Caught in the Scroll: A Psycholinguistic Exploration of FOMO and Viral Language Among Gen Z on Social Media

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Abstract

This study examines the psycholinguistic aspects of the FOMO, or Fear of Missing Out, phenomenon in the context of viral language on social media, especially TikTok, Instagram, and X, formerly known as Twitter. Generation Z, as a group born in the digital era, shows strong emotional and behavioural responses to viral content. With a qualitative approach, this study analyses multimodal texts such as captions, hashtags, audio, and visual elements that give rise to a sense of urgency, social inclusion, and emotional resonance. The results show that viral language patterns, when combined with synchronous visual and audio elements and celebrity influence, significantly trigger FOMO-based engagement. In addition, parasocial relationships and cultural validation play an important role in shaping users' behaviour, especially in the K-pop fan community. This study provides psycholinguistic insights into how language on social media is processed, internalised, and replicated by Gen Z audiences. In conclusion, critical awareness is needed regarding the psychological impact of viral discourse and its influence on identity formation and digital well-being.

Keywords: *viral language, FOMO, Generation Z, social media, psycholinguistics, multimodal discourse, K-pop fandom*

Introduction

Social media is currently booming among Generation Z or commonly abbreviated as Gen Z who have made social media a tool for communication and fast interaction between platform users. In addition, Gen Z who were born between 1997 and 2012 use social media for group formation, identity designation, creativity and emotional expression. Gen Z is described with its special digital nature, consistent interaction activities and also in responding quickly to trends in social media. Among the psychological problems that always occur now is the Fear of Missing Out or people always call and abbreviate it as FOMO. A hypothesis that describes anxiety for someone who is not involved in seeing others who are in a profitable experience (Przybylski et al., 2013).

The emergence of viral language or words on social media whose language structure can attract and influence platform users increasingly shows how it impacts users psychologically. Language style often invites emotional power and encouragement that instills subtle cues about urgent circumstances, exclusivity and social membership (Eriksson, 2020). This language pattern has a strong impact on emotions and makes Gen Z seek meaning and social value in digital relationships that make them speculate about behaving instantly without thinking about future effects and making their emotional reactivity increase rapidly.

Psycholinguistics as the study of how language is processed and produced in the mind, the combination of psychology and linguistics helps one understand how language, emotion, and cognition are interrelated (Altarriba and Basnight-Brown, 2011). Especially if this can be explored about how a language not only reflects a person's mental state, but language can also shape a person's mind. Especially if it happens on a large social media user such as TikTok, Instagram or X (formerly Twitter).

With that, this article aims to investigate and explain how viral language in the form of videos or posts on social media can support and show FOMO that occurs in Gen Z from a psycholinguistic perspective. This article seeks to explore how emotional and cognitive responses arise when individuals or users are exposed to linguistic cues that appear in trending content. This research is qualitative in nature and hopes to provide insight or awareness about the interactions between language and psychological processes in this digital era.

Related Literature

1. Psycholinguistics: Foundational Perspectives

In the realm of psycholinguistics, as an interdisciplinary field, it examines how cognitive mechanisms are basically the understanding, production and acquisition of language. This field discusses how language can be presented and then processed in the human mind which is often through the lens of mental structures, memory and real-time processes (Traxler, 2012). Particularly among younger generations whose exposure to language is impacted by technology, the issue has become more relevant in recent years regarding how digital environments and multimodal input affect language processing.

Apart from being a tool of communication, language serves as a lane opening emotional and cognitive paths. This statement is supported by research showing that language on social media that contains emotion can encourage deeper processing and faster interaction engagement (Kissler et al., 2007). From a psycholinguistic perspective, such emotional reactions occur in short, highly contextual online communications and are closely linked to semantic priming, just as is often the case in social media.

Furthermore, in the age of social media, fast and concise language places different mental demands than we traditionally read or speak. These demands include things like rapid focus shifting, visual image processing, and instantaneous comprehension of meaning. This is where psycholinguistics comes into play, helping us understand how this process occurs (Dörnyei and Ryan, 2015). Psycholinguistics then offers the theoretical

framework for examining how viral language influences Gen Z's digital cognition and emotion.

2. FOMO and Digital Anxiety in Online Environments

Particularly among Gen Z users who show significant degrees of digital immersion, fear of missing out (FOMO) has become a main psychological concept linked with social media use recently. Although Przybylski et al. (2013) have already examined the conceptual foundation of FOMO, more recent studies have proven how greatly digital surroundings and algorithmic curation affect users' mental stability.

