

Deciphering Digital Body Language and the Gen-Z in New Normal

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ABSTRACT

The post-pandemic era or the era of the new normal has kept us all on tenterhooks since the unanticipated inception of the pandemic. The world reluctantly and gradually slithered on the spine of technology and took the reign to bridge the gap that slid between the crevices of the online and offline world, the normal and the new normal, non-digital and digital communication. Digital body language - an integral part of digital communication, is an idea that has gained momentum recently in the new normal, where digital-only communication is seen progressively as something inexorable. We find ourselves surrounded by communication that most of the time occurs exclusively digitally. Digital body language, like physical body language, plays the same integral and vital role in communication, where the former is more difficult to decipher. While communicating on digital platforms, occupying the digital space via email, messenger, chat, or video call, there are more chances of misunderstanding and more nuances to deal with, than in physical communication.

Gen z, iGen, or centennials born between 1995 and 2012, are the generation born with the internet and mobile phones in their pockets- which generously offered them earlier exposure to communication skills and digital communication. The present chapter seeks to explore in its first part, analyzing how and in what ways we need to acquire an understanding of digital body language to dissolve the barriers and filters present, to communicate effectively. In the second part, there is a discussion on how equipped is the Gen z- the communication generation- to combat the challenges of the digital space imposed by digital body language and what we need to learn from them.

Keywords- *Communication, soft skills, body language, digital communication, online.*

Introduction

Interpersonal communication has been indispensable in constructing relationships, faith, and understanding since antiquity. This relationship is orchestrated through communicating effectively by sending and receiving messages between the sender and the receiver. An American scholar, Harold Laswell (1948), formulated a model to explicate the process of communication. He propounded that communication is based on four parameters: "Who?", "Says what?", "In which channel?", "To whom?" and "With what effect?" (Hill, 2007). Later

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on, other theorists presented modified versions of this theory. Heath and Bryant (2000) reified their understanding of communication as a process where the sender sends the message to incite and stimulate the response from the receiver. Merriam-Webster's Collegiate dictionary elucidates communication as a mechanism in which information is exchanged between persons through a system of symbols, signs, or behaviour. It can be inferred from this definition that in addition to words, signs, symbols, and gestures are vital to the communication process. Communication can be both verbal and non-verbal, where verbal communication stands for spoken words, and non-verbal communication encompasses the use of facial expressions, body posture, breathing rhythm, outer appearance, and various others (Hinz, 2015). The psychologist, Albert Mehrabian in 1950 claimed that words play a very small role in the relay of the message to the receiver, and the major onus lies on the tone of the voice and intonation accounting for 38 percent, whereas nonverbal signs make up 55 percent of the non-verbal communication. "Birdwhistell (1970) also argued that 65 percent of communication is non-verbal while only 35 percent is derived through interaction in words" (Silas, 2020, p. 138). From the above data, it can be derived that, the "how" of communication is more essential than the "what" of communication. Nonverbal communication lends a critical shade to the spoken words, says Professor Ingrid Day, Academic Dean at the Australian Institute of Business (AIB) in one of the blogs. He further adds that what is conveyed in words is given interpersonal and attitudinal context when accompanied by visible body language.

Non-verbal communication is the facet of communication that is not expressed in words, therefore some or the other form of communication is always present, "one can not communicate" (Watzlawick et al., 1967, p. 51). Hence, whether we are aware of it or not, communication is always going on; which our body language conveys 55% of communication right from the raised eyebrow in facial expression to the position of hands and tilting of the neck, which during the exchange of ideas, might frame the base of the relationship and feeling of one person towards the other. Another 38% comprises the tone or the paralanguage or suprasegmental feature of the communication and only 7% is communicated through words. This helps in deducing that digital communication, while quick, conducive, and convenient mourns the absence of 93% of the signs and symbols disseminated through face-to-face communication.

Digital Communication or Digital Body Language

“You see, these days, we don’t talk the talk or even walk the talk. We write the talk” (Dhawan, 2022, p.18).

