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Research Article

The Gen Z Stare on Reddit: Youth Nonverbal Communication in the Contemporary Era

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ABSTRACT

The “Gen Z Stare” is a blank or expressionless stare given in response to situations where verbal reactions are expected. Based on online Reddit discussions, this study aims to identify (1) its contexts, (2) its motivation, (3) and its place in intergenerational miscommunication. The findings suggest that the stare is a form of nonverbal communication associated with emotional avoidance, digital socialization, and limited social skills. It commonly occurs under social pressure, in customer-service interactions, or when encountering “offensive” or “nonsensical” statements, and is usually caused by emotional fatigue, an anxiety freeze response, or a way of setting boundaries. Older generations frequently misinterpret it because of their difference in terms of communication norms and digital exposure. This study imparts a more critical understanding of the social and psychological factors associated with Gen Z communication practices and could substantiate further inquiry into comparable nonverbal expressions among younger generations.

Keywords: *Emotional avoidance, Gen Z Stare, Generation Z, Intergenerational misinterpretation, Non-verbal communication, Reddit discussions*

Introduction

The ways young people interact are changing quickly in the modern era of digitalization. For Generation Z (or Gen Z), communication is no longer limited to spoken words and goes past gestures and facial expressions that become indicative responses in everyday

interaction. Within a culture heavily influenced by social media, meme-based humor, and screen-mediated relationships, new forms of nonverbal expression have appeared, which are many times noticed and discussed online (BBC, n.d.; Katos, n.d.).

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Among these that has drawn attention in internet discourse is the so-called “Gen Z stare.” It is described as a blank stare or an expressionless look given in response to a question or a situation where a verbal reaction is expected (Stock, 2025; López Restrepo & Venkat, 2025), while in some contexts, it is read as disinterest, boredom, or lack of engagement. In others, it is seen as a form of silent protest or a refusal to perform expected emotions in social and workplace settings (Robinson, 2025; Katos, n.d.). This interpretation has led to an intergenerational debate. Some older generations view it as “rude” or “disengaged,” and on the other hand, young people defend it as part of a new communicative style (Stock, 2025).

Several explanations associate the Gen Z stare to emotional regulation, cognitive overload, and digital overstimulation in psychology and communication studies. According to Hartoonian (2026), it may result from cognitive fatigue and adaptive dissociation as a form of protection by the nervous system against excessive information. She also states that it is connected to the rise of social anxiety and mental health concerns among Gen Z, who experienced longer digital immersion and pandemic-related separation from face-to-face interactions. Commentaries also support the view that the stare could be a freeze response in situations of social stress or evaluative threat (Hartoonian, 2026).

In media psychology, a neutral or deadpan expression can actually be understood as part of the change in digital self-presentation and aesthetic values among young people. Fagan (2025) puts forward that flat facial affect is an emotional shield against overexposure and social judgment. In relation to this, the stare is also seen as a rejection of the performative positivity typical among earlier generations (Fagan, 2025; Katos, n.d.). Considering this, the Gen Z stare becomes more than a simple lack of expression and turns into a form of authenticity and boundary-setting in a culture that demands constant emotional performance (Robinson, 2025; Hartoonian, 2026).

Nonetheless, there are commentaries stating that this phenomenon is not exclusive to Gen Z and might be an aspect of a recurring cycle of generational stereotyping (Beddington,

2025; López Restrepo & Venkat, 2025). Certain social observers and experts believe that the so-called Gen Z stare is a relabeling of long-existing nonverbal expressions that are now given a new name within viral culture (López Restrepo & Venkat, 2025; BBC, n.d.).

