






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 rapid evolution of digital communication tools, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has significantly transformed educational interactions. This study explores the impact of Generation Z's preferred communication tools on interpersonal communication within post-COVID educational settings, with a particular focus on the interactions between lecturers and students. Grounded in Media Richness Theory, this research aims to identify the effectiveness, challenges, and opportunities associated with various digital platforms in enhancing academic communication. Using a qualitative approach, in-depth interviews were conducted with both students and lecturers across diverse academic disciplines to gain nuanced insights into their communication preferences, experiences, and perceived effectiveness. The findings reveal that while Gen Z students appreciate the convenience and immediacy of digital tools, there remain critical gaps in relational communication, emotional connection, and context interpretation. Furthermore, the study highlights the role of media richness in determining communication satisfaction and learning outcomes, emphasizing the need for carefully selecting communication channels based on task complexity and relational goals. These insights provide practical guidance for educators in selecting communication tools that foster deeper, more meaningful connections with their students, ultimately enhancing educational outcomes in the evolving digital landscape.

Keywords: Generation Z, Communication Tools, Post-COVID Education, Media Richness Theory, Interpersonal Communication.

1 Introduction

The COVID-19 epidemic initiated a profound transformation in worldwide education, compelling institutions to swiftly embrace online technologies to maintain learning continuity. This transition resulted in new communication patterns, as digital technologies supplanted traditional face-to-face encounters. Generation Z (Gen Z) comprises individuals born between 1997 and 2012. Generation Z, recognized for their technological proficiency, experienced a reasonably smooth transition due to their inherent familiarity with digital surroundings (Turner, 2015) and the omnipresence of technology, particularly the internet, since their birth. Generation Z students exhibit a significant reliance on technology, preferring platforms such as WhatsApp, Discord, Telegram, Zoom, and Google Meet for academic and social engagements.

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Nonetheless, despite the facilitation of flexibility and accessibility through technological adoption, apprehensions persist over the quality of communication between students and professors. Interpersonal communication is essential for establishing rapport, comprehension, and feedback, which can be hindered in digital interactions that lack non-verbal indications and immediacy. The abrupt dependence on digital resources has prompted significant educational inquiries: Do these tools facilitate substantive academic discourse? Do instructors and students share congruent expectations regarding media utilization and efficacy?

In the post-pandemic era, as hybrid and blended learning models grow prevalent, it is crucial to comprehend how Generation Z employs communication tools and their influence on interpersonal relationships in education. This study employs Media Richness Theory (MRT) to examine the impact of various communication technologies, from high-richness media (video conferencing) to low-richness media (emails or announcements), on Gen Z's interactions with lecturers and their interpretation of information. This research delineated many aims as follows:

1. To identify the primary communication tools used by Gen Z students in educational interactions.
2. To evaluate the effectiveness of these tools in facilitating interpersonal communication with lecturers.
3. To examine how the perceived richness of various media influences communication satisfaction and academic engagement.
4. To provide recommendations for educational institutions on optimizing digital communication channels in hybrid or fully online settings.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Gen Z and Digital Communication Behavior

Generation Z (Gen Z), typically defined as individuals born from 1997 to 2012, is the inaugural cohort to have been entirely raised in the digital era. Since early childhood, they have been immersed in high-speed internet, smartphones, streaming services, and social media. 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). This generation prioritizes 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. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, and Discord 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.

In educational settings, Generation Z conflates official and informal communication. They often employ the same techniques for academic collaboration as they do in their social interactions. Students frequently utilize WhatsApp or Telegram for group tasks, circumventing institutional means such as email or Moodle, which they regard as overly formal or sluggish (Greenhow & Lewin, 2016). This practice indicates that Gen Z values convenience and quickness more than formality, which has considerable consequences for communication between students and lecturers. Seemiller and Grace (2016) discovered that Generation Z students anticipate regular, timely feedback and prioritize direct communication with instructors via digital media. They are less predisposed to await office hours or reply to emails when instant messaging provides more immediate interaction. Asynchronous resources, like voice notes and learning management system forums, are highly valued for enabling students to interact with content and instructors at their convenience, demonstrating a preference for flexibility and autonomy (Chicca & Shellenbarger, 2018).

Moreover, Generation Z's communication patterns are shaped by a demand for customization and significance. Individuals 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. Educators are more likely to establish strong connections with Gen Z students by fostering collaborative communication with them. Nonetheless, the omnipresence of digital instruments also poses disadvantages. The Gen Z preferred informal communication styles whereas sometimes it might lead to misunderstandings pertaining to academic boundaries and professionalism. Learners might interact with their lecturers through social media using unappropriated and informal language (Greenhow & Lewin, 2016). This circumstance highlights the importance of clear digital communication protocols in order to maintain academic professionalism in conducting Gen Z's communication activities.

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. Understanding how Generation Z communicates is key to keep them engaged and help them succeed academically. 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.

