

The exploitation of conversational maxims in generation Z's mental health discourse on social networking sites

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Abstract

This study examines the use of pragmatic strategies in Generation Z's linguistic expressions related to mental health issues on social media, drawing on Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle and Sperber and Wilson's (1986) Relevance Theory. The analysis focuses on the exploitation of the Cooperative Principle maxims and the implicatures generated in mental health-related discourse. The data consist of Malay-language utterances purposively collected from social media platforms, particularly those exhibiting features of maxim exploitation. The analytical procedure involved data transcription, identification of types of maxim exploitation, derivation of implicatures based on relevance principles, and determination of communicative strategies according to the contextual features of the utterances. The findings reveal that Generation Z consistently exploits conversational maxims to convey indirect meanings, avoid social conflict, and manage audience perceptions when discussing sensitive mental health issues. Such maxim-exploiting linguistic expressions function as a self-protective mechanism that enables speakers to articulate views, experiences, and responses related to mental health while safeguarding their public image. The use of these communicative strategies indicates a tendency among speakers to adapt their utterances to social norms and audience expectations. This study demonstrates that pragmatic strategies play a crucial role in meaning construction and the management of mental health communication among Generation Z in digital spaces. Overall, the findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the relationship between linguistic form, communicative strategy, and mental health discourse among young social media users.

Keywords

exploitation, implicature, Relevance Theory, Generation Z, Media

INTRODUCTION

Mental health is now widely recognised as a global issue affecting individuals across multiple generations. However, the generation most commonly associated with this issue is Generation Z, a cohort that inhabits a complex environment characterised by constant stimulation, pressures to maintain a positive self-image, and intense social comparison. Mishra, Varshney, and Kayusi (2024) argue that unrestricted access to information has heightened both expectations and social pressures experienced by this generation. These factors indirectly shape communicative practices and give rise to distinct pragmatic strategies among Generation Z. Easy access to social media has further positioned these platforms as key spaces for expressing views related to mental health (Yusuf & Astuti, 2025). Although Generation Z is often characterised as outspoken, when discussing mental health issues they tend to favour indirect linguistic expressions or rely on implicature. The use of such linguistic forms requires careful inferential processing to arrive at the intended meanings conveyed by Generation Z speakers.

The use of such linguistic forms functions not merely as a communicative strategy but also reflects Generation Z's adaptation to the social pressures they encounter. These forms of expression illustrate communicative practices that rely on indirect meaning when addressing sensitive issues such as mental health. Such adaptive mechanisms may also result in mental health-related expressions being inaccessible to literal interpretation. Dimitrov et al. (2022) note that this mode of communication is deliberately employed as a means of self-protection against stigma and misinformed social perceptions surrounding mental health. In the context of Generation Z's mental health discourse, semantic analysis alone is therefore insufficient; a pragmatic approach is required to uncover speakers' communicative intentions.

Pragmatics is a branch of linguistics concerned with language use in context. One foundational pragmatic framework, Grice's (1989) Cooperative Principle (CP), provides an initial explanatory basis for how

speakers convey meaning through the exploitation of the Cooperative Principle maxims (CPMs). Although the CP outlines guidelines for effective communication through adherence to the Maxims of Quality, Quantity, Relation, and Manner, these maxims are frequently and intentionally exploited by speakers to generate implicature. Within mental health discourse, such exploitation constitutes a common communicative practice among Generation Z when expressing emotions, stress, or personal experiences. The exploitation of CPMs not only reveals how Generation Z maps meaning but also reflects underlying psychosocial needs to maintain a favourable self-image within digital environments (Jacob, 2023).

Expressions that exploit the Cooperative Principle maxims require a more in-depth pragmatic perspective. Relevance Theory (RT) builds on Grice's (1989) insights by explaining how hearers construct meaning through inferential processes, available or constructed contextual information, and expectations of optimal relevance. Through its heuristics and comprehension procedures, RT enables the explanation of how Generation Z adapts meaning mapping based on encyclopaedic information, thereby revealing the cognitive mechanisms that drive meaning interpretation in mental health discourse.

Although research on language and mental health has received considerable attention within linguistics and communication studies, existing scholarship has tended to prioritise narrative representations over in-depth pragmatic analyses of maxim exploitation mechanisms. Studies that focus specifically on the exploitation of Cooperative Principle maxims and the inferential mechanisms proposed by Relevance Theory remain limited. More importantly, despite Generation Z being among the most active social media users and one of the groups most vulnerable to mental health issues, there is still a lack of focused research on how this group naturally expresses emotions in digital spaces. Furthermore, analytical approaches that integrate maxim exploitation with the cognitive inferential processes outlined in Relevance Theory need to be further developed in order to capture the communicative strategies and practices through which Generation Z conveys more complex meanings. Existing studies also do not comprehensively detail how Generation Z exploits Cooperative Principle maxims as a linguistic strategy for expressing emotional distress while simultaneously maintaining control over self-image and managing social

stigma. This line of inquiry is crucial, as mental health discourse among Generation Z exhibits complex communicative patterns and meaning constructions that diverge from literal interpretation and can only be adequately explained through a pragmatic approach.

Overall, this study focuses on analysing language use among Generation Z from a pragmatic perspective, with particular attention to the exploitation of Cooperative Principle maxims in mental health discourse. By examining utterances and excerpts shared on social media, the study elucidates the meanings intended by speakers and identifies the pragmatic strategies employed by Generation Z when discussing sensitive issues.