In today’s world, as we walk through unprecedented times, we find ourselves surrounded by gadgets and machines. The communication is substantially carried out through the internet or online communication and information is relayed through gizmos like desktop computers, laptops, smartphones, tablets, ipads, etc. The online modes of communication- social media apps or social media platforms (SNS- social networking sites) like email, Microsoft Team, Zoom and Google Meet platforms, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, blogs, etc serve the purpose of communication in a virtual mode promptly and synchronously.

The post-pandemic era or the era of the new normal has kept us all on tenterhooks since the unanticipated inception of the pandemic. The world reluctantly and gradually slithered on the spine of technology and reluctantly took the reign to bridge the gap that slid between the crevices of the online and offline world, the normal and the new normal, non-digital and digital communication. Digital body language - an integral part of digital communication, is an idea that has gained momentum recently in the new normal, where digital-only communication is seen progressively as something that is inexorable. It is an emerging form of communication that runs through digital devices and has started penetrating our lives to such an extent that it has begun to replace the traditional mode of face-to-face communication. We find ourselves surrounded by communication that most of the time occurs exclusively digitally. It has permeated our personal and professional domain and has materialized multitasking as the new talent of the century where people can be easily seen pivoting and gliding between various roles and tasks of texting, talking to someone on the phone, kibitzing and simultaneously checking emails and browsing Facebook and YouTube. With so much going around, it is rather impossible for people to completely focus on anything, thereby making the process of communication even more quagmirical than before. This can be tantamount to ignoring or being rude to those who are trying to connect digitally because they don’t know the other side of the picture and are at the same time unsuccessful in deciphering the intention of the person behind the screen. Digital body language, like physical body language, plays the same integral and vital role in communication, where the former is more difficult to decipher. While communicating on digital platforms, occupying the digital space via email, messenger, chat, or video call, there are more chances of misinterpretation and confusion, and more nuances to deal with, than in physical or face-to-face communication.

As Erica Dhawan (2022) rightly explains that coetaneous communication counts more than ever, depending on, “how we say something rather than on what we say. That is, our digital body language” (p. 17). She further adds that with the advancement in technology and revolution in the field of the internet, “everyone was given a dais and a microphone, but no one was told how to use them. We all just picked things up as we went along. And the mistakes we’ve made along the way have had real consequences in business” (Dhawan, 2022, p. 17). Psychologists say that digital communication is ripe for misunderstanding. Our attitudes, intentions, and expectations are decrypted as we project ourselves digitally- and it mostly leads to confusion and misapprehension.

Objectives of the Study

The present chapter will explore how to stride with the ever-changing scenario of the digitalization of communication, the digital body language, the challenges encountered by the common people and Gen z in the new normal, and how prepared this generation is in dealing with the challenges of the digital world.

1. To find out how equipped Gen z is in combating the challenges of the digital space.
2. To learn about emojis as a digital representation of emotion.
3. To learn about the challenges encountered in deciphering digital body language.

Literature Review

Jeff Fromm proclaims, “Just when you thought you had Millennials figured out, we’re on to the next generation, Generation Z”. Gen Z, or iGen or Centennials or the Pivotal Generation, is a multi-ethnic and gender-fluid generation with vivid characteristics that segregates them from Millennials (Gen Y). Gen Z has bloomed and flourished in the epoch that is booming and pulsating with the fashion, need, and urgency of connecting in the fluidity of online ambiance through social media and social applications. According to Schawbel, Generation Z refers to the individuals born between 1994 - 2010 (2015), whereas Oh & Reeves (2011) defined Generation Z as those born between 2000-2025. As quoted in Entrepreneur (2015), Gen Z is the new generation born in the middle of the 1990s to date, meaning the oldest members of this generation are still teenagers, or in the prime of their youth, currently studying at school or at college level. They are the generations who were raised amidst technological advancement, “a time when types of the cell phone are transforming to be more cutting-edge, the scope of the internet availability is broader, and the accessibility of social media becomes easier” (Mutia, 2019, p. 2). Gen Z, also addressed as the ‘The Internet Generation’ or ‘Digital Native’ is the

generation that has been budding up in a time of incertitude and scepticism whether it is the post-9/11 world, economic recession, pandemic, changing norms, enhanced racial diversity, fluid gender roles, etc., they are the first generation in American history to “inherit a nation in decline” (Harvell, 2016, para. 3).