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, enable students to collaborate in real time, and offer 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—a group that, while very familiar with technology, still values social interaction. Researchers also observed a growing sense of "Zoom fatigue," where both students and teachers felt mentally drained after long hours of video calls (Wiederhold, 2020). 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 & 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 whereby 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). Generation Z students, who prioritize social engagement, personalization, and immediacy, were notably impacted by these communication failures (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). 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 reevaluation 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., 2022).

The implementation of Media Richness Theory (MRT) elucidates these problems. Daft and Lengel (1986) contend that distinct media possess differing degrees

of richness, which refers to their capacity to communicate intricate and subtle messages. Richer media, such as face-to-face interactions and video calls, facilitate emotional expression and prompt feedback, while leaner media, like email and text, are more appropriate for conveying basic facts. Throughout the epidemic, numerous institutions resorted to minimalistic media, compromising the emotional aspect of education. The disparity in media richness resulted in disengagement and diminished motivation among Gen Z students, who are accustomed to rapid, visually stimulating, and interactive communication (Mohr & Mohr, 2017). To address these challenges, certain instructors built informal communication networks to supplement institutional procedures. Platforms such as WhatsApp, Telegram, and Discord facilitated more dynamic, real-time interactions and cultivated a sense of community (Greenhow & Chapman, 2020). Although these tools provoke apprehensions regarding limits and professionalism, they simultaneously signify an increasing necessity to engage students in their current digital and cognitive contexts. In the post-pandemic period, educational communication must transition from a uniform strategy to one that is adaptable, inclusive, and enriched with diverse media. Institutions must allocate resources towards training, infrastructure, and communication literacy to facilitate content delivery, foster connections, promote collaboration, and enhance student well-being. For Generation Z, whose educational aspirations are influenced by digital culture, effective communication necessitates the adoption of methods that are interactive, instantaneous, and emotionally impactful.

2.3 Challenges in Lecturer-Student Communication

Effective communication in education extends beyond subject delivery; it involves fostering emotional, cognitive, and social ties between instructors and students. In the post-COVID educational environment, distinguished by the dominance of digital and hybrid platforms, establishing this relationship has grown more complex. The way Gen Z prefers to communicate is changing fast, but many teachers still rely on old-school methods, creating a communication gap that could hurt learning, motivation, and even student retention (Arghode, 2012; Seemiller & Grace, 2016). One big issue is the heavy use of basic tools like email, LMS announcements, and text messages. These are often too limited to keep students engaged because they lack the personal touch and quick feedback Gen Z expects.

According to Media Richness Theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986), simple tools work fine for routine messages, but they fall short when the message is complex or emotional. In education, relying only on these "lean" communication tools can make it harder to build connections and foster a sense of community—something that's especially important for Gen Z. This generation tends to look for more personalized and socially connected interactions in their learning (Turner, 2015; Mohr & Mohr, 2017). A major hurdle in education today is the generational gap in how people prefer to communicate. Many educators, who didn't grow up with digital tools, tend to stick with formal platforms like email, Moodle, Blackboard, or Google Classroom. These methods feel structured and familiar to them, but they often don't match the faster, more casual communication styles preferred by Gen Z students, who are used to instant messaging, social media, and interactive apps. These platforms adhere to conventional academic requirements and provide administrative oversight. In contrast, Generation Z

students typically choose rapid, informal communication channels such as WhatsApp, Telegram, or direct messaging on social media (Greenhow & Lewin, 2016). This discrepancy might result in erroneous expectations: students may perceive instructors as unattainable or unresponsive, whilst academics may view students' communication styles as too informal or disrespectful (Arghode, 2012). These discrepancies extend beyond mere aesthetics—they can affect trust, clarity, and the capacity to deliver prompt assistance. A lecturer who mandates email communication may postpone responses to student inquiries, but a student anticipating immediate replies may experience feelings of neglect or demotivation. Moreover, lean communication technologies frequently inadequately express tone, empathy, or complexity, resulting in misunderstandings or unintended conflict. A succinct email from a lecturer may be perceived as brusque or dismissive, particularly by students who are emotionally engaged in the subject or facing academic challenges (Kahu & Nelson, 2018).

A further problem exists in the restricted options for feedback and relational growth in digitally mediated contexts. In in-person environments, non-verbal signals like eye contact, nodding, and facial expressions assist lecturers in evaluating student understanding and emotional conditions. Conversely, asynchronous digital communication is devoid of these indications, complicating the identification of disengagement, uncertainty, or anxiety (Huang et al., 2022). This issue is intensified in large courses, when personalized connection is inherently challenging. In the absence of consistent, substantive communication, students may experience isolation, adversely impacting their motivation, persistence, and academic performance (Garris & Fleck, 2022). Educators encounter institutional and cultural limitations while striving to accommodate Generation Z's favored communication methods. Numerous organizations dissuade the utilization of unofficial platforms owing to privacy apprehensions, border complications, or the potential for unprofessional behavior. Consequently, several educators may oppose the integration of messaging applications or social media, despite the potential for these tools to improve rapport and response. This engenders a paradox: the platforms that students find most comfortable are frequently the least employed in formal academic settings. Educators must strike a balance between formality and accessibility to overcome these problems. Implementing explicit communication protocols that integrate both institutional tools and interactive channels (e.g., discussion boards, voice notes, optional message groups) can facilitate bridging the gap. Furthermore, training programs that enhance digital communication skills for both educators and students are crucial for managing expectations, upholding professionalism, and sustaining the human aspects of teaching in a progressively digital academic landscape.