To achieve these objectives, the study collected and analysed 187 mental health-related linguistic expressions from the social media platforms X/Twitter, TikTok, and Instagram. Data selection was conducted through keyword searches such as #mentalhealth, #mentalhealthawareness, #kesihatanmental, and #kesihatanmentalgenerasiz. Only content produced by Generation Z (born between 1997 and 2012) was selected based on profile information, language style, slang usage, and the social context of the content. The collected expressions were transcribed, categorised according to the types of maxim exploitation, and subsequently analysed using the Cooperative Principle and Relevance Theory frameworks as the basis for meaning interpretation. Through this approach, the study identifies patterns of maxim exploitation, the resulting implicatures, and the linguistic strategies employed by Generation Z to manage and express mental health concerns indirectly within digital environments.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The emergence of social media as the primary interactional space for Generation Z has brought about significant changes in how meaning is constructed through language. This landscape is characterised by communicative practices rich in implicature, the emergence of new pragmatic strategies, and linguistic representations that differ markedly from those of previous generations. In the context of Generation Z's mental health, numerous studies indicate that digital media platforms function as spaces for expressing views and emotions related to mental

health. Turuba et al. (2024) emphasise that Generation Z relies on social media as a source of emotional learning, as these spaces are commonly inhabited by like-minded individuals who provide supportive narratives aligned with users' expectations. However, such emotional learning is contingent upon the credibility of information, as content shared on social media may not always be accurate.

Mental health-related content on social media also reflects Generation Z's efforts to express emotions through the sharing of personal narratives. Tudehope et al. (2024) report that the majority of mental health-related social media content consists of experiential accounts depicting sadness, loneliness, and despair. Nevertheless, not all mental health content is supportive in nature. Some content trivialises mental health concerns or reinforces social stigma. Such representations can lead to misunderstandings surrounding mental health issues and foster negative perceptions of the emotional distress experienced by Generation Z. The findings of Ai and Zhou (2025) are consistent with this observation, demonstrating that Generation Z is more open to sharing personal experiences on social media, particularly those centred on emotional distress or psychological pressure. Social media has thus been shown to serve as a space for Generation Z to articulate emotional states and seek social support.

Generation Z's beliefs about digital spaces also constitute a significant factor influencing their mental well-being. Finserås et al. (2025) found that Generation Z's perceptions of social media are characterised by a dual stance: while social media is not generally regarded as beneficial for personal development, it is simultaneously not perceived as inherently harmful. Individuals who hold negative views of social media tend to exhibit higher levels of depression, whereas those who perceive social media as excessively positive are more susceptible to psychological stress. These findings suggest that Generation Z's mental health is shaped not only by the content encountered on social media but also by their beliefs and cognitive orientations toward these platforms.

From a digital communication perspective, the linguistic expressions employed by Generation Z on social media frequently exhibit non-adherence to the Cooperative Principle (CP). In particular, the exploitation of Cooperative Principle maxims (CPMs) has been identified as a pragmatic strategy used by this generation to avoid conflict when

expressing opinions on issues perceived as taboo or sensitive, such as mental health. Such expressions also function as a means for Generation Z to project their identity in a safer and more controlled manner. Cummins (2025) argues that this form of communication continues to constitute cooperative behaviour, given the human tendency to carefully interpret and understand received messages. This process reflects a cognitive mechanism whereby meaning is inferred based on contextual relevance. Porrini et al. (2025) further support this assumption, demonstrating that implicatures are more readily derived when both speakers and hearers share a cooperative assumption; that is, the belief that participants in communication jointly strive to achieve communicative goals. Consequently, even within digital communication contexts, hearers must consider communicative intentions and contextual cues in order to infer speakers' intended meanings. These findings are crucial in providing a foundation for understanding how Generation Z constructs meaning, manages self-image, and communicates sensitive messages, such as mental health concerns, through the exploitation of CPMs in digital discourse.

Linguistic strategies involving the exploitation of CPMs are widely observed not only in personal expression but also in public and political communication. Rahmayanti et al. (2025), for instance, found that social media influencers deliberately flout CPMs to enhance the appeal of their utterances and foster a sense of intimacy with audiences. In more formal discourses, such as political communication, Ghawaidi and Alsmari (2025) demonstrate that CPM exploitation is employed to generate implicatures that function as avoidance strategies when addressing sensitive issues, as well as tools for managing public perception. Similarly, in doctor-patient interactions, Ouma (2025) explains that CPM exploitation is commonly used when discussing complex and taboo topics, with the resulting implicatures serving as politeness strategies to mitigate potential discomfort among listeners. These findings underscore the role of CPM exploitation as a pragmatic strategy for balancing the need for accurate meaning transmission with social sensitivity.

However, Ouma's (2025) findings diverge from those of Rofik and Osman (2024), who focus on the association between maxim exploitation and impoliteness in digital communication. Rofik and

Osman (2024) found that implicature is employed as a strategy of impoliteness on social media. This contrasts with traditional practices within Malay society, where implicature has conventionally functioned as a politeness strategy. In the context of Generation Z communication, Juliana (2025) notes that indirect utterances and CPM exploitation constitute habitual communicative patterns through which this generation displays identity. Meanwhile, Balázs and Hulyák-Tomesz (2025) demonstrate that the openness of digital spaces enables speakers and writers to convey messages without explicit self-disclosure, resulting in greater linguistic diversity, particularly through the use of metaphor, sarcasm, and coarse humour.

