When Type Becomes Trend: Understanding Typography Through Gen Z's Social Media Lens

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ABSTRACT

Typography in digital media has moved beyond aesthetics to become a cultural and communicative tool, especially for Generation Z. On platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, YouTube Shorts, and Discord, typographic choices influence not only attention but also identity and community-building. This study examines typography's role in shaping digital engagement and learning by integrating insights from participatory culture, branding, and microlearning research. A mixed-methods approach combines quantitative measures of engagement outcomes with qualitative analysis of user perceptions, offering a comprehensive view of typography as both a functional and cultural marker. The findings highlight how consistent, well-structured typographic systems enhance trust, clarity, and recognition, while creative variations help establish trends within social media ecosystems. The study contributes practical guidance for educators, content creators, and brands on using typography to strengthen communication and engagement with Gen Z audiences.
Keywords— Typography, Generation Z, Participatory Culture, Social Media, Learning

INTRODUCTION

"Participatory culture shifts of the focus of literacy from one of individual expressions to community involvement" – Henry Jenkins

This participation-centric context reframes type as a cultural marker that signals belonging and values within networked publics. Participatory culture theory helps explain how users' appropriate typographic styles to perform identity and coordinate communal meaning-making, from fan subcultures to social causes (Jenkins, 2009). Related branding research shows that maintaining a coherent visual identity across social channels, where typography is a core asset, it supports recognition and engagement, reinforcing how letterforms operate as social signals rather than neutral carriers of text (Kaur, 2021). Recent work also links graphic–text pairings to interaction outcomes, indicating that specific combinations of visuals and wording systematically shape online responses, further connecting typography's form to measurable behaviour in social feeds (Chen et al., 2024).

In a related study, Nordin, Singh, and Mansor (2021) found that Gen Z students place strong importance on design characteristics such as colour and graphics when interacting with digital platforms, particularly in elearning environments. Their findings suggest that Gen Z's visual preference plays a critical role in sustaining engagement, indicating that design elements, including typography, should be understood as integral to how

this generation perceives and responds to visual communication. Earlier, Nordin et al. (2020) also validated interface elements for Gen Z (e.g., colour, graphics, typography) as cultural markers that materially influence engagement, providing design characteristics transferrable to educational and non-educational platforms alike (Nordin et al., 2020, 2021). A study by Mars Caroline Wibowo et al. (2024) highlights that simple typography, white space, and neutral colours greatly improve Generation Z's visual preferences for minimalist design. These elements promote clarity and emotional calm. The research indicates that easy-to-read sans-serif fonts enhance readability and professionalism, aligning with Gen Z's desire for direct, distraction-free visuals that convey messages effectively and aesthetically.

Studying Malaysians' social media usage is crucial because digital platforms have become central to communication, education, and commerce, especially among younger generations such as Gen Z. Malaysia has one of the highest internet and social media penetration rates in Southeast Asia, over 91% of the population actively uses social platforms, making it a key site for understanding how online behavior shapes attitudes, decision-making, and identity formation (DataReportal, 2025). For educators, marketers, and policymakers, analyzing Malaysian social-media usage helps reveal how cultural values, linguistic diversity, and digital literacy influence engagement and trust in online spaces (Ahmad et al., 2023). Given that 78% of Malaysian Gen Z users discover new brands and educational opportunities via social media, these platforms now function as both learning environments and social ecosystems that affect perception, consumption, and civic participation (Hashmeta, 2025). Understanding these dynamics supports better-targeted communication strategies, inclusive educational design, and effective digital policy that reflect Malaysia's multilingual, multiethnic context and its rapid shift toward a knowledge-based digital economy (TechNode Global, 2025; MDEC, 2024).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Typography as a learning interface. Across TikTok, Instagram, YouTube Shorts, and Discord, type does double duty: it is the interface by which micro-lessons are delivered and the signal that orients attention and trust. Empirical work on microlearning shows that short, self-contained units; commonplace in carousels, short-form videos, and infographic tiles, can improve knowledge and confidence, particularly when paired with intentional design scaffolds (clear headings, cues) and social media delivery (De Gagne et al., 2019; Denojean-Mairet & Dillenbourg, 2024). Discipline-specific studies similarly report learning gains when Instagram is integrated as a structured teaching tool, and when TikTok is used to catalyze active learning intentions (Sandrone et al., 2024; Pérez-Marín et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2024). Discord complements these feeds by sustaining peer discussion and mentoring in between bites of content (Wiles et al., 2022; AlGhamdi, 2025).