Even though the Gen Z stare circulates as a global internet phenomenon, its meanings could also be considered in relation to the social conditions of contemporary Filipino youth. Cabahug and Pescadero (2023) connect social media engagement with the psychosocial well-being of Generation Z in the Philippine setting, while Gabriel et al. (2020) analyze intergenerational relations within Philippine workplaces. These studies do not directly discuss the Gen Z stare, instead they give a local context for considering the influence of digital socialization and age-based expectations on everyday communication. Silence, facial blankness, and limited verbal acknowledgment can be interpreted within established expectations concerning respect, responsiveness, and interpersonal conduct in Philippine schools, workplaces, and service environments. However, since the Reddit discussions analyzed in this study were not restricted to Filipino users, the findings are not presented as direct representations of Filipino youth. The Philippine setting is rather used as an interpretive context for considering the local relevance of an internationally circulating discourse on youth nonverbal communication.

Despite this wide discussion in media and online platforms, systematic academic analysis of the Gen Z stare as a distinct form of nonverbal communication is still limited (Fagan, 2025). Hence, it is important to examine the phenomenon via a clearer analytical lens to know whether it indicates a change in communicative norms, a product of digital socialization, or an expression of psychosocial stress among young people today.

Currently, few comprehensive and readily accessible studies examine the Gen Z stare through the online discussions that interpret and circulate it as an intergenerational issue. Existing accounts appear mainly in feature articles and commentaries published by magazines and news platforms (Stock, 2025; Wyton, 2025). These sources identify the phenomenon, but they provide limited analysis of the

public exchanges through which users connect isolated offline encounters with wider assumptions about Gen Z communication. This study therefore examines public Reddit discourse, where individuals actively debate the meaning, causes, and social consequences of the Gen Z stare. Through thematic analysis, the study identifies (1) the contexts in which the stare occurs, (2) the intentions and emotions connected to it, (3) and its place in intergenerational miscommunication. In this way, the paper is expected to contribute to a closer understanding of contemporary nonverbal communication and the growing discourse on mental health, digital culture, and changing norms of interaction.

Methods

This research used a descriptive qualitative design to describe and understand the Gen Z stare. Taking into account that the topic is new and developing, the study relied on publicly accessible online discourse, particularly discussions on Reddit, where users openly share experiences, observations, and opinions about everyday social behavior.

Data were gathered through keyword searching using the terms “Gen Z stare,” “nonverbal communication,” and “Generation Z.” Relevant posts, comment threads, and discussions were selected from subreddits like r/GenZ, r/antiwork, r/generationology, and r/SocialAnxiety. The dataset included posts published between July and October 2025, which were the available discussions during the data collection period. Moreover, the selected materials were limited to threads that directly discussed the meaning, experience, or possible causes of the Gen Z stare in social interaction.

The collected discussions were analyzed through thematic analysis. First, the posts and comments were read several times to familiarize the researcher with the content and to note recurring ideas related to the Gen Z stare. Second, the responses were organized according to the guiding research questions of the study. Third, initial codes were assigned to repeated ideas, expressions, and situations mentioned in the discussions. These initial codes were then reviewed, merged when overlapping, and

revised to make them clearer and more consistent with the data. After coding, related codes were grouped into categories, which were then examined in all selected discussions to identify larger thematic patterns concerning the contexts, meanings, and possible functions of the Gen Z stare. Finally, theme statements were written based on the recurring patterns found in the dataset, and representative excerpts were identified to ground the interpretation.

Care was taken to keep the coding and theme development anchored in the actual wording and context of the Reddit discussions throughout the analysis. The researchers remained attentive to repeated responses as well as less common or contrasting views, since these helped clarify the range of meanings attached to the Gen Z stare. Analytical saturation was considered reached during the review of the final dataset when the remaining entries repeated previously identified codes and no additional categories or themes relevant to the research questions were identified. The 37 Reddit entries, consisting of 16 posts and 21 comments, were therefore considered sufficient for the thematic analysis.

Ethical Consideration

The study was limited to publicly accessible Reddit posts and comments. Since the researchers did not recruit, contact, or directly interact with Reddit users, individual consent and institutional ethics review were considered unnecessary for this study. The analysis concentrated on the codes, categories, and themes present across the selected discussions instead of identities, profiles, or personal circumstances of individual users.