Further studies indicate that Generation Z's digital identity is closely intertwined with their communicative practices. This generation employs linguistic forms such as slang, emojis, memes, and indirect utterances, which function as markers of social presence in digital interaction. Obasi and Obasi (2024) found that such linguistic choices reflect adaptation to social media communication styles and serve as expressions of generational identity. Sitohang and Damanik (2025) similarly examine this adaptation by focusing on semantic change, noting that Generation Z actively creates and modifies the meanings of existing words to align with digital culture, social media norms, and online communication styles. In the construction of digital identity, Siagian and Yuliana (2024) explain that social media functions as a space for Generation Z to project desired traits or beliefs to audiences. Nurrachmah (2025) further argues that audience perceptions are crucial, as they influence how individuals shape identities deemed socially acceptable. Feedback and social evaluation on social media platforms thus play a central role in how Generation Z assesses and constructs self-identity.

Overall, previous studies point to three key conclusions. First, Generation Z relies heavily on social media as a tool for understanding, expressing, and managing mental health, while trust in digital information and online communities significantly affects their well-being. Second, Generation Z's digital communication exhibits recurring pragmatic strategies, including the deliberate non-adherence to CPMs, the use of implicature whose interpretation depends on context, and cooperative forms of message delivery. Third, the resulting linguistic expressions indirectly reflect Generation Z's identity, emotional states,

and communicative intentions. Digital identity and language style are further shaped through indirect expression and audience responses, positioning social media as a space that structures how Generation Z understands meaning, interacts with others, and establishes communicative norms. Collectively, these findings provide a robust foundation for analysing the exploitation of Cooperative Principle maxims in Generation Z's linguistic expressions related to mental health.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This section analyses and discusses four selected data excerpts that exploit the Cooperative Principle maxims (CPMs) in Generation Z's mental health discourse on social media. The analysis is grounded in Grice's Cooperative Principle (CP) (1975) and Relevance Theory (RT) (1986) in order to illustrate the inferential processes and pragmatic strategies employed by Generation Z when discussing complex issues such as mental health.

Data 1: Exploitation of Linguistic Expression 1 (EEB/1): "Don't Think Men are Invincible; Their Hearts are Not Made of Stone."

The utterance EEB/1, "Don't think men are invincible; their hearts are not made of stone," constitutes an exploitation of the Maxim of Quality (MQL), specifically the sub-maxim concerning the provision of information supported by evidence. In this instance, the speaker employs expressions that are literally unverifiable and factually untrue. The speaker exploits the Maxim of Quality by providing no empirical evidence to support the claims implied in the expressions "men are invincible" and "hearts are made of stone."

From a lexical perspective, EEB/1 appears to convey the propositions that "men cannot be physically harmed" and "the heart possesses the physical properties of a stone." Based on such literal interpretations, the utterance clearly violates the Maxim of Quality, as human beings are neither invulnerable nor do their hearts possess the physical characteristics of stone. Nevertheless, Grice (1989) emphasises that hearers are expected to assume cooperative effort in communication in order to minimise the risk of interpreting an utterance as non-

cooperative. This can be achieved by examining the information provided in the utterance to infer the speaker's intended meaning, thereby preserving the cooperative nature of communication.

In the process of interpreting the speaker's intended meaning, Relevance Theory proposes that hearers identify elements that serve as focal points for inferential processing. In EEB/1, the lexical items "invincible" and "stone" function as such focal elements. The selection of these lexical items as focal points is guided by the relevance assumption, whereby hearers naturally attend to information that yields the greatest relevance and facilitates interpretation of the speaker's meaning (Ifantidou, 2025). Within Relevance Theory, these focal lexical items are referred to as initial contexts. Wilson (2024) defines context as any information that is constructed or selected and deemed relevant for inferential processing. An initial context, in turn, is accessible through knowledge associated with a lexical item, derived from prior experiences of its use in communication.

The interpretation of the speaker's meaning in EEB/1 begins with the encoding of the concept "stone." In Relevance Theory, each lexical item contributes encyclopaedic information, including attributes, properties, relations, and associated knowledge. Accordingly, the encyclopaedic entry for "stone"; encompassing all knowledge related to stone; must be considered. Within general knowledge, "stone" refers to a naturally occurring object characterised by hardness, durability, and physical rigidity. If interpreted literally, EEB/1 would suggest that the heart possesses the physical properties of stone. However, this literal interpretation fails to capture the speaker's intended meaning and does not satisfy the hearer's expectation of relevance. This is because such a literal reading is inconsistent with human physical reality and yields no meaningful cognitive effects.

The interpretive process therefore continues by incorporating another relevant context, namely societal belief systems. The utterance EEB/1 is produced by a male speaker within the context of Generation Z's mental health discourse. Socially, men are often perceived as individuals who possess high levels of resilience, both physically and emotionally. From an early age, men are socialised not to display vulnerability or emotional weakness, and they are encouraged to suppress or conceal their feelings. This phenomenon is closely associated with hegemonic masculinity, which refers to the societal assumption that

men are expected to demonstrate physical and emotional strength (Wedgwood, Connell, & Wood, 2023). This belief constitutes a widely shared societal assumption that men should not openly express emotions when experiencing distress, regardless of age or social status.

Against this backdrop of societal beliefs about male behaviour, the lexical item “stone” undergoes ad hoc narrowing. In Relevance Theory, ad hoc concepts emerge through the narrowing or broadening of meaning to produce a contextually relevant interpretation (Cruz, 2022). In this case, the ad hoc narrowing of “stone” introduces additional attributes such as “insensitive” and “emotionless.” These added features arise through cognitive mechanisms that draw on general world knowledge to align literal meaning with the speaker’s intended meaning.