It is also supported by Stojanović et al. (2019) explored how Instagram can enhance secondary education by motivating students through interactive "Instagram challenges" that encouraged learning new economics terms and developing environmental awareness. Results showed that students found Instagram engaging, motivational, and useful for learning, highlighting its potential as an effective, modern educational tool. The article by Vișan, A. M., Almășan, B. H., & Orășanu, A. (2019) examines how social media applications, specifically blogs, social networks, and video-sharing platforms, can be selected and integrated into the teaching-learning process. Through comparative analysis of platforms like Facebook, Google Plus, Blogger, WordPress, YouTube, and Vimeo, the authors conclude that while these tools were designed for informal contexts, they have become essential for communication, collaboration, and engagement in modern education, provided their pedagogical use, security, and management are carefully guided by teachers.

Microlearning patterns, carousels, and segmenting. Feed-native "chunks" work best when each frame carries one main idea, with a predictable structure (Title → key point → caption) and scannable text. Segmented presentations reduce extraneous processing and improve transfer in short-form video lessons; carousels mirror the same principle for static frames (Mayer, 2021; De Gagne et al., 2019). Empirical reviews integrating microlearning with social media report positive effects on satisfaction and outcomes across domains, provided the units are scoped tightly and navigable (Denojean-Mairet & Dillenbourg, 2024).

Digital Aesthetics, and First Impressions

Digital typography strongly shapes first impressions because aesthetic judgments happen within milliseconds.

In HCI, visual aesthetics comprises classical (simplicity, order) and expressive (creativity, originality) dimensions that influence perceived quality, trust, and usability (Lavie & Tractinsky, 2004). People form stable judgments in about 50 ms (Lindgaard et al., 2006), and layout simplicity, prototypicality, colorfulness, and cultural familiarity shape those reactions (Tuch et al., 2012; Reinecke & Gajos, 2014). Typography amplifies this: typefaces convey personality (trustworthy, modern, friendly) and signal identity even before reading (Shaikh et al., 2007), while experiments show serif versus sans-serif fonts affect trust, usability, loyalty, and satisfaction (Hall et al., 2018; Djamasbi et al., 2011).

Legibility/Readability Parameters and Performance

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Cognitive Load, and Emotional/Affective Processing

Typography influences both cognitive load and emotion. Clear fonts and organized layouts reduce mental effort and improve comprehension (Wästlund et al., 2008; Rello & Baeza-Yates, 2016), while overly decorative or disfluent fonts like Sans Forgetica hinder recall and motivation (Taylor, 2020; Huff et al., 2022; Tietz et al., 2025). Kinetic typography can attract attention but risks distraction (Lee & Park, 2023). Typography also evokes emotion: round, humanist fonts feel friendly, while geometric or serif types communicate trust and professionalism (Medved et al., 2023; Shaikh et al., 2007; Monotype, 2023). In short, effective typography balances cognitive ease with emotional appeal.

Credibility, Audience Engagement, and Platform Cues and Contexts

Typography on Gen Z's social media reflects platform culture and audience norms. Distinctive, platform-specific fonts act as quick authenticity signals, friendly rounded forms seem approachable, while ornate designs reduce credibility (Medved et al., 2023; Shaikh et al., 2007). Gen Z prioritizes peer validation and familiarity over institutional authority (van Zoonen, 2024); watermarks can signal credibility but vary by context (Ye, 2025). Serif fonts imply professionalism, while sans-serif suggests clarity and modernity (Monotype, 2023; Wästlund et al., 2008). Typography also triggers different trust responses across regions (Monotype, 2023). Platform type moderates these effects, visual-first apps like TikTok or Instagram amplify typographic influence more than textheavy platforms (Voorveld et al., 2018).

