


The use of gen alpha slang as a persuasive language in Instagram reels marketing

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ABSTRACT

Social media marketing has been increasingly used to advertise products and services, especially through Instagram reels. This study investigates how Generation Alpha slang functions as persuasive language in marketing on Instagram reels. Using a qualitative case study design, 15 influencer reels were examined through thematic analysis of comments and engagement metrics, including likes, shares, saves and views. The results indicate that reels incorporating Gen Alpha slang and non-fiction storytelling achieved higher engagement rates than those using formal English or rhetorical questions. These findings are interpreted through the Elaboration Likelihood Model, Uses and Gratifications Theory, and Persuasion Theory, which collectively explain how slang operates as a peripheral cue, fulfills social identity needs, and enhances persuasion through increased liking and social proof. While the results provide insight into emerging generational language trends in digital marketing, the study's scope is limited by its small sample size, convenience sampling, and the absence of intercoder reliability testing. Future research should adopt larger, systematically coded datasets to validate and expand on these findings.

Keywords: generation alpha slang, persuasive language, Instagram reels, social media marketing, audience engagement, content analysis, storytelling techniques

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RESEARCH & PUBLISHING



1. INTRODUCTION

Instagram reels are the most engaging content type, allowing posts to gain more likes and comments than pictures and videos (Liang & Wolfe, 2022; Socialinsider, 2023). This rise in reels is due to the increasing trend of short-form video content, which provides entertainment, highlighting its role as a platform for quick, enjoyable, and visually appealing content that captures attention. The short-form video format is ideal for providing a steady flow of engaging and digestible videos, which are often humorous or creative (Doloi, 2024). More specifically, smartphones are used vertically, and these reels are in the form of vertical videos that engage users more than horizontal videos by not forcing them to flip the phone (Menon, 2022). This reflects broader shifts in digital marketing, where short-form, interactive, and socially embedded content is recognized as a key driver of engagement (Tuten & Solomon, 2018).

Alongside this trend, the eldest Generation Alpha, born in and after 2010, is still in their school years and has already influenced marketing trends (Jha, 2020). Their communication style is marked by the use of new slang expressions. In fact, some Gen Alpha slang words have their own meanings that are not literal. For example, the phrase “it is giving” does not literally mean “giving” as in transferring one’s possession to another, but rather describes something by comparing it to something similar and more familiar. Other phrases, like “alpha sigma” means independent, “rizz” is short for charisma, and “aura” is to determine how cool someone is. This is one piece of evidence that the English language has evolved, and some words may have different meanings for different generations, affecting how marketing messages are interpreted. Hence, it is important to determine how these different meanings can have different effects on the success of social media marketing.

This case study, therefore, uses a correlational research design to determine whether there is indeed a relationship between Gen Alpha slang as the language in social media and the engagement of Instagram reels. It is important to study this because Gen Alpha is the youngest generation as of 2024, and they have been using social media, especially Instagram, an evolving and highly influential platform, the most out of all the other generations. This implies that they will soon begin to shape consumer trends. Moreover, Gen Alpha’s use of social media differs from that of other generations. Gen Alpha users are highly influenced by popular creators and affiliate marketers, selling products they have tried and tested themselves, compared to older generations who simply believe the products or services and are swayed more easily by claims alone. Therefore, it is crucial to examine Gen Alpha trends to predict future marketing trends in social media, especially on the Instagram platform, so that marketers can align with their preferences.

Three frameworks were applied to ground this investigation in theory. First, the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) explains persuasion through two routes: central (deep processing of arguments) and peripheral (surface cues) routes. Slang is hypothesised to act as a peripheral cue, boosting relatability and persuasion even when audiences engage in shallow processing, which is typical in fast-scrolling environments like Instagram.

Second, the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) (KATZ et al., 1973; Menon, 2022) suggests that audiences actively consume media to satisfy needs such as entertainment, novelty, and social belonging. Gen Alpha slang provides both novelty and identity reinforcement, which may explain its persuasive appeal.