This enrichment shifts the interpretation from a literal reference to the heart’s physical properties to an assumption about male emotional behaviour; specifically, the tendency to suppress emotional expression. This interpretive shift is grounded in shared cultural norms regarding male behaviour. Johnson (2024) explains that comparative expressions used within a society are shaped by shared cultural assumptions, which enable hearers to construct interpretations aligned with the speaker’s perspective. The ad hoc enrichment is further reinforced by the lexical item “invincible,” which literally denotes a state of being impervious to harm or injury. Within the broader discursive context, “invincible” functions as an exaggerative element employed by the speaker to portray an emotional state characterised by the absence of vulnerability.

The term “invincible” thus depicts a condition that contradicts the natural human capacity to experience emotion (Ali, 2023). The presence of this additional lexical input aligns with prevailing societal views of men and contributes to the generation of implicature premises that guide the hearer toward the speaker’s intended meaning. Through the combined effects of ad hoc narrowing and shared assumptions about masculinity, the utterance successfully prompts inferential reasoning that challenges the stereotype of men as emotionally impervious while indirectly highlighting their emotional vulnerability.

Table 1

Implicature Premises of EEB/1

a.	Linguistic expression	<i>Don't think men are invincible; their hearts are not made of stone.</i>
b.	Implicature premises	i. The speaker asserts that men are not “invincible” and do not possess “hearts of stone,” contrary to common assumptions. ii. The speaker rejects the assumption that men are emotionally invulnerable and emotionally rigid. iii. The expressions “invincible men” and “hearts as hard as stone” function as figurative language that challenges the stereotype that men lack emotions. iv. The speaker conveys that men also possess emotions and may be emotionally affected under certain circumstances. v. If men possess emotions, they are likewise susceptible to experiencing stress, sadness, and mental health difficulties. vi. If men are vulnerable to such difficulties, they therefore require emotional support in the same way as others.

The generation of these implicature premises is facilitated by the contextual cues provided through exaggeration and comparison in EEB/1. The use of such rhetorical elements reflects a communicative strategy among Generation Z speakers, who tend to rely on implicature when articulating emotional states. The resulting implicatures reveal a communicative intention that simultaneously critiques prevailing stereotypes while avoiding direct or explicit emotional disclosure. The lexical choices “invincible” and “stone” thus function not only as vehicles for expressing views on hegemonic masculinity but also as pragmatic tools for articulating emotional experiences through indirect meaning.

This communicative behaviour is consistent with the observations of Jayaputri and Aziz (2024), who argue that Generation Z tends to favour implicature as a safe communicative strategy that enables the maintenance of social distance while still allowing for the expression of psychological and emotional experiences. Based on the implicature premises outlined above, the central implicature derived from EEB/1 is that men also possess emotional vulnerability and require emotional support comparable to that needed by others.

The speaker employs the inputs “invincible” and “stone” as connotative references to emotional resilience and widely shared

societal assumptions. The inferential processing required to arrive at the speaker's intended meaning is relatively low, as the contextual cues provided align closely with shared cultural knowledge and common social assumptions. The exploitation of the Maxim of Quality in this instance can be attributed to Generation Z's heightened awareness of social pressures, coupled with a desire to manage public perception without overtly confronting dominant stereotypes (Dronia & Zakrajewski, 2023). Consequently, the implicatures generated through this exploitation of the Cooperative Principle not only reflect Generation Z's evaluation and critique of masculine stereotypes but also function as a strategic means of reshaping social perceptions and affirming the legitimacy of emotional support for men.

Data 2: Exploitation of Linguistic Expression 2 (EEB/2): I May Cry Intensely When I am Stressed, But Alhamdulillah, I Still Remember Allah

Ekspresi The next instance of Cooperative Principle maxim exploitation is identified in EEB/2 and is categorised as an exploitation of the Maxim of Quantity (MQT), as the speaker deliberately provides insufficient information in order to generate implicature. According to the guidelines of the Cooperative Principle, speakers are expected to provide an adequate amount of information; neither too little nor excessive; for effective communication (Yeboah, 2021). EEB/2 is found to violate this guideline when the speaker states "I may cry intensely when I am stressed" without explicitly specifying the circumstances that lead to such behaviour. The speaker merely describes an emotional reaction to stress without providing details regarding its source or severity.

This act of providing insufficient information constitutes an exploitation of the Cooperative Principle, as the speaker nevertheless supplies adequate input for inferential processing. The information provided serves as a reference point for inference and enables the hearer to derive conclusions that ultimately satisfy the requirements of the Maxim of Quantity. Grice (1989) explains that while adherence to the Cooperative Principle typically facilitates effective communication, communicative strategies may involve intentional non-adherence to

these guidelines. Such instances do not indicate a lack of cooperation or communicative failure, but rather function as strategic means of conveying meaning more effectively (Hossain, 2021).

In the case of EEB/2, the speaker's action can be interpreted as a pragmatic strategy for expressing emotional states without offering complete or explicit accounts of personal experience. From the perspective of Relevance Theory, pragmatic strategies may involve the deliberate withholding of information based on the assumption that the input provided is sufficient for the hearer to identify the speaker's informative intention (Li & Xie, 2025). As proposed in Relevance Theory, the speaker's informative intention can be inferred from the lexical or phrasal inputs that serve as focal elements. In EEB/2, the focal lexical items include "cry intensely," "stressed," "Alhamdulillah," and "remember Allah."