While for most of us, it has been impossible to withdraw ourselves from the fiasco caused by the pandemic and we are still trying to locate a silver lining in the dark circumstances that recent changes have burdened us with, Gen Z, shines full and bright in acclimatizing to the subtleties of the new normal. The research conducted reflects their resilience in, “overcoming hurdles like massive job loss, a sudden shift to living and studying online and swiftly imposed social isolation”, eulogizing them with the nickname “Generation Resilient” (Perna, 2021, para. 2). According to one of the websites, Young Social Innovators, before Gen Z, the last cohort to have grown up in difficult circumstances was denominated as “The Silent Generation”, who survived these were the progenies of, the “great depression who lived through World War II. In the United States, this was the white picket fence generation; conventional and gregarious, silently working, getting married young, and striving for a kind of suburban idyll” (para. 3).

The members of Gen Z, with their acumen and adaptability potential in defining their own lifestyle and communication style, stand out from the people of other generations. Their excessive involvement with social media communication – the lavish use of smartphones, the internet, and social media networking has stirred and precipitated the fact that their belief and zone of comfort rests more on social media and the online world than the real world. This can be palpably interpreted from their feeds and timelines that portray their necessitous dependence on the virtual world. A clear difference is evident when compared with the previous generations, Gen X, who, because of their limited access to the internet have to wait longer for print mass media to obtain the latest updates. It has been found in many studies conducted on different platforms that the belief of various generations about digital communication varies considerably. The previous generation finds digital communication to be a distraction, one that robs us of empathy, emotional intelligence, and the ease of traditional communication. According to them, the excessive dependence and reliance of Gen Z on social media and virtual communication have affected their potential and proficiency in traditional communication or face-to-face communication. But for Gen Z, the virtual is the new real, the new normal. For them “it is an informational resource and a way to connect to others” (Kingston 2014, Sponcil & Gitimu, 2013).

Many studies have been conducted that reconnoitre the impact of computer-mediated environments on the non-verbal communication of Gen Z. A study on Nonverbal Communication in the Virtual world: Understanding and Designing Expressive Characters, conducted by Tanenbaum, J. (2014), investigated the new vistas unfolded by the advent of network mediated virtual environments in the direction of new communication postulates in the existing graphical ambiance inhabited by huge communities of individual users. Joseph Walther (2006) is known for his contribution to proposing his theory on computer-mediated communication which reinforces the point that, “Computer–Mediated Communication is as capable as face-to-face communication, based on the substitutability of verbal and nonverbal cues” (p. 53).

Another research conducted by Ptaszynski, M., et.al. (2011) on Emoticons: Review of the field and proposal of research framework, articulated their theory on the function and usage of Emoticons, and explicated them to be the “strings of symbols representing body language in text-based communication”, and “unnatural language entities” in “Natural Language Processing” (p. 1159). They further contended that over a long history of 40 years of text-based communication, emoticons have been identified as an essential requisite complementing text-based messages. This study probed the behaviour of the users of social media in terms of digital graphic messaging in interpersonal and cohort communication. The social networking sites chosen for the study were Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc., which were being accessed through smartphones. The sample area chosen for this research was Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar University, Lucknow, UP, India. The sample unit was drawn from the students of higher education.