To reduce the possibility of identifying or tracing specific users, Reddit usernames were replaced with neutral identifiers in the presentation of the findings. Only brief portions of the selected posts and comments that were directly relevant to the research questions were retained as representative excerpts. The excerpts were used to support the thematic interpretation and were not examined as individual case histories. Personal profile information and details unrelated to the research questions were excluded from the analysis.

Result and Discussion

The discussions on Reddit present the Gen Z stare as a patterned form of nonverbal behavior that can be examined in three sections. The first section focuses on the everyday and public situations in which the stare is most commonly observed, then the next section turns to the feelings and communicative meanings that users attach to it. The last section places these interpretations within wider tensions between generations, specifically in moments where silence, awkwardness, or deadpan response are read differently by younger and older people. This three-part pattern is consistent with literature that describes Gen Z communication as strongly affected by digital environments, changing nonverbal habits, and age-based differences in communicative expectations (Raslie, 2021; Irshad, 2024; Bukhari et al.,

2025). Although the Reddit dataset is not limited to Filipino users, these patterns are still relevant to Philippine schools, workplaces, and service environments where age hierarchy, respect norms, and expectations of verbal acknowledgment influence everyday interaction (Gabriel et al., 2020). The Philippine setting is used as an interpretive context instead of mere direct description of the national background of the Reddit users.

Contexts of the Gen Z Stare in Everyday and Public Interaction

This section examines the interactional settings in which Reddit users most frequently observed and described the Gen Z stare. The thematic categories drawn from these discussions are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Thematic Categories on the Contexts of the Gen Z Stare in Everyday and Public Interaction

Category	Codes	Theme	Description	Sample Supporting Excerpts
Routine transactional encounters	Retail and customer-service nonresponse; Missing greeting and basic conversational acknowledgment	The Gen Z stare is commonly discussed in routine service encounters where expected verbal scripts break down.	The stare is frequently identified in checkout counters, stores, and similar interactions where users expect greetings, acknowledgment, or clear verbal response.	"I receive the stare at checkout"; "They usually don't say hi or hello"; "the 19 year old clerk just blankly looks at you"; "a simple hello or acknowledgement"
Uncertainty and interpersonal difficulty	Freezing under uncertainty, awkwardness, or anxiety; Social skill gaps shaped by screens, Covid, and weak training	The stare is often framed as a sign of uncertainty, anxiety, or limited confidence in live social interaction.	Many users interpret the stare as a freeze response that occurs when a person does not know what to say, fears being wrong, or lacks practice in face-to-face interaction.	"they don't know what to do so they just stare"; "they don't know what to say"; "lack of communication skills and confidence"; "I panic when someone talks to me and freeze up"
Strained or unwanted interaction	Silent disengagement during rude, unwanted, or exhausting interaction	In some discussions, the stare works as a deliberate silent response to rude, offensive, or draining encounters.	A smaller set of comments treats the stare as intentional restraint, especially in customer-service settings where workers face foolish, offensive, or tiring remarks.	"when customers say something dumb"; "the art of silent contempt"; "I just looked. I didn't nod. I didn't laugh."; "just pay and get out"

Category	Codes	Theme	Description	Sample Supporting Excerpts
Disputed generational labeling	Cross-generational or nonexclusive framing of the stare	The stare is discussed as a recurring social behavior that many users do not see as exclusive to Gen Z.	Several users reject the term as overly generational and argue that similar blank or disengaged expressions have long existed in other age groups and work settings.	"I don't really think this is exclusive to gen z"; "What Gen Z is doing now is what older generations also did"; "It's not the GenZ stare, it's the service-industry employee stare"; "transcends all generations"