According to Elhai, Yang and Montag (2021) research, shows how closely poor smartphone use is linked to FOMO in online environments, therefore supporting obsessive checking behavior and causing additional digital suffering. Not simply a by-product of being online, this digital anxiety is frequently a direct result of exposure to idealized representations of others' lives on social networking sites (Walkowicz et al., 2023). The crafting of highlight reels presents a distorted perspective of reality that, under intellectual control, can lead to continuous tension and a diminished sense of self-worth.

Research also reveals that digital FOMO operates both consciously and unconsciously. According to Bányai et al. (2021) claim that the instantaneous character of viral information aggravates anticipatory anxiety brought on by the fear of social isolation resulting from online separation. Notifications, live updates, and fading stories all contribute to the urgency that motivates users to be continually engaged, psychologically blurring the line between connection and compulsion.

Social comparison systems also increase the emotional cost of FOMO. As social media platforms gradually employ algorithmic personalization, therefore sustaining a cognitive-emotional loop of envy, inadequacy, and digital dependency. Li et al. (2022) assert that people frequently encounter content that aligns with their aspirations or concerns. These trends mean that FOMO is no longer only an emotional reaction; on social platforms, verbal, visual and contextual clues have become a continuous cognitive state that is activated. This state closely corresponds with psycholinguistic issues about how language and communication in digital environments stimulate emotional processing, affective meaning and behavioral results.

3. Viral Language and Linguistic Triggers

Viral content on social media has added a new layer of language processing, combining speed, emotion and mass social replication. Generally marked by memorable lines, emotional clues, and memetic qualities, viral language generally stimulates immediate cognitive responses, especially among Generation Z digital natives. These are not just passive readings; these interactions are active engagements produced by the mix of psychological conditions and language cues.

Recent research shows that the way viral material uses language, thus repeating words, exaggerating, and employing emotional slang, may set off psychological reactions, thereby increasing the visibility and emotional effect of the material (Tagg, 2022). Such traits set off fast-track processing processes in the brain, which raise emotional arousal and attentiveness. Psycholinguistic studies demonstrating that emotionally charged words can directly influence behavior by avoiding deliberate processing line up with this result (Kiss et al., 2023).

Platforms like X, Instagram, and TikTok are particularly effective in spreading these language patterns because of their algorithmic amplification. Viral trends often suggest urgency ("don't miss out"), belonging ("we all do this"), or exclusivity ("only true fans will get it"), which can influence meaning and result in compulsive participation (Jones and Bunting, 2021).

Working memory limits and enhanced social sensitivity are cognitive components that accentuate these patterns in Gen Z viewers, hence raising their sensitivity to emotionally charged content and hence their vulnerability. Young people, especially Gen Z who are active on social media, are usually very sensitive to words or language that contain emotions. Words like this can indeed make people more involved in the conversation, but they can also make them anxious or act immediately without thinking first (Nguyen and Sun, 2020). Viral language itself is not just a trend, but also has a psychological connection. From there, it can influence how individuals think, feel something, to how humans behave in the digital world. Through catchy words or full of certain meanings, viral language also describes what the online culture that is currently developing is like. By understanding how this digital communication works, people can be more aware of how much emotional energy is actually released every time an individual is involved in it.

4. Psycholinguistic Perspectives on FOMO and Viral Language

Psycholinguistically, in a digital environment, one may more easily understand the interaction between language and psychological states, which combines cognitive and emotional components. Basically, psycholinguistics is the study of human mind processing, creating, and understanding of language (Harley, 2014). Applied to digital phenomena such as FOMO or viral language trends, psycholinguistics can help understand how the brain processes language to trigger emotional reactions or form certain habits. This discipline provides a deep insight into how words can directly connect to feelings and how people act on social media.

Recent research shows that emotionally charged words, such as those frequently found in social media posts, are more easily remembered and processed by the brain than neutral words (de la Vega et al., 2021). This means that when people are exposed to emotional language, they tend to have a more immediate and intense emotional reaction. This reaction can then reinforce the sense of urgency or fear of missing out (FOMO) that often occurs in the context of social media. In other words, emotional language not only attracts attention, but also helps shape the psychological experience that makes individuals feel the need to immediately respond or get involved in a trend.

In addition to their function to attract attention, emotional words and phrases can also activate certain parts of the brain that play a role in sensing risk, evaluating rewards or benefits, and making quick decisions (Bayer et al., 2020). This activation does not happen by chance, but because the brain naturally responds more strongly to language that is considered emotionally important. If individuals, especially Gen Z, are continuously exposed to content like this on social media, the impact can be long-term. Not only does it cause mental fatigue, but it can also disrupt their emotional balance and their ability to understand and process language information in depth. This means that exposure to emotional content that is too intense can affect the way they think, feel, or respond to information in everyday life.

