

## THE SKULL EMOJI (💀) IN GEN-Z INTERNET SLANG: A STUDY OF ITS USE AS TONE TAG AND PUNCTUATION

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### Abstract

Emojis are employed to enhance communication in the digital age on the daily. And the digital-natives, the Gen-Zers, seem to be particularly creative when it comes to their use. Recognizing this, this qualitative study examines the evolving use of one particular emoji – the skull emoji (💀), as a tone tag within Gen-Z internet slang. By analyzing various examples from different social media platforms, the paper highlights how this emoji, beyond its conventional representation of death, has been repurposed by this generation of speakers to denote laughter or embarrassment.

The study further argues that the modern use of the skull emoji serves a dual function: it not only signifies humor/awkwardness but also acts as a tool to separate text, thereby being used as a makeshift punctuation mark.

**Keywords:** Emojis; Digital Discourse; Gen-Z; Internet Slang

### 1. Introduction

Slang, an informal subset of language, serves as a means of expression that is often tied to specific groups or cultures. Slang is used for many purposes, but generally it expresses a certain emotional attitude (Maurer, 2023). It evolves rapidly, reflecting changes in society, technology, and the collective consciousness of its users. According to Eble (1996), slang functions as a marker of identity and group membership, allowing individuals to express solidarity and distinguish themselves from outsiders. In the digital age, the landscape of slang has transformed, becoming intertwined with digital discourse.

Discourse should be seen more broadly as "social practice" (Fairclough, 1992) with digital discourse being its latest, technology-led variety. Digital discourse, defined as communication that occurs within digital environments, encompasses a variety of platforms and modes of interaction. It includes text messaging, social media interactions, online forums, and more. According to Herring (2001), digital discourse is characterized by its brevity, informality, and the use of multimodal elements such as emojis, gifs, and memes to convey meaning. These elements enhance and modify traditional language.

Generation Z (Gen Z), often dubbed the "digital natives," stands at the forefront of this linguistic revolution. This generation of individuals, typically born between 1997 and 2012 (Bejtkovsky, 2016, as cited by Lihawa et al., 2021), has had technology available as a means of communication throughout most of their lives. As a result their language use has been

uniquely shaped by their constant interaction with the digital world. The, so called, Gen Zers have crafted a distinctive linguistic landscape that blends traditional language use with the rapidly evolving lexicon of the internet.

One important aspect of Gen-Z digital discourse is the innovative use of emojis, which serve as modern hieroglyphs, providing visual context and emotional nuance to text-based communication.

### ***1.1. Emojis in Digital Discourse***

Emojis have become an integral component of digital discourse, serving as visual cues that complement and enhance text-based communication. These small pictographs, which range from facial expressions to objects and symbols, provide additional layers of meaning that words alone may not fully convey. According to Herring and Dainas (2020), emojis play a crucial role in expressing emotions, clarifying the intended tone, and facilitating interpersonal interactions online. Their use allows for a more nuanced and expressive form of communication, which helps bridge the gap between written and spoken language. In the context of social media, instant messaging, and other digital platforms, emojis help users convey humor, sarcasm, affection, and other complex emotions quickly and effectively.

### ***1.2. Tone Tags vs. Discourse Markers***

Tone tags and discourse markers are both crucial elements in communication, particularly in online contexts. Tone tags, such as "/s" for sarcasm or "/j" for joking, are used in digital communication to clarify the intended tone, reducing misunderstandings in text-only interactions (Cuneca & Degand, 2022). Discourse markers, on the other hand, are words or phrases like "however," "you know," or "I mean," which organize discourse and manage the flow of conversation. They help signal relationships between ideas and guide the listener or reader through the speaker's or writer's thought process (Fung & Carter, 2007).

These linguistic tools are vital for effective communication, providing clarity and cohesion, especially in complex or nuanced discussions that lack social cues, such as online interactions (Soylu & Das, 2023). For the purposes of this research, the skull emoji will be considered a tone tag for it serves the same function within digital discourse.

## **2. Literature review**

The evolution of digital discourse and its impact on communication has been a subject of significant academic interest. Al-Jahdali (2022) conducted a morpho-semantic study on typed laughter-derived expressions used in Hijazi Twitter and WhatsApp instant messages. His findings highlight how users employ laughter indicators creatively, transforming traditional expressions into digital slang to convey humor and social bonds.