Finally, Persuasion Theory (Cialdini, 2009) highlights principles such as liking (familiar language fosters rapport) and social proof (slang signals trendiness and credibility). Together, these frameworks justify why slang use in reels may strengthen engagement and purchase intention.

This case study is guided by this research question: “How does the use of Gen Alpha slang on Instagram reels impact the engagement of Instagram users and the success of social media marketing?” This case study aims to study investigates how Gen Alpha slang, as a form of informal and persuasive language, is used to engage audiences on social media, especially on Instagram. I will test the strength of the association between these two variables and their cause-and-effect relationships.

2. METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative case study design to explore how Generation Alpha slang is used as a persuasive language technique in marketing on Instagram reels. A case study approach is suitable because it allows for an in-depth investigation of a bounded unit of analysis (Priya, 2020) by time and activity, within its natural setting. To ensure systematic analysis, the study applies thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, combined with descriptive quantitative measures (engagement rate) and qualitative measures (audiences' comments) to examine patterns of audience response.

2.1 Platform Selection and Content Type

Instagram was chosen as the research platform because of its widespread use among Generation Alpha and its emphasis on short-form videos through the reels feature. Fifteen Instagram reels created by different influencers were selected from the "Explore" page using purposive sampling to capture diverse marketing communication styles. Although labelled as "random," the selection followed clear criteria: (1) posted within the past six months, (2) promotional or semi-promotional in nature, and (3) received a minimum of 10,000 views. This sampling strategy ensured that the content was relevant and visible to the target audience.

The number of likes, comments, shares, saves, and views on these reels acted as the units of analysis. Various topics, such as reel content and the relationship between platform usage and audience feelings, were analyzed by examining audience comments. Content analysis and correlational research design methods were used to further analyze the case study.

2.2 Data Collection

The dataset consisted of quantitative engagement metrics (likes, comments, shares, saves, and views) and qualitative audience feedback (comments under each reel). Screenshots and numerical data were recorded and securely stored in an encrypted folder to ensure confidentiality. Identifying details other than the name of the Instagram influencer account, such as the audience's usernames, were anonymized. The folder is permanently deleted six months after the completion of this research to ensure ethical compliance.

2.3 Data Analysis Method

Persuasive language is used to convince, seduce, or persuade someone to want or desire to do the actions or activities conveyed by the author (Nur Fitria, 2021). The use of both images and texts holds equally pivotal roles in persuading viewers to purchase products, with the former as the 'ideal' benefits of the products and the latter as the informative details (Hidarto, 2021).

A thematic coding process was applied to identify how persuasive language was deployed across the selected Instagram reels: (1) Familiarization – reviewing all reels multiple times and transcribing captions and comments; (2) Open coding – highlighting slang terms, rhetorical techniques, and storytelling features; (3) Axial coding – grouping codes into categories such as Gen Alpha slang, fiction storytelling, non-fiction storytelling, call to action, and formal standardized English; and (4) Selective coding – consolidating categories into broader themes of persuasive resonance and participatory appeal.

These methods differentiate the various techniques of different influencers using persuasive language to advertise a product or service. To complement the qualitative analysis, the engagement rate was calculated for each Reel, accounting for the number of likes, comments, shares, saves, and views, using the following standard formula:

2.4 Equation

$$\text{engagement rate} = \frac{\text{likes} + \text{comments} + \text{shares} + \text{saves}}{\text{views}} \times 100\%$$

This dual approach allowed for both thematic interpretation and numerical comparison of different persuasive strategies.