The above two studies explored the function of digital nonverbal cues in the limited sample area and observed the role, non-verbal communication plays in interpersonal and group communication on social media. The studies concluded that “the nonverbal graphic (emojis) changes the environment of text communication and receiver and sender understand the words and sentences behind nonverbal cues” (Gangwar, 2022, p. 12). This confirmed that the role non-verbal communication executes in face-to-face communication is usurped successfully by modern emojis in computer-mediated virtual environments. The significant outcome of this study was that our language, when used in technology, becomes pictorial language.

Another study was conducted by Yalda T. Uhls (2020), at Southern California Public School, which discussed the significance and impact of non-verbal cues such as facial expressions, tone of voice, and gestures on children during early childhood. The study perused the pervasiveness

of digital devices- mobiles, iPhones, and tablets in the lives of toddlers and their response toward face-to-face and digital communication. The study tested and analysed the skill and capability of more than 50, both male and female students- sixth graders in the years 2017 and 2012, from the Southern California public school, to decode and recognise emotions in photographs and videos. The study precipitated the result that sixth grader students of 2017 (a generation more exposed to smartphones and tablets) showed remarkable excellence in their adroitness of reading emotional cues in photographs with uncertainty in their potential of imparting the same deftness in deciphering the cues in video communication.

Yalda T. Uhls (2020) asserted that with so many of our kids are on- screen so frequently, it is important to know that good things can come from their interactions with photos. She indicated that, with the recent increase in video communication, they may be now learning these cues from video chat too. She also fleshed out her observation by claiming that even 18-month-old babies can acquire and imbibe much from video chat. Further referring to other research, she stated that exposure to the virtual mode of communication or screen time does not pose any threat or hindrance in the development of the social skills of kids. It can be inferred from these studies that; mediated communication is more visual while sharing photographs, particularly among adolescents. Because of this dynamism, the New York Times 2018 embellished it with an intriguing title, “Welcome to the Post Text Future” (Manjoo, 2018).

Another research by Silas Udenze (2020) was an investigation of the process of non-verbal communication about emoji, by examining its usage on five prominent social networking sites- Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter. The study was based on the theory of an Interpersonal Communication Model that elucidates how computer-mediated communication surpasses the nuances and subtleties of face-to-face communication by transforming and transcending into hyperpersonal communication. The study showed that digital communication offers communicators an edge over traditional communication. Hyperpersonal communication, according to Walther (1996), provides a more comfortable zone to its interlocuters in comparison to face-to-face communication because of its focus on, “personal and relational optimisation, because they are unfettered by unwanted cues or multiple conversational demands” (Udenze, 2020, p. 8). According to Kumari and Gangwar (2018), hyperpersonal theory unleashes a catena of choices, presenting the communicators with a plethora of options, cues, and emojis for making their communication effective. This freedom to choose their cues allows a hyperpersonal message sender to exhibit their expertise and excellence in polishing and presenting their digital personality efficaciously. This study

presented an understanding of the use of emojis, defining them as, “conduit pipes” (Udenze, 2020, p. 2), which helps the users in streamlining and negotiating digital body language.

Emoticons and Emojis

The emergence of Emoticons in the early 1980s on the horizon of social media multiplied the communicative impact of the virtual world in manifold ways. It revolutionized the platform of digital body language. Joinson (2003), describes emoticons as the textual expression of paralanguage in the virtual world. An Emoticon may simply be defined as an emotional sign of representing body posture, behaviours, and facial expressions to digitally communicate our response and reaction on social media. The findings of the neuroscientists indicate that while emoticons stimulate and incite an emotional response in the human brain, the same is not true in the case of human faces; people are able to interpret emoticons despite knowing that these are not real human faces (Calin, 2019).

