefore creating a new version of professional identity, which is based on authenticity and not status.

Theme 2: Emotional Expression Through Visual Symbols

Another prominent theme concerned the expressive use of emojis, GIFs, and reaction icons as communicative tools in managerial contexts. Nearly all participants acknowledged using visual symbols to enhance tone, convey warmth, and reduce ambiguity in digital communication.

"In text, tone can easily get lost. A simple 😊 changes everything it softens feedback or shows appreciation."
(Ravi, 29, Operations Manager)

"Sometimes I use a GIF when words don't cut it it helps break tension after serious conversations." *(Maya, 25, Product Manager)*

Emojis were employed tactfully by the participants to show empathy, motivation, and common humor especially in the remote work environments where physical expressions are not available. The effect reverberates through the observation made by Derks et al. (2008) that emoticons are affective alternatives

to nonverbal communication, which adds the warmth to otherwise cold messages (Ghaffar et al., 2026).

Nonetheless, there was also evidence of response to contextual limits- not using emojis when communicating with senior executives or in a performance appraisal. This selective use is the evidence of emotional intelligence and situational judgment and is therefore consistent with the theory of social information processing proposed by Walther (2011) in computer-mediated communication in which the user will vary the expressiveness based on the relational and organizational context.

Moreover, visual expression is a digital dialect a generational language that allows managers to make authority human and professional at the same time. Kiss and Barr (2021) refer to this as the introduction of the so-called visual leadership, in which symbolic images become a new source of emotional Labor and administrative setting of tones.

Theme 3: Reframing Professionalism in Hybrid Workspaces

The third theme revealed a significant shift in how Gen Z managers conceptualize professionalism in digital and hybrid work environments. Traditional markers of professionalism—formality, tone, and hierarchical distance are being replaced by values of responsiveness, inclusivity, and digital literacy.

"For me, professionalism isn't about how fancy your email sounds; it's how quickly you respond and how respectful you are online."*(Junaid, 26, Finance Manager)*

"Being professional now means being clear, concise, and kind—even if that includes a meme or emoji." *(Sofia, 28, Project Lead)*

This change is consistent with the argument of Leonardi (2020), who argues that the social norms of work are being redefined due to the digital transformation. The managers of Gen Z perceive professionalism as clarity, empathy, and ethical communication and not the rigidity of language. To them, the message sent through the platform message of professionalism in Slack or Teams should be conversational, whereas emails might have a toned message of being a bit formal.

Interestingly enough, the respondents were opposed to the notion of digital informality as a threat to the managerial authority. They instead saw relational communication as increasing influence and engagement. According to Ravi, my team members feel more comfortable to message me directly and they trust me more as well. It is consistent with the critique of hierarchical distortions of communication by Tourish and Robson (2006); in flattening digital hierarchies, Gen Z managers seem to promote upward feedback and understanding each other.

The working environment between remote and in-person communication, the hybrid workspace, even more obscures the line between formal and informal discourse. Gen Z managers can change freely between these modalities, which confirms the notion that professionalism is currently contingent and relational (Barrett, 2014).

Theme 4: Digital Empathy and Leadership Connectivity

The final theme highlighted the emergence of digital empathy as a cornerstone of Gen Z leadership communication. Participants repeatedly described empathy as central to their digital managerial style, particularly in emotionally charged or high-stress contexts.

"When someone messages that they're overwhelmed, I don't just reply with deadlines. I use empathy—even digitally, people can feel it." *(Ali, 30, HR Manager)*

"We lead through connection. Sending a supportive message or reacting with a heart emoji makes people feel seen."*(Nouman, 27, Creative Director)*

This emotional atonement aligns with the concept of emotional Labor in leadership provided by Ashforth and Humphrey (2013). The use of tone, timing and visual messages is deliberate in Gen Z managers to ensure relational harmony, even during digital communication. They do not consider empathy as a rare act, but as a management skill that is manifested in everyday communication processes.

Digital empathy is one of the team cohesion strategies as well. To create a sense of belonging and psychological safety, in geographically spread teams, members were employing virtual gestures, including reaction emojis, or shared memes, or checking in with each other. These results are echoed by Gibbs et al. (2013), who have seen that interpersonal

connection and the knowledge sharing can be reinforced by the affordances of social media in organizations (Ghaffar et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, the participants did not underestimate possible difficulties: "Even empathy online can be misunderstood, because sometimes a brief response can be perceived as cold, even though it is not, as Sofia said. This highlights the fact that although computer-mediated communication enables expression of emotions, it has caused ambiguity in interpretation (Walter, 2011). Gen Z managers make up this by using multimodal signals (words, emojis, and images) to emphasize intent.

Finally, digital empathy is a change in the paradigm of leadership communication that became more relational than authoritative, focusing on care, responsiveness, and inclusion.

