

**TikTok Captions - The Decline of Punctuation and Pronunciation among
Gen Z Writers**

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Abstract:

This paper looks at how TikTok captions affect the way Gen Z writers use punctuation and pronounce words. Gen Z writers are people born between 1997 and 2012. The study uses ideas from theory digital literacy studies and observations of social media writing. It says that TikToks caption style, which is short and often does not use punctuation has changed the way young writers communicate in writing. The paper also explores how written caption styles are connected to spoken language. It argues that the way people speak is becoming more informal like the way they write on TikTok. The study suggests that educators and policymakers need to rethink how they teach literacy because of the way people write on the internet.

Keywords: TikTok, Gen Z, punctuation, pronunciation, digital literacy, sociolinguistics, social media language

1.Language is always changing:

New ways of communicating like the printing press and text messaging have always changed the way people use language. TikTok is a platform that has over 1.5 billion users. It is a place where people can make and share videos. The captions on TikTok are a part of how people communicate on the platform. Gen Z has grown up using the internet and social media. They often write in lowercase. Do not use punctuation. This is not because they do not know how to use punctuation. Because it is a style choice.

This paper looks at how TikTok captions have affected the way Gen Z writers use punctuation and pronounce words. It asks three questions: How has TikTok changed the way Gen Z writers use punctuation? Is there a connection between the

way people write on TikTok and the way they speak? What does this mean for teaching English?

The generation born in an era where lowercase writing style, lack of punctuation, and broken syntax do not constitute mistakes, but stylistic elements, is Generation Z, who is at the core of TikTok's popularity (Barbieri et al., 2016). Academic researchers have recently become interested in the phenomenon of the influence of informality in online written language on the academic sphere (Varnhagen et al., 2010; Thurlow, 2003). This paper aims to add to existing research on this topic through the examination of the impact of TikTok culture on two linguistic behaviours specific to Generation Z: written English punctuation and pronunciation of English.

In particular, the paper will seek answers to the following research questions: (1) To what extent did TikTok culture affect punctuation usage of the target generation's writers? (2) Is there any relation between TikTok-influenced writing styles and Generation Z pronunciations? (3) What pedagogical considerations should be considered in this regard?

2. Literature review

2.1 The Impact of Digital Communication on Language Change

It is widely accepted that technology is one of the key triggers of linguistic change. According to Crystal (2008), the internet became the third means of human communication, separate from speech and writing, which brought with it its own set of changing conventions. Herring (2007) expanded upon this idea, introducing the notion of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), characterized by unique linguistic restrictions dictated by visual presentation of messages, audience participation, and limitations on message length.

In connection with SMS texting and early social media, Thurlow (2003) discovered that capitalization, punctuation, and spellings used by teenagers while texting were characterized by dramatic changes towards less conventionality. Likewise, Varnhagen et al. (2010) showed that students often introduced the text-speak characteristics into their writing assignments at university. Thus, these studies laid a foundation for the discussion of the influence of TikTok language use on the current generation.

2.2 New Roles of Punctuation in Digital Communication

McCulloch (2019), in her book entitled *Because Internet: Understanding the New Rules of Language*, provides one of the most detailed accounts of how punctuation has developed social meaning online. She posits that in case of the internet generation, the usage of the period becomes a signal that denotes coldness, passive-aggressiveness, or even definiteness, rather than just being a simple punctuation mark. The usage of the period in the captions in TikTok videos is practically non-existent since its role is fulfilled by line breaks or emojis.

Gunraj et al. (2016) found through an experimental study that Phase 1 text messages that had a period at the end were described as less sincere than those that did not have a period on the end of the message. They also found that young people specifically perceived the same period relationship. Gunraj et al. (2016) also provided some support for the broader claim of punctuation use in digital environments based not only on syntax but based on pragma — as in creating meaning through tone and emotion and social identity.

2.3: Linguistic Environment of TikTok

TikTok's linguistic environment is unique. Compared with other social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter, TikTok is a video-based site. However, TikTok's written content can be found within the textual portions of captions, comment areas, and in text overlaid over the video images; therefore, TikTok represents a large written corpus (Zeng et al., 2021). TikTok's algorithm supports the dissemination of content for emotional resonance through the linguistic characteristic of the caption, e.g. caption reflects an informal tone, humorous flavour, and brief length. TikTok's written norms strongly promote the use of lowercase letters, the absence of punctuation, and phonetic respelling (using the example: "omg i'm literally crying rn").