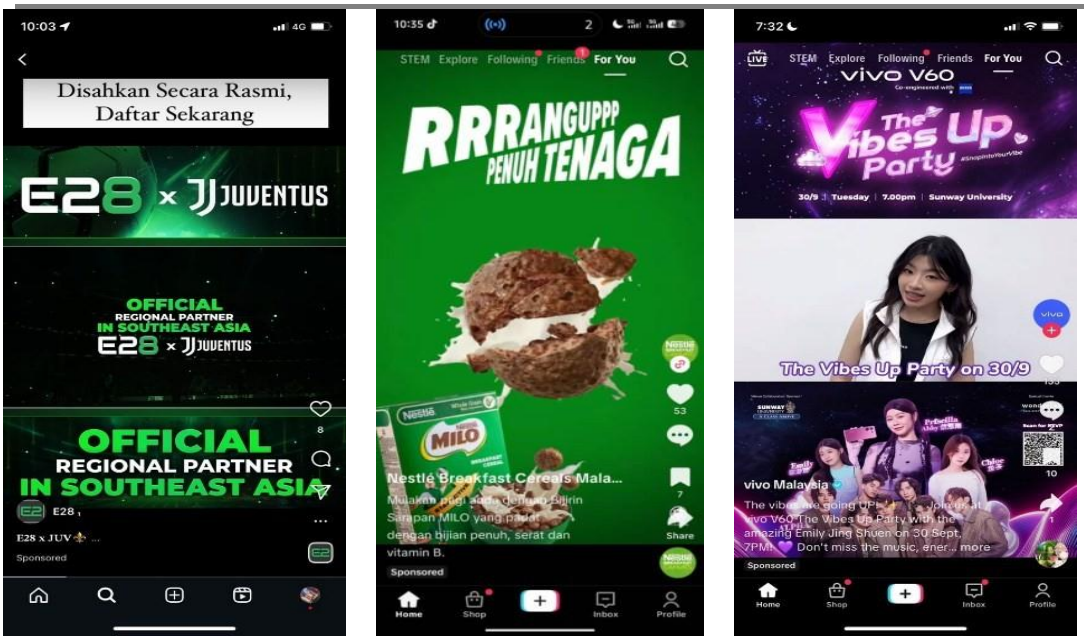

Fig. 1: Example of typography strategy in business marketing based on Generation Z's social media feed.

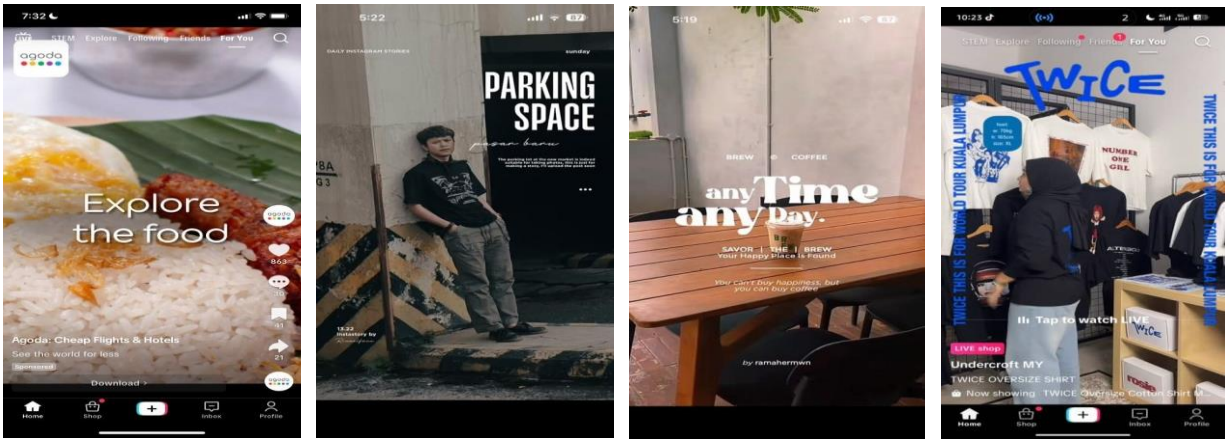

Fig. 2: Typography approaches in food, clothing, apparel, events, and lifestyle. The images are all from Gen Z's live feeds and carousels on TikTok, YouTube Shorts, and Instagram.