2.5 Methodological Limitations

Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the sample size of 15 Reels restricts generalizability, although it provides exploratory insights. Second, data were collected from publicly available posts at different times, which may affect the comparability of engagement metrics. Third, coding was conducted by a single researcher; therefore, intercoder reliability testing was not possible in this study. Future research could strengthen the validity by including a larger dataset, employing multiple coders, and integrating software such as NVivo for systematic coding.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Findings

The data collection results of all my findings are summarized and quantitatively analyzed into eight categories: Gen Alpha Slangs, Fiction Storytelling, Non-fiction Storytelling, Silent Video, Rhetorical Question, Call to Action, Formal Standardized English, and Reverse Psychology. Instagram reels that use fiction storytelling means that the creator uses stories that are imaginary and would never happen in real life, while non-fiction storytelling means that the stories are related to real-life contexts in today's world. This grouping allows me to compare the different types of persuasive language used. This is shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Quantitative Data Collection Results in Smaller Categories

Type of Persuasive Language Used	Number of Reels Found	Average Number of Views	Average Engagement Rate
Gen Alpha Slangs	3	1 133 333	10.82%
Fiction Storytelling	3	1 392 666	7.63%
Non-fiction Storytelling	4	1 654 000	13.51%
Silent Video	6	1 434 000	7.49%
Rhetorical Question	1	2 300 000	4.77%
Call to Action	1	648 000	6.48%
Formal Standardised English	1	2 600 000	6.11%
Reverse Psychology	1	1 600 000	6.50%

Source: Processed from primary data (2024)

Of the 15 advertising reels, seven used storytelling as a type of persuasive language, with three using fiction storytelling and the other four using non-fiction storytelling. Reels that use the non-fiction storytelling technique have the highest average engagement rate with 13.51% and reels that use Gen Alpha slangs have the second highest average engagement rate of 10.82%. The lowest average engagement rate goes to reels that use rhetorical question with an engagement rate of 4.77%. These different language choices affect audience engagement.

These data collection results prove that Instagram reels that use Gen Alpha slang have a high engagement rate compared to others, leading to a higher success rate in social media marketing. This indicates that there is indeed a relationship between Gen Alpha slang as the language in social media and

the engagement with Instagram reels. Surprisingly, Instagram reels that use formal standardized English have the highest average number of views, yet their engagement rate is low. This is because most consumer demographics are still populated by the older generations, such as Gen Z and millennials, who prefer reels that are less informal. The low engagement rate shows that the marketing techniques used in Instagram reels are less effective and less successful. It can be concluded that the use of non-fiction storytelling and frequent use of Gen Alpha slang is the best marketing strategy to achieve a higher engagement rate.

This analysis can be proven by one of the reels, by SEA Aquarium, that uses both non-fiction storytelling and Gen Alpha slang in their Instagram reel (see Table 1 and 2). For instance, the actors in this reel use phrases like “yapping,” “very gentle, very mindful, very cutesy,” “mew,” “has so much rizz,” “aura,” “alpha sigma,” “it is giving,” and “pookies.” The reel achieved a 15.28% engagement rate and the most liked comment states that whoever filmed this deserves a pay raise, meaning that the audience agree that this reel has a very good marketing strategy. This is positive evidence that both techniques are successful.



Figure 1. Screenshots from an Instagram reel from SEA

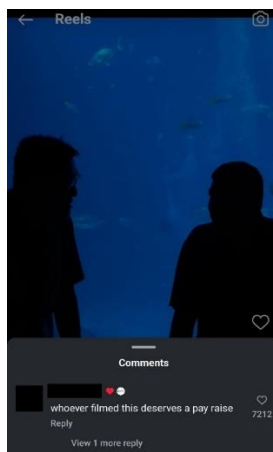


Figure 2. Screenshots from an Instagram reel from SEA

Source: Processed from primary data (2024)

In addition, another reel that uses Gen Alpha slang but uses fiction storytelling, instead of non-fiction storytelling, has a high engagement rate as well, with 11.08% with a top comment stating that the marketing of the Instagram reel is very good with the phrase ‘S Tier Marketing’ (see Figure 3 and 4).