Similarly, McKay (2015) investigated the use of written laughter on Twitter through a corpus analysis. This study reveals the frequency and contexts in which different forms of written laughter appear. Haugland (2021) explored the role of emojis in discourse relations through an empirical study. This research emphasizes that emojis are integral to digital communication and function to convey emotions, clarify intent, and maintain the flow of conversation. Van Dijke (2018) examined the influence of emojis and sarcasm on message perception. His findings show how the use of emojis can alter the interpretation of text, often softening the perceived harshness of sarcastic comments and adding layers of meaning to the discourse.

Bashir, Farukh, and Younis (2022) analyzed the role of emojis and digitally created discourse in constructing a global communicative society. Their findings indicate that emojis contribute to a universal language, facilitating cross-cultural communication and enhancing mutual understanding among diverse online communities. König (2019) studied the sequential and functional patterns of 'laughter' particles and emojis in German WhatsApp chats. The research highlights how users employ these elements to signal stance-taking and relational work. Schneebeli (2020) investigated the function and position of "lol" as a discourse marker in YouTube comments. This study reveals how "lol" is used not just to indicate laughter but also to structure interactions and manage social relationships within digital conversations.

Adams (2017) explored the cultural significance of emojis, arguing that they serve as carriers of culture and symbols of identity. This research provides insights into how emojis are embedded with cultural meanings and contribute to the expression of individual and group identities online. Escoufflaire (2021) identified eight linguistic functions of emojis in computer-mediated discourse, including signaling irony, displaying politeness, and replacing words.

McSweeney (2018) focused on the pragmatics of text messaging, examining how users create meaning through messages. His research further emphasises the importance of contextual cues, such as emojis, in interpreting the intended tone and nuance of text-based interactions. Shalevska (2023) researched the Gen-Z internet slang and found that even non-native speakers of English, who belong to the Gen-Z group, use slang terms such as "flex" and "lowkey".

Finally, McCulloch (2019) and Crystal (2011) have both provided foundational insights into the broader field of internet linguistics. McCulloch's "Because Internet" explores the new rules of language shaped by digital communication, while Crystal's "Internet Linguistics" offers a thorough analysis of the linguistic phenomena emerging from online interactions.

All in all, these studies provide valuable insights into internet slang, emoji use, and the novel ways the younger generations mould language.

### 3. Methods

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the use of the skull emoji (💀) as a tone tag in Generation Z's digital communication. Data was collected from a variety of social media platforms commonly used by Generation Z. A purposive sampling method was employed to identify posts that prominently featured the skull emoji (💀). The sample included a mix of public posts.

The collected data was analyzed using thematic analysis (Clarke, 2006), which involved identifying patterns related to the use of the skull emoji. The general qualitative interpretative/inductive method was also employed (Dey, 1993; Merriam, 2002; Thomas, 2006; Creswell, 2009; Morse, 2011; Kahlke, 2014; Harding & Whitehead, 2016). The main research question entails understanding how Generation Z repurposes the skull emoji (💀) as a tone tag or humor/awkwardness marker in digital communication, as well as if and how it is used instead of traditional punctuation.

While this study provides valuable insights into the use of the skull emoji among Generation Z, it is not without limitations. The reliance on purposive sampling may introduce bias, and the findings may not be generalizable to all Gen Z users or other demographic groups.

## 4. Results and discussion

The findings of this study reveal that the skull emoji (💀) has undergone a significant transformation in its usage among Generation Z. This phenomenon can be understood through the concept of semantic bleaching. Semantic bleaching, introduced by Hopper and Traugott (1993), is defined as the process by which a lexical item loses its original semantic content. Essentially, the more frequently a charged word or symbol is used, the more its original meaning becomes diluted until it is eventually lost altogether.

In the case of the skull emoji, its original association with death and morbidity has been bleached. The emoji no longer primarily signifies death; instead, it has taken on a modern meaning. Among Gen Z users, the skull emoji is commonly used to cue laughter, embarrassment or awkwardness and indicate a lighter tone in messages. This shift illustrates how the intense and frequent use of the emoji has stripped it of its initial connotation, repurposing it for new, more benign communicative functions within digital discourse.