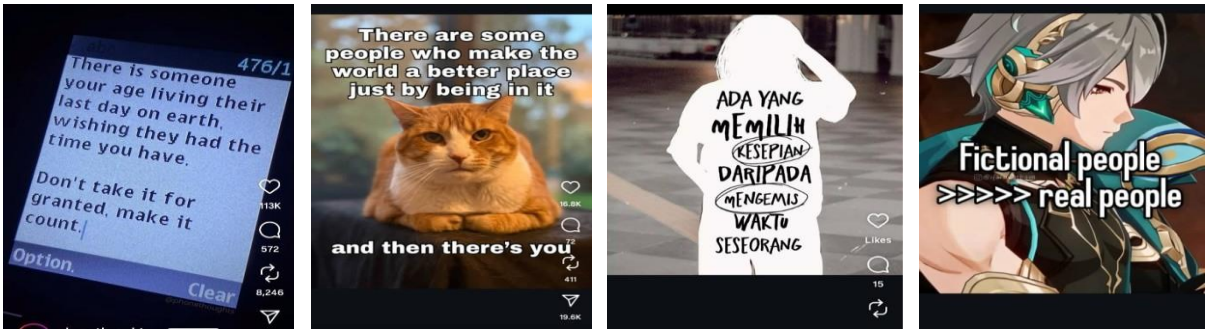

Fig. 3: The images illustrate the participatory culture among Generation Z on social media (TikTok, YouTube Shorts, and Instagram).

Conceptual Framework: Typography in Social Media

Core Idea: Typography as a Communication Tool

Typography on social media functions as a crucial visual communication tool that directly shapes user perception, engagement, and learning or brand outcomes. It is more than decoration, it is central to how

meaning is transmitted, how users navigate digital interfaces, and how they connect with content. The framework positions typographical parameters as independent variables, user responses as dependent variables, and platform characteristics alongside demographic factors as moderators of this relationship (Lupton, 2010; Lee, 2020). This perspective is grounded in research on visual communication, which shows that type selection influences readability, user trust, and affective responses in digital contexts (Shaikh, Chaparro, & Fox, 2006).

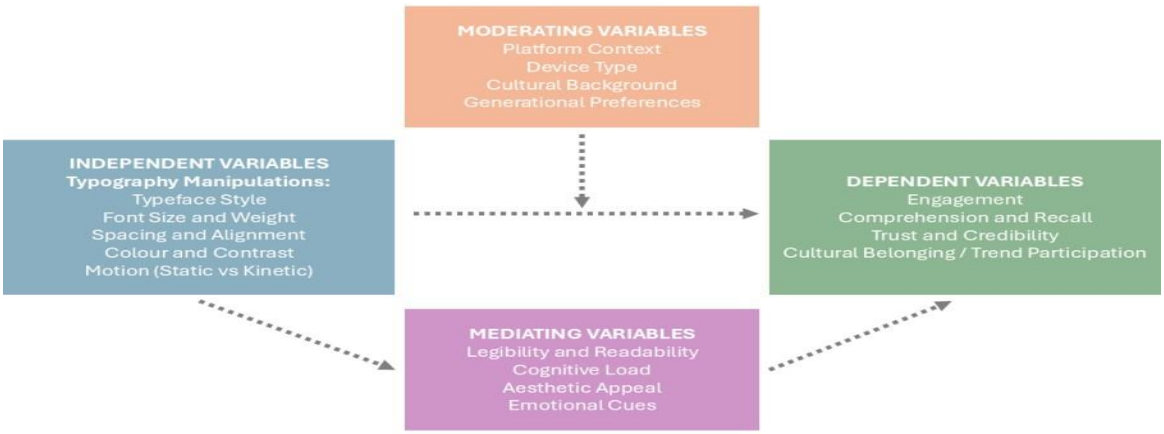

Fig. 4: Conceptual Framework for 'Understanding Typography Through Generation Z's Social Media Lens'
Independent Variables: Typographical Parameters

The independent variables within this framework are the diverse typographical parameters that define text appearance. Typeface style: serif, sans-serif, decorative, or script affects perceived personality and credibility (Brumberger, 2003). Font weight and size guide attention and establish hierarchy, while line spacing and alignment impact reading comfort and fluency (Dyson, 2013). Colour and contrast determine legibility by shaping the background-text relationship, especially on small-screen devices (Hall & Hanna, 2004). Motion or kinetic typography, such as animated or timed overlays, extends the expressive dimension of type in video-based platforms, creating temporally dynamic reading experiences (Satué, 2012; Fong, 2019).