Figure 3. Screenshots from an Instagram reel from Dwynna

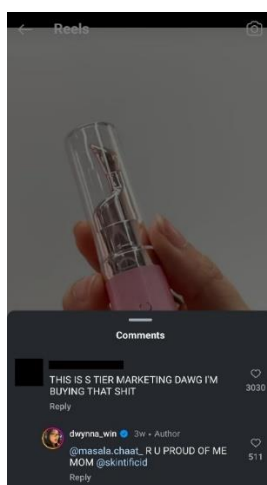


Figure 4. Screenshots from an Instagram reel from Dwynna

Source: Processed from primary data (2024)

Moreover, negative evidence further supports that Instagram reels that do not use non-fiction storytelling or Gen Alpha slang have a lower engagement rate. A reel by Nicolina Frisk advertises an app using only a rhetorical question and then proceeds to discuss the app's features straightaway, without any storytelling beforehand or use of Gen Alpha slang (see Figure 5 and 6). This resulted in a low engagement rate of only 4.77%.

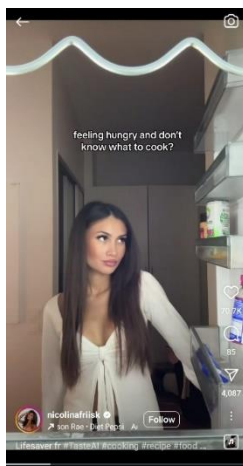


Figure 5. Screenshots from an Instagram reel from Nicolina Frisk

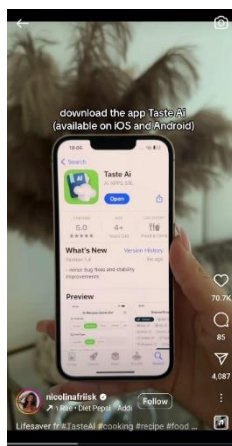


Figure 6. Screenshots from an Instagram reel from Nicolina Frisk

Source: Processed from primary data (2024)

3.2 Discussion

The findings of this study show that Instagram reels using Gen Alpha slang or non-fiction storytelling achieved higher engagement rates than other techniques. These outcomes can be interpreted using established theories of persuasion and media use.

First, the results support the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Slang often functioned as a peripheral persuasive cue, allowing content to resonate with viewers even when they did not deeply process the product information by using real-life situations, so the audience puts themselves in the shoes of the characters and are able to feel related with the story, and thus making it easier to persuade the audience to purchase the product or service being advertised. This is consistent with prior research showing that peripheral cues can significantly influence engagement in short-form video marketing (Teng & Khong, 2015). Similarly, Dong et al. (2023) found that storytelling, emotionality, and timing in short-branded videos significantly facilitated consumer engagement, reinforcing the relevance of these persuasive elements in short-form marketing.

Second, from a Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) perspective, slang-driven content fulfills entertainment and social identity needs. The audience, especially Gen Alphas, which will soon begin to populate most of the consumer demographics, will feel more easily persuaded by using their own style of language, which is Gen Alpha slang. Gen Alpha audiences engaged more actively because the language reinforced in-group belonging and novelty. This aligns with research on Instagram reels usage, which has identified motivations such as entertainment, escapism, and social connectedness (Menon, 2022; Phua et al., 2017).

Third, the findings are consistent with Persuasion Theory (Cialdini, 2009). By adopting the audience's speech style, influencers tapped into the principles of liking and social proof. Slang signalled authenticity and trend awareness, making the content appear both relatable and credible, which in turn encouraged higher engagement. This is because Gen Alphas, who are active social media users, prefer personalized, interactive, and credible online experiences, which contribute to enhanced user engagement (Ahn et al., 2025; Ngo et al., 2025).

However, this study has some limitations. While slang improves engagement among younger audiences, it may alienate older generations, such as Millennials, who are less familiar with such terminology, which may lead to possible misunderstandings and misinformation. Moreover, if these generations are not able to digest the information stated in the Instagram reels advertisement, they may not like or comment on the Instagram reels, leading to decreased audience engagement. This reflects a trade-off between targeting a niche demographic and ensuring broader comprehensibility. Future campaigns may need to blend Gen Alpha slang with clear product information to balance the relatability and clarity.