Routine service and transactional encounters, especially those occurring in stores, checkout counters, and other customer-facing settings, are the situations most frequently associated with the Gen Z stare in the Reddit discussions. Many users recalled instances in which a young employee or customer responded with silence, a blank expression, or no greeting, even when a brief acknowledgment might ordinarily be expected. The absence becomes noticeable. For several users, the stare appears to disrupt familiar interactional conventions, such as saying "hi," "welcome," or "thank you." These accounts locate the Gen Z stare within ordinary public exchanges where people anticipate a verbal response but receive none. Repeated references to cashiers, clerks, and store transactions suggest that users commonly recognize the stare during brief and relatively low-stakes encounters that still carry expectations of courtesy and responsiveness. Raslie (2021) provides a useful context for this pattern through the observation that Gen Z communication tends to be concise and less reliant on conventional face-to-face rituals. Irshad (2024) similarly argues that younger people increasingly use nonverbal cues influenced by digital communication practices in the new normal. The discomfort expressed in these Reddit accounts also aligns with Bukhari et al.'s (2025) discussion of generational differences in communicative expectations. Silence, response time, and acknowledgment may carry distinct meanings across age groups.

Many Reddit users, however, do not interpret the stare as intentional disrespect in every case. Instead, they associate it with uncertainty, social awkwardness, low confidence, or anxiety

during face-to-face interaction. Several of them explained that the stare occur when a person cannot decide what to say, remains unsure about the next appropriate action, or feels overwhelmed by an unscripted social situation. Such interpretations appear in accounts of retail transactions, school interactions, and casual encounters with strangers. Some users directly connected the behavior with freezing, delayed speech, or fear of making a mistake. Under these conditions, the stare may be understood less as an intentionally rude gesture and more as a visible pause that signals difficulty in responding to immediate social demands. References to social anxiety, limited interpersonal practice, and discomfort with spontaneous conversation support this interpretation. Hartoonian (2026) similarly links the Gen Z stare with social anxiety, cognitive overload, and freeze responses during stressful encounters. Cabahug and Pescadero's (2023) findings also provide relevant context, since they connect Gen Z psychosocial well-being with social media environments that influence confidence and comfort during offline interaction.

Comments also connect the stare with concerns about weak social preparation. Reddit users repeatedly associated the behavior with limited communication skills, heavy phone use, disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, and insufficient guidance in workplace or family settings. Some commenters argued that younger employees receive little instruction in basic customer-service expectations. Others pointed to fewer opportunities for face-to-face interaction during childhood and adolescence. Within these accounts, the stare appears as one

element of a wider social condition rather than an isolated personal habit. Digital communication, interrupted schooling, and limited interpersonal practice may have reduced some young people's confidence during direct encounters. The commenters disagreed about the precise cause, although many shared the view that the stare occurs when social conventions have not been adequately learned or practiced. Irshad's (2024) discussion of digital body language in the post-pandemic period supports this interpretation. Cabahug and Pescadero's (2023) account of the psychosocial effects of social media use among Gen Z also provides relevant context. These explanations further correspond with Bukhari et al.'s (2025) argument that generational differences in communication arise partly through unequal social experiences and changing interactional practices.

A smaller but clearly identifiable group of responses interprets the stare as an intentional reaction to rude, offensive, or emotionally draining encounters. In these posts, a worker stare silently after dealing with an unreasonable customer, an inappropriate remark, or an exchange that no longer warrants further engagement. Users describe the response as restrained contempt, quiet refusal, or emotional self-protection. Silence becomes a way to withdraw without intensifying the conflict. This explanation differs from interpretations based on anxiety because it treats the behavior as purposeful and dependent on the situation. It receives less attention, however, than accounts centered on customer-service interactions and social discomfort. Fagan's (2025) discussion of flat affect as an emotional shield closely corresponds with this interpretation. Robinson

(2025) likewise proposes that the Gen Z stare constitute a refusal to display socially expected emotions in demanding encounters.