Mediating Processes: From Visual Form to Cognitive and Emotional Effects

Between typographic design choices and user outcomes lie several mediating processes. Legibility and readability represent the ease of decoding text, both of which are necessary for comprehension (Larsen, 2014). Cognitive load reflects the mental effort users expend when processing content and typography simultaneously, influencing attention span and retention (Sweller, 2010). Aesthetic appeal fosters visual pleasure, modernity, and perceived trendiness, which in turn impact user attitudes and engagement (Reber, Schwarz, & Winkielman, 2004). Typography also conveys emotional cues: playful, serious, or authentic tones can be communicated through stylistic variations, influencing affective user responses (Lupton, 2010; Henderson, Giese, & Cote, 2004).

Moderating Variables: Contextual and Demographic Influences

The effects of typography are moderated by platform and demographic factors. Platform context matters because each social media platform has its own conventions and affordances. Instagram relies heavily on visual cohesion, TikTok emphasizes rapid video-text overlays, and Twitter/X favours concise text-based expression (Highfield & Leaver, 2016). Device type also shapes outcomes, as mobile interfaces prioritize clarity and brevity, while desktop platforms afford more detailed typographic presentation (Mangen, Walgermo, & Brønnick, 2013).

Cultural background plays a significant role, as semiotic interpretations of typefaces, colours, and layout differ across regions (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Finally, generational preferences influence perceptions: Gen Z

tends to value authenticity, minimalism, and playful experimentation with type, while Millennials often prefer structured, professional, and brand-cohesive presentations (Fromm & Read, 2018).

Dependent Variables: User Outcomes

The dependent variables in this framework capture both behavioural and cognitive user outcomes. Engagement metrics, such as number of likes, shares, comments, and watch time, these provide quantifiable evidence of interaction (Cvijikj & Michahelles, 2013). Typography also supports comprehension and recall by influencing how well users understand and remember content (Dyson & Suen, 2002). Trust and credibility are shaped by font choices, as certain typefaces enhance brand perception and willingness to follow or purchase, while others diminish professionalism (Shaikh et al., 2006). Typography also contributes to cultural belonging and trend participation, as users align themselves with typographic aesthetics that signal identity and community affiliation within digital subcultures (Jenkins, 2006; Papacharissi, 2015).

Integrative View

Taken together, this conceptual framework positions typography as a powerful factor in digital communication. Typographical decisions influence not only visual clarity but also emotional tone, cultural alignment, and trustworthiness. By linking typographic variables to user outcomes through mediating and moderating factors, the framework demonstrates typography's capacity to amplify engagement, foster learning, and strengthen brand relationships across social media platforms.

Problem Statement and Objectives

Typography is increasingly central to the way communication unfolds in digital culture. On social media, typography is not only a medium of information delivery but also a cultural symbol, shaping how Generation Z expresses identity and participates in online communities. While typography's role in enhancing visual literacy has been established (Poon, 2021), much of the existing scholarship focuses on general digital communication or e-learning contexts rather than social media trends.

For instance, Nordin, Singh, and Mansor (2021) highlighted that Gen Z students are highly sensitive to design characteristics such as colour and graphics when interacting with digital platforms. This suggests that visual elements, including typography, play a decisive role in sustaining attention and engagement. Similarly, Wibowo and Zainuddin (2024) observed that design elements often serve as trend markers in digital participatory culture. Yet, research seldom isolates typography as the focus of such cultural and generational trends.

This reveals a clear gap: despite typography's critical role in shaping visual literacy and digital identity, limited attention has been given to understanding how typography becomes a trend within Gen Z's social media use. Addressing this gap is essential for both scholars and practitioners seeking to understand the cultural value of typography in contemporary digital communication.

Thus, there are few aims that can be formulate from this topic. The main objectives are as follows:

1. To examine the role of typography as a cultural and communicative tool in Generation Z's social media interactions, focusing on how typographic choices shape identity, participation, and trend formation.
2. To analyze the relationship between typography and engagement outcomes in mobile-first, feed-based environments such as TikTok, Instagram, YouTube Shorts, and Discord.
3. To evaluate the integration of typographic strategies with microlearning principles, particularly how text design supports knowledge transfer, attention management, and community learning in digital platforms.
4. To propose design guidelines for practitioners and educators that align with the cultural preferences of Generation Z, enabling more effective use of typography in branding, education, and social communication.