### 4.1. Skull Emoji Use

Several examples from social media platforms illustrate the semantic bleaching of the skull emoji that no longer denotes morbidity, but either laughter or embarrassment.

On Twitter or X, for instance, users tweeted:

"Roxxxxy Andrews just violated Gottmik 5 minutes into the first episode 💀 i'm SICK. #DragRace #AllStars9" (@dragraceher)

Biz: "I'm more nervous than when I played right now"

Yandle: "You wouldn't be playing in playoffs anyway" 😂💀 (@BR\_OpenIce)

"Defending somebody and then experiencing why nobody likes them is so humbling 💀" (@cammi2k\_)

"This video never gets old 💀" (@NoCapFights)

"Goodnight guys, tomorrow is monday💀" (@KeiBlackz)

On TikTok, users also used the emoji in a similar manner:

"He in fact could not sing💀" @cegielski\_twins

"They're always "cheering you up" on a monday as well💀"@qw3nty

"bro only need food💀" @gova.official etc.

It is also interesting to note that the skull emoji is also used in media posts in other languages (@esquizopoc; @JosePenche; @maxdestructionn etc.) in the exact same manner. This shows that its use as a tone tag transcends English only.

### 4.2. The Skull Emoji as Punctuation

Some research within the field of digital discourse indicates that emoticons may have assumed the role of punctuation marks (Provine, Spencer, & Mandell, 2007; Vucheva, 2014). The lack of proper punctuation paired with the emojis' usual placement at the end of statements, has contributed to some author's claims that the emojis are the new punctuation marks. Our

findings align with these observations, as we consistently found the skull emoji at the end of statements without accompanying punctuation, indicating its function as a terminal marker.

It seems that the skull emoji's role as punctuation is indicative of a broader trend in digital communication where emojis and emoticons are used to convey tone, emotion, and context, supplementing or even replacing traditional punctuation marks.

## 5. Conclusion

The skull emoji (💀) has undergone an important transformation within digital discourse, particularly among Generation Z. Originally symbolizing death and morbidity, the skull emoji has undergone semantic bleaching. As a result, the emoji now signifies laughter, embarrassment, or awkwardness. Its frequent placement at the end of statements further emphasizes its potential role as a modern punctuation mark. And, most importantly, this phenomenon is not limited to English-speaking users – as similar usage patterns are observed across various languages, indicating a universal trend in digital communication. Future research should explore other emojis undergoing similar semantic changes to identify broader patterns, study the impact of emoji use on language learning, and conduct longitudinal studies to track the evolution of specific emojis over time. These new avenues of research can deepen our understanding of how digital communication continues to shape and redefine modern English.

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### Usage Examples

@dragraceher: apiffant ☐ on X: "Roxxy Andrews just violated Gottmik 5 minutes into the first episode 🤡 i'm SICK. #DragRace #AllStars9 <https://t.co/jmTpoAgDKC>" / X

@BR\_OpenIce: [https://x.com/BR\\_OpenIce/status/1791245214377492766](https://x.com/BR_OpenIce/status/1791245214377492766)

@cammi2k\_: cam on X: "Defending somebody and then experiencing why nobody likes them is so humbling 🤡" / X

@NoCapFights: Wild content on X: "This video never gets old 🤡 <https://t.co/V81XzLABMO>" / X

@KeiBlackz: Kei. (Follows Back) on X: "Goodnight guys, tomorrow is monday 🤡🤡🤡 <https://t.co/7qF0xS1IJJ>" / X

@maxdestructionn: <https://x.com/maxdestructionn/status/1741000572155879453>

@esquizopoc: <https://x.com/esquizopoc/status/1779482584528888264>

@JosePenche: <https://x.com/JosePenche/status/1782723103467934091>

@cegielski\_twins: [https://www.tiktok.com/@cegielski\\_twins](https://www.tiktok.com/@cegielski_twins)

@qw3nty: Find 'monday👹' on TikTok | TikTok Search

@gova.official: Find 'bro👹' on TikTok | TikTok Search