Emoji in Japanese means “picture character”, a word which was included in oxford dictionaries in the year 2013 and has been claimed to be similar to language in many aspects. It was conceived, “as an indicator of affective states and emotions, containing nonverbal information that in real settings is conveyed through facial expression and other physical indicators” (Dresner and Herring, 2010, p. 250). Because of its persistent and increased usage, it has been elevated to an eminent position by releasing it as the word of the year by Oxford Dictionaries in 2015, an emoji- “face with tears of joy”. This can also be understood as “a step further, developed with modern communication technologies that facilitate more expressive messages. An emoji is a graphic symbol, ideogram that represents not only facial expressions, but also concepts and ideas, such as celebration, weather, vehicles and buildings, food and drinks, animals and plants, or emotions, feelings, and activities” (Kralj, N. P. et. al., 2015). The popularity of emojis has been reportedly increasing at a very fast pace. Dimson (2015) also joins the stream by stating that nearly half of the texts on Instagram comprise the extensive use of emojis.

Vyvyan Evans (2021) in the article “Signs of our times: why emoji can be even more powerful than words” asserted that “Emoji is to text-speak what intonation, facial expression and body language are to spoken interaction” (para. 10). He further stressed that although emojis are not traditional words, they offer an appropriate articulation and contextualization cue, which allow us to accentuate and enliven the “emotionally arid landscape of digital text with the personal expression”(para. 11). They are also known to be instrumental in evoking empathy and

enhancing our emotional intelligence- which are the essential ingredients of digital communication.

As we can see through the extensive research done in the field of non-verbal communication in cyberspace or digital space, we can ascertain that digital body language is all about adjusting, adapting, and acclimating to the technological demands and needs of the virtual landscape. In contemporary times, traditional communication, the use of conventional words, the paralanguage (stress, intonation, the pitch of the voice and speed, gestures, noises, etc) are being deftly translated by Gen Z. They are adroitly converting the different strands of paralanguage using cues, signs, caps, emojis, gifs, etc, and deciphering the nuances of emotions, thoughts, and feelings portrayed by others without the use of words. Calin (2019), fortifies that, “nonverbal communication is not getting lost in a digital world, it has simply adapted and is evolving with it” (para.18). Gen Z is all set and geared to smoothly sail in the new digital space, the new normal or the newest normal. Born with iPhones in their pockets, Gen Z is, “mature, self-directed, and resourceful” (Harvell, 2016, para. 3). Right from Greta Thunberg to BTS Army, Gen Z has been exemplary in exhibiting creativity, challenging conventional norms, forthrightly unfolding their minds, establishing a strong footing in the digital discourse, and influencing and participating in the paradigm shift that the world has been witnessing. Because of this, Gen Z is, “hyper-aware of everything that is happening around them and is better equipped to educate themselves and form their own independent opinions” (Ahuja, 2021, p.2).

Talking about empathy and emotional intelligence, a study on Gen Z reveals that they are the “most empathetic generation to date” (Peterson, 2021, para. 1), and it is owing to their indigenous involvement with social media or digital space. Due to the global connectivity, sumptuously served by the virtual platforms, they have been directly a party to the events and experiences of others through their ever-brimming feed and timeline. They have an edge over the people of the previous generation who had passive and second-hand exposure to the events through the narratives of the reporters and their cameras. Gen Z, not only share first-hand information, but also perceive the truth through the eyes of the individuals, along with their take on the truth, related to the events. This reflects their empathy towards others. Not only this, but they also exhibit unity, which can be supported by an example- “from raising a million dollars for the Black Lives Matter movement to raising money to run small schools in Assam, the BTS Army has shown the world that small, collective efforts can do wonders if put in the right direction” (Ahuja, 2021, para. 4).