METHODOLOGY

The qualitative depth via semi structured interviews also could be implemented and think-aloud protocols as participants interact with experimental and live posts. Transcripts are analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis with deliberate attention to credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

The study integrates evidence that microlearning via social platforms can improve satisfaction and outcomes when units are scoped and navigable, and that Instagram/TikTok can support discipline-specific learning when embedded in structured pedagogy and accompanied by peer interaction.

This study will adopt a mixed-methods experimental design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to explore the impact of typography on social media engagement, comprehension, and trust. A between-subjects experiment will be conducted where participants are randomly assigned to different typography conditions (e.g., typeface, size, contrast, motion). The quantitative strand will assess typographical effects on comprehension, cognitive load, and engagement, while a qualitative strand (focus groups and interviews) will capture cultural and generational interpretations of typography. This design aligns with recommendations for multimedia and digital content research that integrate experimental control with ecological validity (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Neuman, 2014).

Data Collection Procedures

Participants will be active social media users aged 13–35 (born 1997–2012), covering Gen Z cohorts who represent the most typography-sensitive demographics in digital platforms (Turner, 2015), recruited through online advertising and university mailing lists, with eligibility requiring at least three hours per week of active use on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube Shorts, or Twitter/X, and a priori power analysis using G*Power ($f = .15$, $\alpha = .05$, power = .80) indicating a minimum of 135 participants per condition, yielding a total sample of approximately 400–600 participants (Cohen, 1992). The study adopts a two-phase mixed-methods design integrating quantitative experimentation and qualitative validation to examine how typography influences user engagement and perception on social media following Creswell and Plano Clark's (2018) triangulation framework. In the quantitative phase, participants will first complete an online pre-test survey to capture demographic and platform usage data, then be exposed to 3–5 randomized typographically manipulated posts or short videos varying in typeface, font weight, spacing, colour contrast, and motion, after which engagement intention, trust, aesthetics, belonging, cognitive load, and readability will be captured through Likert scales (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994; Shaikh, Chaparro, & Fox, 2006), comprehension tests (multiple choice questions), and behavioural analytics such as dwell time, click-through rate, engagement actions, and eye-tracking to capture attentional focus (Rayner, 2009), including manipulation checks (e.g., "The text contrast was high") to confirm perception of typography conditions. In the qualitative phase, 20–30 participants will join focus groups or semistructured interviews to explore aesthetic and emotional interpretations of typography, revealing how typographic tone and style convey authenticity, trend alignment, and social identity (Papacharissi, 2015), extending the quantitative findings with thematic insights (Braun & Clarke, 2006). All procedures will comply with institutional ethical guidelines: informed consent will be obtained electronically, participants may withdraw at any time, data will be stored anonymously, reported in aggregate only, and ethical approval will be obtained from the relevant institutional review board.

Analysis

Data Analysis Technique

Quantitative data will be analysed using SPSS and/or AMOS in several sequential stages. First, data screening will be performed to detect outliers, missing responses, and normality issues, followed by reliability testing (Cronbach's alpha > .70) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to ensure measurement validity for readability, cognitive load, trust, aesthetics, and belonging constructs. Descriptive statistics will summarize participant profiles and platform usage patterns. Hypothesis testing will proceed using one-way or factorial ANOVA to determine whether typographic manipulations (typeface class, weight, spacing, contrast, motion)

produce significant differences in dependent variables (engagement intention, trust, readability, comprehension, cognitive load). Regression models and structural equation modelling (SEM) will test directional relationships between typography predictors and engagement outcomes, including mediating effects (e.g., readability → cognitive load → trust). Behavioural metrics (dwell time, CTR, clicks, scroll depth) will be triangulated with perceptual ratings to assess whether subjective perceptions align with behavioural responses.