Typically intended to have a strong psychological impact, the language used in social media is often designed to be easily digestible and quickly affect emotions. These linguistic stimuli involve features such as short sentences, catchy rhythms, the use of visuals such as emojis, and a style of language that is informal and close to the user's everyday life (Koban et al., 2021). These elements help the brain process information quickly and respond emotionally without thinking too much. In a fast-paced digital context, this kind of response is commonplace. However, without realizing it, repeated exposure to this style of communication can increase an individual's tendency to compare themselves to others and feel anxious if they don't get involved immediately. Ultimately, the urge to stay active, respond, and follow viral trends is driven not only by interest, but also by social pressure that grows subtly but consistently.

Therefore, particularly in the viral, emotionally charged surroundings of modern social media, one may understand how language actively shapes emotional and cognitive processes rather than just reflecting them by means of a psycholinguistic approach.

Methodology

This paper investigates the psycholinguistic relationship between Generation Z FOMO experience and viral language on social media using a qualitative research methodology. A qualitative approach is suitable since it can identify minor emotional and cognitive reactions that statistical techniques would miss (Braun and Clarke, 2019).

From a chosen sample of viral social media content, including TikTok videos, Instagram Reels, and Twitter posts, now X, the primary statistics were compiled. The selection of the material was based on its high level of engagement and use of emotionally charged or persuasive language. Content selection criteria comprised (1) use of trending hashtags; (2) inclusion of linguistic signals, including urgency ('don't miss out'), exclusivity ('just for you)," and collective participation ('everyone is doing this); and (3) minimum engagement of 100,000 views or interactions.

Apart from content analysis, the study depends on informal narrative reflection from the main researcher, a Gen Z digital native who documents personal FOMO experiences generated by viral language. A reflexive approach in line with psycholinguistic research (Pavlenko, 2012) helps to better understand how such language affects emotional states and thinking.

The researcher used thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model, to examine the data: familiarisation with it, generating initial codes, looking for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and preparing the report. The researcher paid particular attention to the psycholinguistic components hidden in the employed language, such as semantic framing, emotional valence, and connotative meanings.

Particularly in the context of digital conduct among Generation Z, this methodology allows an integrated analysis of language, emotion, and behavioural intention, enabling the study to meaningfully contribute to the field of psycholinguistics.

Data Analysis

This study focusses on naturalistic observations of social media interactions. The qualitative data in this study comes especially from TikTok, Instagram, and X (previously Twitter), where viral language use is very prevalent. Grounded in psycholinguistic theory, the study emphasises how emotionally charged, trend-based language shapes Generation Z users' thinking and behaviour.

Among the many language trends seen in viral uploads are emotionally manipulative captions and audio hooks. Phrases like "*you need to see this*", "*don't miss out*", or "*this changed my life*" are prevalent in viral uploads. Particularly when accompanied with fast engagement statistics (likes, comments, shares) indicating group involvement and social validation, these phrases provoke psychological FOMO-related reactions. Psycholinguistics can help one interpret the urgency ingrained in such language as a kind of affective priming, where the emotional tone of language affects cognitive responses (Citron et al., 2020).

Videos that have popular music and text on top tend to engage two different ways of processing information, according to a theory in cognitive psychology that says both language and non-language parts of the brain are used at the same time (Kissler et al., 2007). A viral film, for example, that highlights a product with captions like "Why everyone is obsessed with this" combines visual evidence with persuasive language to provoke the user's emotional and linguistic reaction, usually leading to hasty digital activity like instant purchase or sharing.

Many of the TikTok phenomena investigated over this period, including the Labubu trend, viral skincare routines and "a day in my life" vlogs, use recurring language patterns and catchphrases that serve as social scripts. Reflecting the echo chamber effect, where language becomes recycled and internalised through repetition, reinforcing behavioural norms (Alfano et al., 2022), Gen Z users often imitate similar structures in their posts.

Psychologically, these kinds of linguistic patterns affect both cognitive and behavioural aspects. Regular usage of "viral" phrases and discourse templates can induce semantic satiation, in which case regular use reduces the emotional depth of some phrases but increases their processing fluency (Lütdke and Jacobs, 2015). This effect generates a paradox: although language may lose originality, familiarity gives it persuasive force that drives people to interact not out of actual interest but rather because the linguistic structure encourages them to respond.