2.4 Gaps in Research

Although many research have examined online learning technologies, few have concentrated on the specific communication methods used by Gen Z and their effects on interpersonal ties with lecturers. There is a deficiency of research utilizing Media Richness Theory to examine Gen Z's communication behaviors in educational settings, particularly in the post-COVID hybrid learning environment. 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. Even fewer have utilized Media Richness Theory to evaluate the impact of various tools on interpersonal interaction and happiness in post-pandemic academic environments. Empirical research is required to merge Gen Z's digital behavior with communication theory to enhance instructional practice and institutional policy. This study examines on 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 which are "lean" (better for simple, quick messages). The goal is to find out how these preferences impact how well students and lecturers communicate with each other.

3 Theoretical Framework: Media Richness Theory (MRT)

3.1 Key Dimensions of Media Richness

Media Richness Theory (MRT), introduced by Daft and Lengel (1986), 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 things like quick responses, body language, tone of voice, natural conversation, and a personal touch. These features make it easier to avoid misunderstandings and build stronger connections. Face-to-face conversation is considered the richest form of communication because it includes all these features—you can see someone's expressions, hear their tone, and respond right away. Video calls on platforms like Zoom or Microsoft Teams come close, offering visual and audio cues, quick feedback, and fairly natural interaction. Phone calls are a bit less rich since they lack visual elements, and 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, Lengel, & Daft, 1987).

This theory is especially useful when thinking about how students and lecturers communicate in post-COVID education. Now that most communication happens online, it's important to choose the right tools for the message. Gen Z students, who grew up with digital technology, often expect fast, interactive, and personal communication (Mohr & Mohr, 2017). A quick email might work for sharing a deadline, but for giving feedback or discussing a concern, a video call or voice note might be more effective. Choosing the right medium can make all the difference in keeping students engaged and connected.

3.2 Application in Educational Contexts

Media Richness Theory (MRT) is a useful way to think about which communication tools are most effective in education, especially when working with Generation Z. The theory, developed by Daft and Lengel (1986), says that the "richer" a communication tool is, the better it handles emotional or complex messages. In student-lecturer communication, choosing the right tool can help make information clearer, build stronger connections, and offer better support. In order to apply MRT in a way that

makes sense today, it's important to understand how Gen Z communicates. They grew up with technology and often switch between apps depending on the situation (Schroth, 2019). For example, they might use WhatsApp or Discord for casual group work, but expect their lecturers to use video calls or voice messages when discussing something serious or complicated (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). Kock (2005) found that using a tool that's too simple for a complex message can confuse students, make them lose interest, and lead to weaker learning outcomes. This was clear during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, when schools leaned too heavily on basic tools like email instead of using richer platforms. By using MRT to guide how communication tools are chosen, especially in hybrid or online classrooms, schools can improve how they connect with students. Choosing the right platform for each kind of message and being aware of what Gen Z responds to can lead to stronger relationships, better understanding, and improved academic results.

3.3 Justification for Using MRT in This Study

Media Richness Theory (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. This study uses MRT to look at common platforms like Zoom, WhatsApp, institutional emails, and LMS tools, examining how well they support different types of communication. 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 whereby it leads to clearer, more engaging interactions with students.

Secondly, MRT helps bridge 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—things like 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 (Mohr & Mohr, 2017; Seemiller & Grace, 2016).

Thirdly, MRT supports analysis at both the personal and institutional levels. This study investigates how lecturers choose communication tools based on their understanding of richness, and how 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.

4 Methodology

This study will utilize a qualitative methodology through focus group discussions with Generation Z students at University Poly-Tech Malaysia (UPTM) Kuala Lumpur. Participants will be intentionally selected to ensure diversity in educational background, gender, and digital behaviors. The data will be analyzed through thematic coding based on the principles of Media Richness Theory, with the objective of discovering patterns in communication behaviors, media preferences, and engagement levels (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

5 Conclusion

This study is theoretically and practically relevant as it contextualizes Media Richness Theory (MRT) within the evolving communication behaviors of Generation Z in post-pandemic educational environments. As the inaugural generation entirely immersed in digital technology from an early age, Gen Z demonstrates unique communication habits that markedly diverge from those of preceding student cohorts. Comprehending how these students utilize and assess communication tools—especially in their interactions with lecturers—is crucial for fostering inclusive, responsive, and effective academic settings.

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 little examined. This study enhances the literature by illustrating how the theory may be utilized to assess communication media not alone 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.

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 professors and 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.

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