Deciphering The Digital Body Language

As we already know that communication is both a science and an art and it can be acquired, polished, and honed with appropriate guidance and practice. Those encountering confusion and befuddlement in deciphering the digital body language, with apropos training may easily navigate between the traditional and digital space. Digital body language is not only about appearing on Google Meet, Zoom, or at a Teams meeting, it also includes how we work with our caps, punctuation, time management in responding to messages or emails, how we sign off our emails, our virtual backgrounds, etc. Erica Dhawan in her book, *Digital Body Language: Collaborate Faster and Further, Together* (2022), has profusely discussed the rules that cultivate connectivity, promote trust, and stir creativity and innovation in today's hybrid and digital workplace. She underpins that we have moved a step ahead of the new normal; more than the anxiety of adapting and adjusting to the new normal, we are faced with the challenges of successfully managing the collaboration of Gen Z and Gen Y (Digital Natives) and Gen X and Baby Boomers (Digital Adapters), along with those who work in hybrid ambience. With the help of innumerable examples, Dhawan illustrates and unravels that the mismanagement of digital body language leads to severe repercussions both in personal and professional life. Discussing an email correspondence between the boss and his employee, she explains that, it became a cause of stress and anxiety because of the inappropriate use of words. Talking about, "passive-aggressive behaviour" (2022, p. 28), she writes that, it is like, we appear arguing though we're not. Strong ties have gotten stronger, weak ties have gotten weaker". To dissolve the barriers sprouting from the 'connection overload', appropriate digital body language management is a must. Perusing and speculating the differences between "Digital Natives" and "Digital Adapters", she highlights that the same digital cues are construed differently by each of them; a single period can't be read as just a period in a text. Dhawan further asserts that for digital natives, a period at the end of a text is interpreted as passive-aggressive while for digital adapters, it reflects the use of good grammar. Likewise, there are plentiful differences in the use of exclamation marks, ellipses, use of multiple question marks, and capitalization.

To truly comprehend the gradations of non-verbal communication in the digital space, Dhawan proposes four laws of digital body language: "Value Visibly, Communicate Carefully, Collaborate Confidently, and Trust Totally" (p. 23). She also offers the remedy or the panacea to resolve the conflicts and confusion arising in the virtual or cyberspace owing to digital body language by citing the signs of the traditional body language and its respective translation in digital body language. For example, she alludes to the belief that the head tilted to one side

conveys the attentiveness of the listener in the traditional body language. The same may be depicted through digital body language by “liking” a text or a comment, offering genuine verbal praise, and acknowledging and praising the presentation of the speaker by leaving a message in the chat box during a video call. Another example that can be cited here, is that ‘smile’ plays a crucial and significant role in building relationships, trust, and bonding. The digital body language translates a smile with the intelligible and logical use of emojis and exclamation points, by ending the email in an appropriate way.

Conclusion

We have navigated through various research, studies, and investigations pertaining to non-verbal communication and digital body language. Exploring the significance of non-verbal communication, we discussed that the inability in deciphering the same in the digital space leads to confusion, miscommunication, failure, and incompetence. It was seen that Gen Z and the previous generations have adapted themselves to the demands and nuances of the digital world, though Gen Z more easily than Gen Y or X. Gen Z is all set and geared to smoothly sail in the new digital space, new normal or the newest normal.

It was also seen that the popularity of emojis has even made it into the Unicode standard, ensuring their compatibility with different digital platforms and gadgets. Emojis' enduring appeal and wide adoption show how good they are at conveying emotion in digital form. The traditional body language or paralanguage is being translated into digital body language with the help of graphic tools like emojis, caps, time management, and appropriate use of words. It seems apparent that the solution existed even before the problem was encountered. It is just that the digital natives and digital adapters need to learn and acquire the niceties in different degrees to navigate the hybrid platforms of traditional and digital communication. Gen Z is fluent in digital communication, but their ability to glide smoothly and successfully in face-to-face communication is under doubt; likewise, digital adapters are adept in traditional communication but fumble with a shift to online platforms. Dhawan aptly describes that despite being adept in managing technological complexities, digital natives encounter a “communication deficiency” (p. 165), in their inability to comprehend traditional body language; whereas digital adapters suffer from a communication deficiency in deciphering digital body language. Erica Dhawan (2022) offers timely assistance by writing her book *Digital Body Language: Collaborate Faster and Further, Together*, which meticulously extends well-researched solutions and suggestions to heal and supplement the deficiencies or challenges of communication- both traditional and digital.

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