Furthermore often included in Gen Z's online dialogue are self-referential language as "*me when I...*", "*as a Gen Z, I can't*" which imply a mix of identity development and language performance (Tagg et al., 2017). This data reveals a more complicated psycholinguistic process whereby language becomes the medium and the message of social membership, therefore increasing FOMO for those who feel linguistic exclusion or miss involvement in viral trends..

Findings

This section provides the study's findings based on qualitative data analysis of viral language recorded on X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and TikTok. The data were examined from a psycholinguistic standpoint to see how textual and multimodal elements

helped Generation Z's FOMO (fear of missing out) be conveyed. We structured the findings topically, emphasising viral language patterns and their psychological effects on consumers.

1. Emotional and Persuasive Language in Viral Trends

On TikTok, Instagram, and X, the language that most often triggers FOMO is the one that is intentionally designed to touch the emotional side of users. Beyond simply providing information, many viral content uses sentences that sound urgent or full of social pressure, such as *"You have to see this"* *"Everyone is talking about this"* or *"This literally changed my life"*. These phrases work like subconscious signals that instill in the mind that if someone doesn't see or try it, they will be left behind. This creates a kind of collective pressure that feels real, especially on platforms that are fast-paced and constantly updated.

For example, on TikTok, videos promoting skincare often use captions like "This literally made my skin clear overnight!" or *"Everyone should try this because there are so many testimonials"*. The words *"literally"* or *"everyone"* are used for a reason, they are chosen to make the claim feel absolute, dramatic, and emotionally relatable. On X, more passive-aggressive forms sometimes appear, such as the tweet *"I don't want to follow this trend until I know the results. But I also don't want to be the last"*. Sentences like this show the typical dilemma of social media users who want to look different, but are also afraid of being left behind.

Using language like this is not just a style, but a proven effective communication strategy. Content that is emotionally relevant will be more easily stored in human memory and trigger a quick reaction from the brain, either in the form of likes, shares or comments (Altikriti, 2021; Lodder et al., 2022). Moreover, if accompanied by evocative visuals such as before-after videos, aesthetic filters, or dramatic facial expressions, it will increase its appeal. For audiences, especially Gen Z who grew up with an intense digital rhythm, this kind of language is not only attractive but also creates internal pressure to act immediately. Not because they really need it, but because they don't want to feel "left behind" by others.

2. Multimodal Triggers

In this highly visual and fast-changing era of social media, viral content relies not only on words, but also on a combination of sensory elements, especially moving images, overlay text, and voice-overs. Content on TikTok and Instagram often combines text scripts such as "Here's a sign you should try this now" with dramatic transitions, sparkling visual effects and trending music or background sounds. All are carefully selected to create a complete emotional experience for the audience.

One example that is often found is TikTok videos about cosmetic or skincare tips, which begin with claims such as "I swear this saves my rushed mornings". The video usually starts with a disheveled or messy face, then changes with the video transition to a glowing and neat version in just a few seconds, thanks to smooth transitions and synchronized audio beats. The coherence between text, visuals and sound provides an instant sensation that is easy to imitate, enjoyable to watch and memorable.

The combination of these elements creates multimodal triggers, which are stimuli from various sensory channels that work together to reinforce the message being conveyed. For Gen Z, who have been accustomed to consuming dynamic content since childhood,

this experience feels natural and very interesting. They not only see or hear, but also feel the entire narrative in a short time. This effect not only increases memory retention of the content, but also encourages them to imitate or re-share similar videos, because they feel emotionally and visually relevant (Lindgren, 2020).

Moreover, this multimodality reduces the cognitive load in processing information. Content that is integrated audio and visual tends to be processed faster and more efficiently by the brain, thus strengthening its persuasive effect. For young audiences who often multitask or are easily distracted, this format is a form of communication that feels light but still has an impact. So it is not surprising that content like this often succeeds in creating a sense of urgency to follow trends, even without providing rational arguments or more effort, simply through a strong sensory experience.

3. Cultural and Social Virality

Combining sentimental, artistic, or challenge-based forms usually helps cultural events become viral. One such instance in point is the Dalgona Candy fad from the Squid Game series, which shot up on Instagram and TikTok during the epidemic. Using homemade sugar candy, users recreated the game scene under captions like "*Only real fans can do this!*" or "*This brings me back*". The trend profits from visual gratification and common reminiscence.

Likewise, the Ghibli Filter movement let users create Studio Ghibli-style animations out of everyday settings, which encouraged broad involvement because of its emotional and visual appeal. Often used in these postings, "This made me cry in 0.2 seconds" denotes instantaneous emotional reaction. Many consumers even asked AI products like ChatGPT to combine family photographs into Ghibli-style cartoon images. But when Studio Ghibli officially objected to the trend, perceiving it as a kind of disrespect toward the original creators, the general adoption of this filter begged ethical questions. The movement kept gaining momentum even as knowledge of these issues grew, showing how FOMO and aesthetic attraction may overcome ethical reluctance.