The problem in the real world is that some social media influencers or creators have yet to realize that Gen Alphas have started to populate the social media consumer demographic, where this generation has their own beliefs that are different from other generations and a unique way of thinking when considering buying a product or service. Therefore, a different approach is needed to attract Gen Alpha consumers for a successful social media marketing advertisement. Based on the above findings, it is suggested that social media influencers should start to implement the use of Gen Alpha slang to further increase their chances of attracting more consumers, especially the growing number of Gen Alphas. To effectively reach and engage a particular group, a thorough understanding of their mindset and habits is necessary when developing a marketing strategy (Pérez, 2023). Gen Alpha is the first generation to be fully born in the 21st century and is consequently a generation of digital natives who use social media extensively. However, this generation is still evolving, and little research has been conducted on their purchasing behavior.

Overall, these theoretical lenses—ELM, UGT, and Persuasion Theory—help explain why Gen Alpha slang was strongly associated with higher engagement levels. They also suggest that marketers seeking to connect with emerging consumer groups should adapt linguistic strategies to meet both psychological needs and persuasion pathways.

3.3 Limitations and Future Research

Although this study provides early evidence of how Gen Alpha slang enhances persuasion and engagement in Instagram reels, it has several limitations. First, the sample was limited to 15 reels drawn through convenience sampling, which may not fully represent the diversity of influencer content or audience demographics. Second, while thematic analysis offered useful insights, the absence of intercoder reliability testing introduced potential subjectivity in coding. Third, focusing exclusively on Gen Alpha slang may overlook other persuasive strategies, such as visual aesthetics or music choice, which also contribute to engagement. These limitations suggest that the findings should be interpreted cautiously. Future research could address these constraints by employing larger datasets, experimental or longitudinal designs, and more rigorous coding procedures to provide a stronger empirical basis for understanding generational language use in digital marketing.

4. CONCLUSION

To summarize all my findings, Instagram reels that narrate stories that are related to real-life contexts happening in today's world, or non-fiction storytelling, and uses Gen Alpha slang, have an overall higher engagement rate. Reels that use other types of marketing strategies, such as rhetorical questions or formal standardized English, have lower engagement rates. This shows that different language choices affect audience engagement.

These findings imply that the use of Gen Alpha slang on Instagram reels does impact the engagement of Instagram users and the success of social media marketing, as it increases engagement rates and relatability for the audience, which will become more easily persuaded into buying the products or services advertised. However, they also have negative effects, such as potential misunderstandings and misinformation due to the different meanings and interpretations of these storytelling and Gen Alpha slang terms by different generations of audiences.

This case study therefore recommends businesses, especially those who would like to advertise their product or service on social media, to post Instagram reels that narrate stories that are related to real-life contexts happening in today's world and use Gen Alpha slang, particularly those who would like to attract and target most of their customers from Gen Alphas. Businesses should first understand their customers' needs and why these customers should purchase their products or services. These are then explained through a relatable story, and the use of Gen Alpha slang is highly recommended. When these areas are developed, the engagement rate of Instagram reels will increase, and consequently, there will be a higher success rate of social media marketing.

As this is a small case study, the findings may not be conclusive. This research needs to be developed in terms of the sample methodology. It should be noted that the 15 Instagram reels were not posted simultaneously. During data collection, some reels were posted a few weeks before, while others were posted a few months before. This may result in different numbers of likes, comments, shares, saves, and views as some have yet to spread to a wider range of audiences, causing them to have lower number of views and lower engagement rates. Therefore, to obtain more reliable findings, the same time interval should be given for each Instagram reel after they are posted before the data collection is conducted. This case study suggests several topics for future research, including how different trends on social media and other types of generations as audiences affect the success of social media engagement and reach a wider range of audiences.