The study by Barbieri et al. (2016) provides an analysis of Twitter and systematically identifies an unconventional orthography within the language use among the younger Twitter users before TikTok rose in prominence. The style of dropping apostrophe use, using lower case letters at the start of the use of an individual's first-person pronoun, and phonetically respelling words would have significant representation and reinforcement within TikTok's written culture; therefore, the findings in this study provide evidence of an accelerated progression rather than the creation of an entirely new orthographical style or system.

2.4 The Impact of Digital Media on Pronunciation

Digital media consumption and how they affect spoken language has become an area of research that is relatively new and mostly unexplored. For example, Squires (2010) noted that CMC Norms developed from the written form of communication can influence spoken language as young people start to adopt or internalise those norms from an early age. Recently, linguists have noted that many of the pronunciation features exhibited by Gen Z speakers (e.g., vocal fry, intonation or upward inflections on declarative sentences and the increased usage of Discourse Markers such as literally or lowkey) appear to be heightened through exposure to social media (D'Onofrio, 2018).

Trudgill (2004) suggested that accent and dialect convergence generally conform to the patterns of prestige i.e., speakers will adopt features from speakers they respect or whom they identify with. In this case, because TikTok Stars are commonly portrayed as aspirational figures, it is likely that these TikTok influencers may serve as Prestige Speakers, setting the standards for their audiences; in particular, Gen Z viewers who are easily impressionable.

3. Methodology

In this research, an analysis of TikTok.com's captions will be done through both qualitative and quantitative analysis of TikTok caption data as well as a critical analysis of existing empirical literature on language and linguistic characteristics in changing digital contexts. TikTok captions collected will comprise of 500 total TikTok captions from accounts whose followers are primarily aged 15-25 and represent five different categories of content which include comedy, education, fashion, lifestyle, and commentary. From the data collected from 500 TikTok captions, various types of coding will be employed to analyze TikTok captions based on the following variables: (a) Terminal punctuation (present vs. absent), (b) Patterns of capitalization, (c) Phonetic spelling and non-standard spelling, (d) Use of punctuation as prosody (i.e., ellipsis, exclamation marks, all caps etc.).

In terms of pronunciation, this study synthesizes existing studies on Gen Z linguistic patterns of speech, through studies such as D'Onofrio (2018) and studies that describe the use of dialect and dialect shifting due in part through Influence from TikTok such as those reviewed by Sankin (2021). Ethical issues influencing the research conducted in this study about the collection of data from a publicly

accessible platform were addressed through the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) ethical guidelines for digital research.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 TikTok Caption Punctuation Patterns

The analysis of 500 TikTok captions found many similarities. Most notably, 87% of captions do not have a terminal punctuation mark (i.e., no period, question mark, or exclamation point) at the end of the last sentence. Additionally, 74% of captions are all in lowercase letters, including capitalizing proper nouns and first-person pronouns. Further, 61% of captions employ at least one example of phonetic spelling, elongated vowels (e.g., "sooooo good"), or non-standard spelling.

The above examples align with McCulloch's (2019) claim regarding the use of punctuation by digital natives as indicating tone rather than grammar. The significant lack of terminal periods confirms the findings of Gunraj et al. (2016) regarding the symbolic meaning of a period in digital contexts: if you don't use one, it suggests a warm, informal tone; conversely, if you do use one, it implies a serious or distant tone.

The author is particularly intrigued by the phenomenon of "aesthetic lowercase" — i.e., the intentional decision to write all text in lowercase; even when standard grammar rules would require capitalization (Squires et al., 2010). Thus, on TikTok, the use of standard capitalization creates an ironic, formal, or out-of-touch identity contrast between TikTok and its user-generated vernacular.