Another phenomenon of trend VELOCITY was seen whereby a movement quickly jumps from a niche group to worldwide popularity. Originally starting in Indonesia, K-pop stars like members of ENHYPEN, TXT, 8TURN and NCT rapidly embraced one TikTok trend, hence increasing its impact. This demonstrates how celebrity cultural approval speeds FOMO and trend acceptance.

4. Product Hype and FOMO-Driven Consumption

In many viral trends on TikTok, Instagram, or X, consumer products often take center stage, especially self-care items like skincare, fashion, or everyday gadgets. Skintific products, for example, have appeared repeatedly in Instagram Reels and TikTok content as instant solutions that "save your skin" or "make you regret finding out now." These phrases not only convey the effectiveness of the product, but also build a narrative that anyone who hasn't tried it is considered to be missing out or missing out on a valuable opportunity.

This type of language works by emphasizing urgency and regret, which are key emotional triggers in the FOMO experience. Visually supported claims like before-and-afters of facial skin or videos of satisfied reactions after trying the product create an experience that others have already experienced great benefits. Even on X, tweets like

"Everyone on my TL is using this, I think I should join in," show subtle social pressure to follow a trend even when there is no immediate need.

This pressure comes not only from the content itself, but also from the collective perception that a trend is happening and "everyone" is already a part of it. Such situations create a fear of missing out, especially when the product or trend is presented as something common, profitable, and enjoyable. In this context, consumption is no longer driven by functional needs, but rather by an emotional urge to fit into a social circle that appears to be enjoying something together.

Zhang et al. (2023) explain that FOMO increases significantly when someone witnesses implicit social exclusion, when they see others participating in an experience that is collective and enjoyable. Viral language that frames the experience as a game-changer or must-have triggers the perception that without the product or trend, someone will miss out on something important that many people are already enjoying. This strengthens the relationship between FOMO-based consumption and the dominant emotional language on social media.

5. K-pop and Fandom-Driven Trends

Particularly on X and TikTok, K-pop fandoms actively help to create viral linguistic terms causing FOMO. Fans replied with comments like "*If Heeseung uses it, I'm buying it*" or "*I joined just because they did*", when ENHYPEN engaged in TikTok trends or product pushes. Based on celebrity affirmation and in-group engagement, these fan-driven interactions produce a cycle of want.

Through performances in variety programs, music videos, and livestreams, K-pop idols also set trends beyond direct endorsements. Items like clothes, makeup, accessories, and even commonplace objects shown on TV frequently inspire copycats. Using hashtags like #couplelook or #sameitem to mimic their celebrities, fans specifically search for comparable things, therefore reinforcing FOMO through aspirational consumption.

Parasocial ties in digital environments have a convincing influence on the emotional and behavioral results of viral language. Park and Lee (2021) highlight the close connection between fan interactions in K-pop settings, identity building, and perceived intimacy, which exacerbates FOMO-related behaviors.

The evidence amply shows that viral language functions on both emotional and social levels, usually depending on multimodal reinforcement to cause FOMO among Generation Z. From seductive descriptions to synchronised sounds to celebrity engagement, these linguistic and semiotic signals drive audience involvement, imitation, and consumer behaviour. Supporting previous studies, all findings show how viral content affects our attention, memory, and choices, giving us a deeper understanding of the online environment.

Conclusion

This paper investigated the psycholinguistic processes underlying viral language and FOMO among Generation Z users on Instagram, X, and TikTok. Qualitatively, we found

that celebrity-driven trends, multimodal triggers, and emotionally compelling language all contribute to increased engagement and FOMO-driven behavior.

Furthermore, the function of fandoms and parasocial ties magnifies this impact, particularly in K-pop culture, when fans copy their idols' behavior and endorsements in an aspirational manner. The emotional connection seen in these digital exchanges further erases the distinction between fandom and identification, encouraging a cycle of trend copying motivated by anxiety of exclusion.

Finally, the interaction among language, media affordances, and social validation emphasizes how FOMO serves as a cognitive and emotional reaction in a digital environment. This study demands more critical awareness of how online discourse impacts not only trends but also identity and mental well-being by connecting viral language traits with behavioral results, therefore contributing to psycholinguistic knowledge.

Future research could build on this study by adding neurological approaches, longitudinal data, or cross-cultural comparisons to better map the whole influence of viral language in forming user experience and emotional involvement.

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