Qualitative analysis will apply Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis steps: familiarisation, initial coding, theme generation, review, definition, and naming. Transcripts from interviews/focus groups will be coded inductively and deductively focusing on how participants describe "authentic," "professional," "friendly," or "trendy" typography, including platform-specific language (e.g., TikTok style vs Instagram aesthetic). Crosscase comparison will examine how typography meanings vary across demographic sub-groups (e.g., younger vs older Gen Z). These qualitative insights will be used to interpret, explain, or nuance the quantitative findings, especially when numerical results indicate contrast effects between typography conditions. Using NVivo, thematic links will be mapped to quantitative findings, providing interpretive depth. Integrating both strands ensures methodological triangulation and a comprehensive understanding of how typography shapes users' cognitive processing and emotional engagement on digital platforms.

Finally, integration of both data strands will follow a side-by-side joint display comparison (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) to identify convergence, complementarity, or discrepancy between experimental outcomes and participants' interpretive accounts. This ensures the overall interpretation is not merely statistically significant, but contextually meaningful and culturally grounded in Gen Z's platform-specific typographic norms.

DISCUSSION

This study highlights typography as a central element in shaping digital interactions among Generation Z. The findings emphasize that typography functions beyond its decorative role, becoming an essential tool for identity expression, cultural signaling, and engagement across social media platforms. Typography acts as a bridge between content and audience, influencing trust, attention, and perceived credibility. Through the review of microlearning practices and participatory culture, it becomes clear that typography contributes not only to communication efficiency but also to community-building. Consistent use of typographic systems fosters recognition and reliability, while creative variations allow for trend formation and cultural resonance within digital communities.

The integration of quantitative and qualitative methods further strengthens the contribution of this work. Quantitative measures help capture the scale and consistency of engagement outcomes, while qualitative insights reveal the nuanced ways in which Gen Z users perceive, interact with, and assign meaning to typographic designs. Together, these dimensions provide a holistic view of typography as both a communicative and cultural artifact. In practice, the discussion extends implications for educators, designers, and brands. Educators can leverage typographic strategies to enhance knowledge retention in mobile-first learning environments. Brands can harness typography as a tool to maintain authenticity and relevance in high-velocity feeds. Designers, meanwhile, are encouraged to balance clarity with creativity to produce engaging, culturally aligned visual narratives.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the critical role typography plays in shaping communication, engagement, and perception in social media environments. Typography is not merely a design choice; it operates as a strategic variable that influences how users interpret, process, and respond to digital content. By examining typeface style, font weight and size, spacing, contrast, and kinetic motion, the framework demonstrates how typographic parameters intersect with cognitive, emotional, and cultural processes to drive user outcomes. The conceptual framework developed here situates typography as a mediator between visual communication and user behaviour. Legibility, readability, cognitive load, aesthetic appeal, and emotional tone serve as mechanisms that explain how typographic choices affect comprehension, recall, trust, and credibility. At the same time, contextual moderators including platform conventions, device type, cultural background, and generational preferences, underscore the importance of situating typographic research within diverse media ecologies.

The implications are both theoretical and practical. For researchers, this framework provides a foundation for systematic inquiry into the measurable impact of typography on digital learning, branding, and social media engagement. For practitioners, particularly designers, educators, and marketers, the findings emphasize that typography should be carefully aligned with audience needs and platform affordances to maximize clarity, trust, and participation in cultural trends. In conclusion, typography in social media extends far beyond aesthetic surface, it is integral to meaning-making, identity formation, and community engagement in the digital age. Future research should validate this framework through empirical studies that measure typography's impact across platforms, devices, and cultural contexts, thereby bridging design theory with real-world application.

Future Work

While this conceptual framework establishes the foundations for understanding the role of typography in social media, future research should empirically validate its propositions. Experimental studies using eye-tracking technologies can provide insights into how typographic features such as line spacing, contrast, and kinetic effects guide attention and affect reading fluency across platforms. Controlled comparisons between generational cohorts, such as Gen Z versus Millennials, can shed light on preference patterns and cultural interpretations of typography.

Further, mixed method approaches that combine quantitative measures of engagement metrics (likes, shares, watch time) with qualitative approach (interviews or surveys) can help capture the nuanced perceptions of trust, authenticity, and cultural belonging conveyed by type. Longitudinal studies could also explore how evolving typographic trends interact with platform design changes over time. By pursuing these directions, scholars and practitioners can move beyond abstract theorization toward evidence-driven insights that connect typographic practice with social media outcomes. Such research will not only refine theoretical models of legibility, readability, and affect but also inform practical guidelines for educators, marketers, and designers seeking to optimize communication in digital spaces.

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