The Reddit data also indicate that the category is still contested. Many users rejected the claim that blank stares, awkward silences, or discourteous service belong exclusively to Gen Z. Some described the behavior as a common feature of youth, while others regarded it as an expression associated with service work. Such responses do not necessarily dispute the existence of the stare. Rather, they question its classification as a distinctly generational behavior. The term refers less to a stable characteristic of Gen Z than to a recognizable interactional pattern that online discourse has attached to contemporary young people. In the discussions, users most commonly locate the stare in transactional exchanges, moments of uncertainty, and socially strained encounters. Some interpret it as interpersonal difficulty, others as intentional disengagement, and still others as the product of generational stereotyping. Public commentary raises similar objections to the label and suggests that the term rename familiar patterns of awkwardness or withdrawal through the language of an internet trend (Beddington, 2025; López Restrepo & Venkat, 2025; BBC, n.d.).

Intentions and Emotions Associated with the Gen Z Stare

This section presents the communicative intentions and emotions that Reddit users associated with the Gen Z stare across the selected discussions. The thematic categories related to these intentions and emotions are listed in Table 2.

Table 2. Thematic Categories on the Emotions and Intentions Associated with the Gen Z Stare

Category	Codes	Theme	Description	Sample Supporting Excerpts
Social difficulty behind the stare	Uncertainty, awkwardness, and low confidence; Anxiety, freeze response, and fear of judgment	Reddit users often associate the Gen Z stare with uncertainty, anxiety, and low confidence rather than deliberate hostility.	Many users read the stare as a reaction to discomfort in live interaction, especially when a person is unsure, socially awkward, or afraid of being judged.	"they don't know what to do so they just stare"; "they DONT KNOW what to say"; "lack of communication skills and confidence"; "afraid of looking like a fool"; "I panic when someone talks to me and freeze up"

Category	Codes	Theme	Description	Sample Supporting Excerpts
Emotional distance or low affect	Silence and nonacknowledgment in interaction; Deadpan detachment or emotional flatness; Habitual expression with unclear intent	The Gen Z stare is also described as a blank, low-affect state marked by silence, detachment, or autopilot.	In this category, the stare is seen as emotionally muted, automatic, or habitual rather than clearly communicative.	“just a blank stare”; “dead silence, dead eyes”; “an actual lack of emotion and thought”; “It’s my autopilot face”; “glazed over look”
Negative evaluation of the other person or situation	Contempt, irritation, or disbelief toward others	In another set of responses, the stare carries irritation, contempt, or disbelief toward rude, exhausting, or absurd interaction.	Some users view the stare as a restrained expression of annoyance or judgment in response to unpleasant social encounters.	“the art of silent contempt”; “when customers say something dumb”; “are you serious right now?”; “really stupid, racist, offensive, rude, ignorant or crazy”; “I just looked”
Strategic withdrawal from interaction	Intentional disengagement and self-protection; Rudeness or unwillingness to communicate	Some users view the stare as an intentional way to withdraw from interaction without open confrontation.	The stare is treated as a quiet way to stop conversation, avoid conflict, or limit participation in unwanted interaction.	“shuts the conversation down without escalating it”; “I’m not here to have a conversation”; “I am not allowed to cut them off”; “the inability or unwillingness to communicate”

Reddit users associate the Gen Z stare with varied intentions and emotions. Many accounts connect it with uncertainty, awkwardness, and low confidence in face-to-face interaction. Users described the stare as a response that appears when a person does not know what to say, remains unsure about the next appropriate action, or feels uneasy during a live social exchange. In these accounts, the stare signifies less a conscious act of disrespect than a pause characterized by hesitation. Several users linked it with weak communication skills, limited experience in direct interaction, or discomfort when speaking with strangers. Others associated the reaction with fear of embarrassment or concern about giving an incorrect response, particularly in school or public settings. Within this pattern, the stare appears as a visible indication of social difficulty. This interpretation corresponds with Hartoonian’s (2026) view that the stare can operate as a freeze response under social pressure. Cabahug and Pescadero’s (2023) discussion of psychosocial well-being among Gen Z also supports this

interpretation through its attention to the emotional consequences of highly mediated social experience. Since the dataset consists of Reddit discussions, this pattern can also be considered alongside studies that treat the platform as a space where users describe anxiety, emotional discomfort, and everyday coping in relatively spontaneous language (Boettcher, 2021; Yang et al., 2023).