These lexical items are selected for encoding as initial contextual cues, as they can be readily connected to broader discussions of Generation Z's mental health, particularly those involving extreme psychological pressure. This process reflects the principle of relevance, whereby human cognition naturally seeks to maximise relevance by selecting inputs that yield optimal cognitive effects with minimal processing effort. The relevance of these inputs can be evaluated by their compatibility with background knowledge or available contextual assumptions (Elder, 2024).

The lexical item "stress" literally refers to a state of anxiety, tension, or psychological strain resulting from mental or physical pressure. This literal meaning, however, is overly general and requires further encoding. Leclercq (2023) explains that encoding within Relevance Theory involves the activation of semantic information stored in the hearer's cognitive system, which provides relevant conceptual and functional knowledge.

Within the context of mental health discourse, "stress" activates a range of concepts related to the speaker's lived experience. This encoding process must take into account sociocultural background, daily routines, and the challenges commonly faced by Generation Z. Members of this generation frequently encounter social comparison in academic, professional, and social domains. Their strong emphasis on self-image and constant comparison on social media increases their vulnerability to emotional distress and depression (Liang, 2024). Consequently, "stress"

in EEB/2 is encoded as a more specific and contextually appropriate form of psychological pressure associated with Generation Z's lived realities.

The encoding process further suggests that this stress exceeds ordinary levels and constitutes intense psychological pressure. Such pressure may disrupt emotional stability and trigger physiological responses such as crying, as expressed in the phrase "cry intensely." This input reinforces the encoding of "stress" by signalling a profound emotional reaction. The modifier "intensely" functions as a marker of degree, a linguistic feature commonly employed by Generation Z to indicate the depth or severity of emotional experience. Lexical intensifiers such as "gila," "bapak," and "teruk" are frequently used by Generation Z to convey emotional intensity (Alisoy, 2023). These forms act as communicative signals that enable concise yet expressive articulation of emotional states.

EEB/2 can therefore be interpreted as a communicative strategy commonly adopted by Generation Z on social media: openly acknowledging emotional distress while employing indirect linguistic expression (Jayaputri & Aziz, 2024). Although Generation Z frequently uses social media to voice opinions and emotions, they also exercise caution in revealing detailed or sensitive information. Peredy et al. (2024) argue that this behaviour reflects Generation Z's concern that their disclosures may be perceived as insignificant, misunderstood, or met with negative social reactions. As such, this form of expression represents an adaptive response to anticipated audience perceptions. By providing limited information, speakers allow hearers to construct interpretations based on shared experience and empathetic understanding.

The lexical items "Alhamdulillah" and "remember Allah" function as post-utterance contextual cues, supplying additional information that expands the interpretive context. In Relevance Theory, such post-contextual information can be integrated with previously encoded inputs to enrich meaning interpretation (Wilson, 2024). "Alhamdulillah," an Arabic expression meaning "Praise be to God," is commonly used within Islamic discourse to express gratitude. Within this religious context, additional concepts such as gratitude, calmness, and acceptance are activated. Similarly, the phrase "I still remember Allah" signals spiritual reliance and serves as a coping strategy. Silvana et al. (2025) observe that

Muslim members of Generation Z frequently employ religious expressions as a means of emotional regulation and to maintain a positive outlook even in emotionally unstable conditions. Such expressions not only symbolise faith and dependence on God but also function as mechanisms for managing emotional distress.

The phrase “remember Allah” further gives rise to assumptions about the speaker’s continued spiritual awareness, including the capacity for prayer, self-reflection, and emotional composure. These assumptions are contextually relevant and indicate emotional resilience. Based on the available contextual information and the assumptions derived from these additional cues, several implicature premises can be generated.

Table 2

Implicature Premises of EEB/2

a.	Linguistic expression	<i>I may cry intensely when I am stressed, but Alhamdulillah, I still remember Allah.</i>
b.	Implicature premises	i. The speaker is experiencing intense emotional pressure that results in excessive crying. ii. Despite experiencing severe emotional distress, the speaker expresses gratitude for still being mindful of Allah. iii. If the speaker remains mindful of Allah, there is an ongoing effort to calm oneself and regulate emotions. iv. If remembering Allah facilitates emotional calm, this effort may help the speaker manage the stress experienced. v. The speaker therefore seeks to convey that they remain emotionally stable and resilient despite being under pressure.

Based on these premises, the implicature generated conveys the speaker’s self-disclosure of experiencing intense psychological stress while simultaneously indicating that spiritual resources contribute to maintaining mental stability. The linguistic expression used in EEB/2 reflects Generation Z’s effort to allow audiences to understand their mental state without disclosing overly sensitive information. Within Generation Z communication practices, such expressions represent a common pattern; acknowledging emotional distress while withholding excessive detail. The incorporation of religious concepts further demonstrates Generation Z’s tendency to integrate spiritual and

emotional elements as coping strategies for mental health challenges (Aspar, 2025).

Data 3: Exploitation of Linguistic Expression 3 (EEB/3): My Family Says it's Not Important to See a Psychiatrist; What Matters is Seeing a Heart Specialist

EEB/3 illustrates an exploitation of the Maxim of Relation (MRL), which emphasises the relevance of information to the direction or topic of discourse. Grice (1989) asserts that effective communication requires speakers to provide information that is directly relevant to the topic, purpose, or direction of the interaction. In EEB/3, however, the speaker introduces information that appears irrelevant to the context of mental health by stating "what matters is seeing a heart specialist." Despite this apparent irrelevance, the utterance constitutes a cooperative act, as it enables hearers to derive implicature and thereby identify the speaker's communicative intention (Katsos et al., 2023).