Ethical Approval

Ethical approval was not required for this study.

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was not obtained for this study.

Author Contributions

Not applicable.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflicts of interest were reported by the authors.

Data Availability Statement

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Notes on Contributions

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APPENDIX

Raw Quantitative and Qualitative Data Collection Results as of October 8, 2024

	Type of Persuasive Language(s) Used	Examples / Descriptions	Number of					Engagement Rate	Top Liked Comment Regarding the Advertisement Technique
			Likes	Comments	Shares	Saves	Views		
1	Gen Alpha slangs	“your honour”, “I’m just a girl”, “crusty ahh lips”	227 K	245	14.1 K	13.4 K	2.3 M	11.08%	THIS IS S TIER MARKETING DAWG I’M BUYING

	Fiction Storytelling	a short story about a thief that steal the product advertised							THAT SHIT
2	Non-fiction Storytelling	a short story about a situationship to advertise a song released	665 K	2047	72.7 K	87 K	4.7 M	17.59%	I just loveeee the way you create a whole teaser for your song release. Keep going girl I'm invested 🥰
3	Rhetorical Question	"Feeling hungry and don't know what to cook?"	70.3 K	84	4041	35.3 K	2.3 M	4.77%	-
4	Call to Action	"This is your sign to start using bump with friends."	33.1 K	110	2227	6525	648 K	6.48%	-
5	Non-fiction Storytelling	Someone getting 'catfished' by the cafe being described	98.9 K	63	13.2 K	10.8 K	815 K	15.09%	Oooh viral viral 🥰
6	Silent Video	no audio, just background sound with caption that advertises an app	16.5 K	145	15.8 K	18 K	556 K	9.07%	Interesting
7	Gen Alpha slangs	"brain0t"	21.5 K	129	4416	13.3 K	646 K	6.09%	ive been seeing ur vids for a while yk. good job man. im so excited to try the app!
	Non-fiction Storytelling	narrates the journey on making the advertised app							
	Silent Video	no audio, just background sound with caption that advertises an app							
8	Silent Video	no audio, just background sound with caption that advertises an app, shows the reader how to use the app	60.4 K	261	13 K	29 K	1.4 M	7.33%	-
9	Silent Video	no audio, just background sound with caption that advertises an app, shows the features of the app	64.1 K	269	16.3 K	30.9 K	1.6 M	6.97%	-
10	Silent Video	no audio, just background sound with caption that advertises an app, shows how the creator uses the app	98.3 K	100	20.6 K	55.3 K	2.7 M	6.46%	That looks so cute!
11	Fiction Storytelling	a love story in the form of text messages in a chat	50.6 K	3185	93.1 K	6481	1.7 M	9.02%	when I die, donate my middle finger to the marketing team.
	Silent Video	no audio, just background sound with caption that advertises an event at the end of the reel							
12	Fiction Storytelling	a short story about someone using his friend's water bottle (which is being advertised) all the time	4493	109	205	162	178 K	2.79%	I just got my daily dose of happiness and a advertisement 🥰
13	Formal Standardised	All sentences are formal, straightaway advertisement,	53.9 K	425	79.5 K	25.1 K	2.6 M	6.11%	-

	English	tells features of the advertised product							
14	Gen Alpha slangs	“yapping”, “you are so real for that”, “lives rent free in my mind”, “very gentle very mindful very cutesy”, “mew”, “has so much rizz”, “aura”, “alpha sigma”, “its giving”, “pookies”	53.5 K	158	13.2 K	2512	454 K	15.28%	whoever filmed this deserves a pay raise
	Non-fiction Storytelling	a short story about being in an aquarium, which is being advertised							
15	Reverse Psychology	Uses reverse psychology to advertise her own social media account	95.9 K	3347	2226	2482	1.6 M	6.50%	Ha! Reverse psychology doesn't work on me!!!! Where do I send the check?

Source: Processed from primary data (2024)