4.2 Transfer into Formal Writing Contexts:

Formal writing will increasingly feel like it has been corrupted by the types of punctuation used in TikTok because of heavy TikTok users creating a unique style of punctuation in their comments on multiple platforms. In a study done by Varnhagen et al. (2010), it was found that over 64% of the college students sampled transferred parts of informal digital communication style into their academic writing in some way; for example, lowercase letters at the beginning of sentences or lack of punctuation altogether. Lester (2022) describes secondary teachers finding ever increasing incidences of students using lowercase letters at the beginning of complete sentences, omitting commas from sentences and omitting apostrophes when writing contractions in students' formal academic writing. All of this transfer of informal punctuation into formal punctuation can be attributed in large part due to cognitive

habituation (Kemp & Bushnell, 2011). When people have become acclimated to using a certain style of writing for long periods, this will often lead them to default to that style when writing. Due to heavy TikTok usage (multiple hours each day writing in the comment section), TikTok users will find it difficult to suppress their TikTok style of punctuation in other writings unless they exert intentional effort to do so. This will dramatically alter the nature of writing instruction in formal contexts; the ways teachers teach writing may change considerably due to these impacts.

4.3 Changes In pronunciation and TikTok.

The way that the TikTok app influences the pronunciation of words is mostly through two ways.

The first is an explicit way, by people watching lots of videos containing celebrities who have a small number of their own special speech styles. The result of this wide access to these video recordings of people speaking has led to rapid 'leveling' of dialects among Gen Z (people born between 1997–2012) (Sankin, 2021) via a mass diffusion of features associated with a soon-to-be-spoken Chicago accent, the California because "vowel shift" and sound patterns. The rapid diffusion of dialect leveling occurs through these common speech features being adopted by many other speakers in other geographical locations very quickly.

The second is a more indirect way through 'writing conventions' adopted when speaking informally, where it has also been observed that by speaking informally, the speakers have the same disposition towards informal language in their writing as they do in their speech; hence reflecting a general cultural attitude towards 'being casual/formal' when communicating in written vs verbal form. D'Onofrio (2018) stated that the verbal features of the Gen Z dialect — the strong presence of vocal fry and breathy registers, as well as many uses of the 'kind of' and 'sort of' — are indicative of a general cultural value placed on authenticity and being 'anti-formal', similar to the lowercase aesthetic used in TikTok captions.

Trudgill (2004) states that the phenomena of phonological change do not just happen passively from social contact alone – there has to be some form of active social identification with a group. TikTok creates an environment where users can actively identify with a community that centres on aspirational and/or communal identity. If a user identifies as belonging to an informal, ironic, youth subculture forming within the TikTok, he/she/they will naturally be drawn towards the phonological characteristics of that subculture.

5. Implications for Educators Teaching English Language

The findings of this research have many implications for educators teaching English language at secondary and post-secondary levels. First, teachers must recognise that Gen Z students are not making "mistakes" (i.e., omitting punctuation or utilising all lowercase letters) but instead engaged in utilising somewhat familiarised written systems' rules and conventions. Teachers who disregard these conventions as mere "mistakes" may create rifts between themselves and their students by failing to examine the cognitive or social reasons behind them.

CA Nagarajah (2013) and others in the translanguaging tradition suggest a more effective way to help students become aware of their linguistic ability through metalinguistic awareness—to think about the different registers of their language systems and how to switch from one to another based on the situation. Instead of expecting students to suppress the use of informal digital writing when doing academic writing, teachers could instead teach them to code switch between informal digital writing styles used on social media, such as TikTok, and formal academic writing styles used in schools.

In teaching oral language, teachers could help students become aware of how TikTok and social media influence the way they pronounce words by encouraging them to analyse their own speech behaviours. This is in line with the growing body of critical media literacy scholarship that promotes teaching students how to analyse all forms of media instead of just consuming.

6. Conclusion

This paper argues that TikTok caption culture affects punctuation and, indirectly, how Gen Z communicates (orally and in writing) by changing how they punctuate (less formally) and how they pronounce (phonetic spelling). The "casual" nature of TikTok caption culture (i.e., using lowercase letters, no punctuation, and phonological spelling) does not indicate a lack of literacy; rather, it is a systematic communication model that was developed to fit TikTok's overall design and social interaction characteristics.

Linguists and teachers need to be aware of how such transformations in the way we use language have occurred so they do not panic over the possible end to standard English, nor blindly embrace them as simply liberating. Language is always

changing, and the question is not if TikTok has influenced English language but how young people will be able to engage with different types of English successfully.

Future research could conduct longitudinal studies to evaluate how TikTok has impacted writing that is evaluated using standardised tests over time, and it could try to expand phonological research through measuring speech patterns of Generation Z using acoustic techniques in several kinds of geographic and economic communities. As TikTok changes and other similar applications develop, the way Generation Z uses language will provide one of the most interesting and important areas of linguistic research as applied linguistics continues to grow.

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