In this case, the speaker exploits the Maxim of Relation by reporting family opinions that are incongruent with the actual needs of psychiatric treatment. The communicative context of EEB/3 centres on the need for mental health support or intervention. Nevertheless, the speaker deliberately introduces information that diverges from the topic under discussion and, on the surface, fails to satisfy communicative relevance. From the perspective of discourse direction, the speaker would be expected to provide information related specifically to mental health treatment. The exploitation of the Maxim of Relation is thus achieved by reporting family responses that do not regard psychiatric care as equally important as cardiological treatment.

According to Al-Shboul (2022), exploitation of the Maxim of Relation occurs under two conditions: (1) when speakers intend to shift the topic or direction of conversation, or (2) when speakers fail to provide relevant responses. The exploitation observed in EEB/3 corresponds to the second condition, whereby the speaker does not provide information relevant to the conversational focus. The utterance functions as a direct evaluation of the family's stance on mental health. Rather than aiming to mislead or conceal information, this communicative act operates as a pragmatic strategy to convey irony or

criticism toward the family's perspective. Through this expression, the speaker highlights societal attitudes that prioritise physical health over mental health (Wren-Lewis & Alexandrova, 2021).

At a literal level, EEB/3 merely reproduces information previously conveyed by others. However, the speaker supplies sufficient inferential input through the lexical items "not important," "psychiatrist," and "heart specialist." As the utterance constitutes a reported belief, the lexical item "not important" reflects the family's evaluation of psychiatric or mental health treatment. Conversely, the phrase "what matters" signals the family's prioritisation of physical health, particularly cardiovascular conditions.

These beliefs can be further elucidated by examining encyclopaedic knowledge associated with psychiatrists and cardiologists. Psychiatrists are medical specialists involved in the assessment and treatment of mental, psychological, and emotional well-being. Their work encompasses the diagnosis and management of mental disorders, emotional instability, stress, negative thought patterns, and other psychological conditions (Potash et al., 2025). Cardiologists, in contrast, specialise in the treatment of cardiovascular systems, focusing on clinically measurable conditions such as heart function and blood circulation (Douglas et al., 2008). The statement "it's not important to see a psychiatrist; what matters is seeing a heart specialist" thus conveys an implicit hierarchy of treatment priorities, privileging conditions that are physically observable and medically measurable over psychological conditions that lack visible physical markers.

Within the broader societal context that prioritises physical illness over mental health concerns, the lexical item "not important" undergoes contextual enrichment, incorporating additional meanings such as "not serious," "unnecessary," or "not worthy of priority." This enrichment is reinforced by societal beliefs that trivialise mental health treatment and perpetuate mental health stigma (Schnittker, 2022). These added meanings strengthen the assumption that the speaker's family prioritises physical health while marginalising mental health. The repetition of the family's statement serves as an evaluative act, revealing the speaker's critical stance toward familial beliefs that regard mental health problems as less deserving of attention than physical illnesses.

From the perspective of Relevance Theory, inferential processing continues until the hearer's expectations of relevance are satisfied; that

is, until sufficient cognitive effects are achieved with minimal processing effort (Gallai, 2022). The assumption that the family prioritises physical health alone does not fully meet relevance expectations. Interpretation must therefore proceed by incorporating broader societal belief contexts. Afek et al. (2021) note that mental health is often associated with psychological weakness or emotional fragility. Within Malay society in particular, mental health problems are frequently linked to insufficient religious commitment (Mohd Nasir et al., 2024). As a result, mental health concerns are often dismissed as non-urgent and undeserving of immediate attention.

These assumptions are further reinforced by generational belief systems. Although Generation Z is increasingly open to discussing mental health issues, they continue to encounter restrictive attitudes that hinder access to appropriate treatment (Hadi & Destiwati, 2025). The phrase “my family says” provides crucial contextual information, indicating that the statement originates from individuals who are expected to offer emotional support. When such a support group asserts that “it’s not important to see a psychiatrist,” this implicitly constitutes a denial of the speaker’s psychological condition. The lack of familial support thus emerges as a significant barrier to seeking psychiatric care. This observation aligns with Samari et al. (2022), who identify insufficient family support as a primary factor discouraging Generation Z from seeking professional mental health treatment, often leading individuals to cope with psychological difficulties independently.

From a Relevance Theory perspective, EEB/3 functions not merely as a report of information but as a pragmatic signal reflecting the family’s evaluation of mental health treatment. The speaker employs EEB/3 as an ironic critique of familial attitudes that fail to accord psychiatric issues the same level of importance as physical health conditions. To derive the intended implicature, hearers must integrate assumptions generated through lexical encoding with the contextual information constructed throughout the utterance. The implicature premises resulting from this integration are presented in the following section.

Table 3

Implicature Premises of EEB/3

a.	Linguistic expression	<i>My family says it's not important to see a psychiatrist; what matters is seeing a heart specialist.</i>
b.	Implicature premises	i. The family states that seeking psychiatric treatment is not important. ii. The family asserts that treatment for physical health issues, such as heart conditions, is more important. iii. The family regards psychiatric treatment as unimportant, unnecessary, and not serious when compared to physical treatment. iv. The family demonstrates a misguided assumption about mental health by assigning it a lower level of importance than physical health. v. If psychiatric treatment is considered unimportant, the speaker's psychological needs are not properly recognised by the family. vi. If these psychiatric needs are not acknowledged, the speaker's efforts to obtain professional mental health support are hindered or restricted.