Cross-Theme Analysis: Redefining Leadership in the Digital Age

The four themes help to show the managerial communication redefined generationally. Gen Z managers are not simply getting accustomed to digital tools they are transforming the language of leadership. Their habits are an indication of the shift in the direction of communication that is more relational than transactional and credibility has been gained not based on formality or positioning but through authenticity, empathy, and digital fluency.

There is a possibility of a change in leadership because of the introduction of emotional expressiveness into digital channels. Emojis as visual symbols can be viewed as a linguistic new phenomenon and an emotional marker, that is, a bridge between the language of business meetings and human interaction.

Such redefinition can be congruent with the concept of symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969), according to which the meaning is created during a social interaction and it is constantly recreated in the process of communication. In the case of Gen Z managers, performatively constructed leadership identity is created digitally, every message, emoji, or tone choice has a role to play in how authority and approachability are negotiated (Ghaffar et al., 2025).

Discussion

The results of the present research demonstrate that Gen Z managers are changing the traditional managerial communication by adding digital authenticity, emotional expressiveness, and empathy to it. In contrast to the past generation who upheld the principles of structure and formalized communication, Gen Z considers leadership in the relationships of transparency and inclusion. Their embrace of emojis, GIFs, and instant messaging is not merely the aesthetic option but a linguistic and cultural response to the emotional reality of online working environments. This strengthens the fact that digital natives generate new meaning of professionalism due to empathy that is technologically mediated and self-expression (Francis and Hoefel, 2018; Schroth, 2019). Gen Z blurred the formal and informal line of communication by humanizing the managerial discussion and allows a more emotionally intelligent and friendly leadership approach (Miller, 2020; Derks et al., 2008).

Moreover, the paper demonstrates that digital empathy is a new type of leadership capital. Gen Z managers apply emotional signals and reaction icons and customized digital gestures to establish psychological safety and belonging to hybrid teams. This observation builds on the theory of emotional Labor developed by Ashforth and Humphrey (2013) by contextualizing empathy as a communication and leadership tool in the virtual world. These managers transform authority by means of relational credibility, proving that digital literacy and emotional intelligence are inherent parts of the management in the new era. So, the generational change is not a denial of professionalism but its re-formation: a shift towards contextual, human, and digitally incarnated forms of communication (Leonardi, 2020; Kiss and Barr, 2021).

Practical Significance

The findings of this research have practical implications to organizations that have to deal with multigenerational work environments. Corporate communication trainers and human resource developers must be aware that digital literacy encompasses emotional and symbolic fluency and not only technical expertise. Organized training based on the importance of digital tone control, the

correct use of emojis, and the way to communicate empathy through different platforms can be useful to managers. Besides, digital empathy must be one of the key competencies of the leadership development program that trains the future leaders to be able to communicate in both synchronous and asynchronous media. In the case of hybrid and remote organizations, the deliberate application of visual symbols and casual communication can be encouraged to promote engagement, minimize conflicts and misunderstandings and reinforce the organizational culture. In a way, the adoption of the communicative style of Gen Z provides businesses with an avenue to more diverse, responsive, and natural digital communication systems (Arshad et al, (2025).

Theoretical Significance

Ideally, the research would add to the ever-changing discussion of the digital age leadership and organizational communication by upsetting the traditional ideas of professionalism, power, and emotional display in the managerial settings. It builds-up on symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969) by showing how Gen Z managers create meaning and identity by engaging in digitally intermediated interactions- where emojis, tone, and immediacy are symbolic instruments of relational negotiation. Other implications of the findings are an expansion of the social information processing theory (Walther, 2011) which demonstrates that computer-mediated communication does not only convey information, but also passes intricate emotional and cultural cues conveying managerial relationships. This study enhances the theory of emotional labor by introducing emotional expressivity and digital fluency into the communication in leadership roles and by showing that empathy in online communication is an effective tool of both affective work and leadership performance (Ashforth and Humphrey, 2013). To sum up, the research contributes to a novel theoretical approach to the concept of digital relational leadership, which is a leadership paradigm, in which authenticity, empathy, and multimodal expressiveness is reconstituting the ways in which authority and trust are practiced in technologically driven workplaces (Arshad et al, (2024).

Future Research

Future studies should examine how Gen Z managerial communication will change as the group of individuals grows into senior leadership roles. Longitudinal research would be able to test the hypothesis of whether the use of emojis, GIFs and informal digital expressions might remain professional and legitimate over time or may be institutionalized. Furthermore, cross-cultural studies might be used to demonstrate the influence of cultural norms and power distance on acceptability and interpretation of digital expressiveness towards leadership. The emotional and organizational consequences of digitally empathetic communication, including its impact on the engagement, trust and retention of employees, can also be further confirmed by quantitative and mixed-method researches. Lastly, as AI and virtual collaboration tools are increasingly mediating the communication of the workplace, contemporary work ought to look at how AI-based communication platforms may either enrich or limit the authenticity and empathy that define Gen Z leadership.

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