The formation of these implicature premises requires relatively low processing effort, as the speaker provides input that aligns closely with the conversational context. Through this input, hearers are able to construct contextually relevant information. The context generated from the lexical choices involves a comparison of status and priority between psychiatric treatment and physical medical treatment.

This linguistic expression is exploited by Generation Z when articulating criticism toward misguided perspectives on mental health treatment. It also highlights generational differences in opinions and perceptions of mental health between older groups and Generation Z. By repeating family statements, Generation Z speakers trigger implicatures that function as indirect criticism and irony. Such utterances exemplify mockery or sarcasm expressed without overt confrontation. This communicative behaviour aligns with Jacob's (2023) observation that, in discussions of mental health, Generation Z tends to favour ironic utterances or sarcastic implicatures to express dissatisfaction or disappointment with support groups that fail to understand their experiences.

Based on the set of implicature premises, the resulting

implicature is that the speaker does not receive adequate support or recognition from their family, leading to the marginalisation of their mental health needs. The inferential effort required to derive this implicature is minimal, as the speaker provides input that connotes a hierarchy privileging physical health treatment. With the support of broader societal belief contexts; such as stigma surrounding psychiatric care and the tendency to prioritise physical health; hearers are able to derive cognitive effects that reflect evaluation and critique of these widely held assumptions.

Data 4: Exploitation of Linguistic Expression 4 (EEB/4): “Nowadays, we Learn to Swallow Whatever can be Swallowed, But we Must Not Burp for Fear That Others Might Smell it.”

The linguistic expression in EEB/4 illustrates an exploitation of the Maxim of Manner (MMR), which emphasises the manner in which contributions are delivered. In this instance, the speaker exploits the Cooperative Principle by providing information that is vague and obscure. Grice (1989) explains that effective communication requires speakers to convey information in a clear and comprehensible manner. This requirement includes clarity, orderliness, avoidance of obscurity, and the elimination of ambiguity. In EEB/4, the speaker exploits the Maxim of Manner by intentionally presenting unclear and vague information to generate implicature.

Westby (2023) identifies four conditions under which the Maxim of Manner may be exploited: (C1) exploitation through vague contribution, (C2) exploitation through ambiguous contribution, (C3) exploitation through overly concise contribution, and (C4) exploitation through disordered contribution. Based on the linguistic features of EEB/4, the speaker exploits the Maxim of Manner primarily under conditions C1 and C3 by employing expressions that are literally unclear and imprecise.

The speaker exploits the Maxim of Manner through the use of lexical items such as “learn,” “swallow,” “burp,” and “smell.” The use of these lexical items indicates that the speaker does not explicitly describe concrete physical actions in a transparent manner. Yeboah (2021) notes that cooperation in communication involves speakers’ efforts to ensure

that their utterances are interpretable by hearers. This observation aligns with the construction of EEB/4, in which the speaker employs references to physical actions as inferential cues, enabling hearers to derive meaning beyond the literal level. The use of vague or unclear information functions as a pragmatic strategy commonly employed to convey sensitive messages, such as those related to mental health discourse. These references to physical actions serve as initial contextual cues. This process is consistent with Relevance Theory, which posits that hearers select linguistic elements that yield the greatest cognitive effects with the least processing effort (Ifantidou, 2025). Moreover, these lexical items refer to everyday human actions, making them readily accessible as inferential anchors.

At a literal level, “learn” refers to the act of acquiring knowledge or skills, while “swallow” denotes the act of ingesting something through the throat into the stomach. Interpreted literally, the phrase “swallow whatever can be swallowed” would mean ingesting anything that can physically be consumed. Similarly, “smell” refers to the act of inhaling air through the nose to detect odour, while “burp” refers to the release of gas from the stomach through the throat, which may produce an odour. The clause “do not burp for fear that others might smell it” literally means refraining from releasing gas from the stomach out of concern that others may detect its odour.

Taken literally, these expressions merely describe common human actions and bear no explicit connection to mental health discourse. However, the Cooperative Principle suggests that the innate human tendency toward cooperation enables hearers to utilise all available input to derive conclusions that align with the communicative direction of the discourse (Behera, 2021). Consequently, hearers draw upon these lexical items to construct implicatures that are coherent and contextually relevant. Gibbs (2005) explains that speakers frequently employ metaphors grounded in bodily actions to express abstract experiences. In this regard, the lexical items in EEB/4 do not denote actual physical actions but function as conceptual markers for inferring implicatures related to emotional states. This interpretation is further supported by Lakoff and Johnson (2024), who argue that implicatures grounded in physical action are easily accessed and interpreted due to their universality in human experience.

The meaning of “swallow” in the context of EEB/4 diverges from

its literal interpretation. Based on shared background knowledge and communicative context, “swallow” undergoes ad hoc narrowing and acquires a connotation associated with “suppressing” or “enduring.” Within Relevance Theory, such narrowing occurs when speakers select the most relevant encyclopaedic information associated with a lexical item to produce contextually appropriate meaning (Majeed & Alsaadi, 2021). The lived experiences of Generation Z; characterised by academic, social, and familial pressures; further reinforce the interpretation of “swallow” as referring to the silent endurance of problems and the internalisation of emotional distress.

Similarly, the lexical items “burp” and “smell” undergo contextual narrowing. “Burp” is encoded as “openly expressing” or “releasing” what has been suppressed. This encoding draws on the physiological understanding that burping occurs when swallowed air or gas creates internal pressure that must be released (Moshiree et al., 2023). This physiological response provides a conceptual basis for interpreting “burp” as the outward expression of internal emotional pressure. Correspondingly, “smell” is interpreted as information, emotions, or psychological distress becoming perceptible to others.

The interaction of these lexical items constructs a coherent emotional process: “swallow” represents the act of internalising or suppressing difficulties, “burp” signifies the potential outward release of suppressed emotions, and “smell” refers to the moment when others become aware of what has been concealed. Such figurative representations are commonly employed by Generation Z, who tend to express emotional experiences through indirect and subtle cues rather than explicit disclosure. This communicative strategy reflects Generation Z's belief that overt emotional disclosure may invite negative judgement or social stigma (Peredy et al., 2024).

This communicative behaviour is closely linked to Generation Z's social context. Yustika and Jaya (2025) observe that this generation is subject to strong social pressure to appear productive, competent, and resilient in digital spaces. As a result, Generation Z often refrains from expressing emotions directly out of fear of being dismissed or perceived as weak. The exploitation of the Maxim of Manner in EEB/4 thus functions not only as a stylistic choice but as a pragmatic strategy for navigating stigma and articulating complex emotional experiences.

Through the encoding of lexical input and the integration of contextual information; such as background knowledge and encyclopaedic representations; hearers are able to construct implicature premises. These premises emerge from the interaction between linguistic input and contextual assumptions, as outlined in the following section.

Table 4

Premis Implikatur EEB/4

a.	Linguistic expression	<i>Nowadays, we learn to swallow whatever can be swallowed, but we must not burp for fear that others might smell it.</i>
b.	Implicature premises	i. The speaker states that one learns to ingest whatever can be ingested but must refrain from releasing gas from the stomach through the throat, out of fear that others may detect the resulting smell. ii. The speaker conveys the need to suppress problems, issues, or emotions for as long as they can be endured. iii. The speaker indicates a prohibition against openly expressing problems, issues, or emotions due to concern that others may discover what has been suppressed. iv. The speaker suggests that if others become aware of what has been suppressed, they are likely to judge or respond negatively. v. The speaker demonstrates that the chosen strategy is to suppress rather than express problems, issues, or emotions in order to protect oneself from negative evaluation.

These premises are generated through the integration of the linguistic input provided and the broader social context associated with Generation Z. The input is connected to available contextual assumptions to yield an interpretation that aligns with the discourse topic, namely mental health. The exploitative strategy in EEB/4 involves the use of vague and obscure information to convey social criticism indirectly. References to common human physical actions function as inferential cues that metaphorically represent Generation Z's experience of psychological pressure, emotional suppression, and the need to regulate emotional expression due to fear of social stigma and negative judgement.

Based on the premises derived, the implicature generated through the exploitation of the Maxim of Manner is that Generation Z

deliberately chooses not to display emotional distress or life pressures out of concern for stigma, societal perceptions, and evaluative judgement. The speaker employs references to physical actions as conceptual anchors for illustrating how Generation Z manages stress by suppressing emotions and refraining from open emotional disclosure due to fear of social evaluation.

The resulting cognitive effects further indicate that Generation Z experiences substantial societal pressure to maintain a favourable self-image and avoid appearing vulnerable, even while mental health has become a topic of open discussion. The linguistic input also demonstrates Generation Z's preference for using ambiguous or indirect forms of communication to convey complex positions, such as critiquing stigma and highlighting the normalisation of emotional suppression driven by social criticism. EEB/4 thus not only illustrates a pragmatic strategy employed by Generation Z to communicate emotional processes under mental strain but also reveals the broader psychosocial dilemma faced by Generation Z within contemporary mental health discourse.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Generation Z's linguistic expressions in mental health discourse exhibit complex communicative patterns and are rich in implicature. The use of such expressions reveals systematic exploitation of the Cooperative Principle maxims, largely shaped by social pressures and the need to maintain a positive self-image. Analysis of the four selected linguistic expressions indicates that maxim exploitation is not incidental, but rather constitutes a consistent and primary pragmatic strategy employed by Generation Z when addressing sensitive issues. The exploitation of the Cooperative Principle maxims is not intended to create misunderstanding; instead, it functions to generate implicature that enables speakers to express emotions, articulate social critique, and assert the need for support without engaging in direct disclosure. This reliance on maxim exploitation further confirms that Generation Z's communication in mental health discourse depends more heavily on inference, contextual assumptions, and expectations of relevance than on literal linguistic forms.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings affirm the

explanatory power of the Cooperative Principle and Relevance Theory in accounting for meaning construction in Generation Z's linguistic expressions. Although Generation Z speakers do not adhere strictly to the Cooperative Principle maxims, the input they provide nevertheless reflects communicative cooperation. The use of ad hoc concept construction, contextual reference, and the integration of relevant encyclopaedic information demonstrates that cognitive processes play a crucial role in interpreting the intended meanings conveyed by Generation Z. Consequently, an analytical approach that integrates maxim exploitation with a relevance-theoretic framework is shown to be effective for examining indirect linguistic expression in mental health discourse.

Overall, this study contributes new insights into how Generation Z expresses emotional distress, constructs linguistic identity, and negotiates stigma through strategic language use in digital spaces. The exploitation of Cooperative Principle maxims not only reflects the need to protect oneself from social evaluation but also functions as a communicative mechanism for critiquing social norms, seeking recognition, and implicitly requesting support. These findings provide an important foundation for future research on language, emotion, and mental well-being, particularly among younger generations navigating the highly dynamic ecology of social media.

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