Other users describe the Gen Z stare as an emotionally flat or detached expression. They repeatedly referred to it as a blank stare, glazed look, dead eyes, or autopilot face. Under this interpretation, the stare is associated with low visible affect, limited verbal response, and emotional distance. Some users attached no strong emotion to it and described it as an absence of emotion or thought. For these Reddit participants, the stare may not always communicate a specific intention toward another person. It could constitute a neutral or habitual expression that others easily misinterpret during social interaction. The recurring distinction between a “resting face” and a refusal to

respond also indicates that users attempted to separate facial appearance and communicative intention, although actual encounters frequently confuse these two elements. Irshad (2024) describes this type of low-affect signaling as part of contemporary digital body language among young people. Lamba and Jain (2025) similarly note that highly mediated visual environments strongly affect Gen Z communicative habits because these environments compress reactions into minimal cues. Fagan (2025) further argues that flat facial affect can act as a protective stance against social scrutiny and emotional overexposure.

Accounts involving rude customers, offensive remarks, and exhausting conversations assign more deliberate and negative emotional content to the stare. Users interpreted it as irritation, contempt, disbelief, or annoyance directed toward another person. This pattern appears most clearly in descriptions of inappropriate comments, disrespectful conduct, and conversations considered foolish or emotionally exhausting. Some users presented the stare as a restrained response to ignorance or disrespect. Others treated it as a quiet expression of the question, “Are you serious right now?” In such cases, the stare carries emotional weight and communicates a nonverbal judgment of another person’s conduct. Compared with the uncertainty-based interpretation, this reading presents the stare as purposeful and emotionally charged. It supports Robinson’s (2025) claim that the Gen Z Stare operate as a refusal to perform warmth or friendliness on demand, particularly in settings where others expect emotional labor. This interpretation also corresponds with Fagan’s (2025) view that emotional flatness can act as a defensive response.

For several users, the Gen Z stare functions as a form of withdrawal or self-protection. They described it as a way to avoid extended conversation, end an interaction, or prevent es-

calation without direct confrontation. This interpretation appears most clearly in workplace settings where employees feel pressured to remain polite while dealing with difficult or intrusive customers. Under such conditions, silence and facial blankness become practical responses that restrict further exchange. The person withholds a visible reaction and avoids open disagreement. In this sense, the stare constitute a low-conflict strategy for maintaining distance, emotional control, or personal safety during uncomfortable interactions. These accounts correspond with Robinson’s (2025) and Hartoonian’s (2026) interpretation of the stare as a means of boundary-setting or self-protection.

All in all, the Reddit accounts attach multiple emotional and intentional meanings to the Gen Z stare. The most common interpretations associate it with social unease, uncertainty, and low confidence. Another group of responses describes it as emotionally blank or detached, whereas a smaller recurring set of comments connects it with irritation, contempt, or deliberate disengagement. The stare carries no single or stable meaning. Its interpretation varies according to the observer’s perspective, the interactional setting, and whether users regard it as involuntary hesitation or intentional refusal. These patterns imply that the stare may be understood as a flexible communicative sign whose meaning depends on context, emotional state, and audience interpretation (Irshad, 2024; Bukhari et al., 2025).

The Gen Z Stare as a Site of Intergenerational Miscommunication

This section discusses the ways Reddit users framed the Gen Z stare as part of wider misunderstandings between younger and older generations. The major thematic categories for this dimension are compiled in Table 3.

Table 3. Thematic Categories on the Gen Z Stare as a Site of Intergenerational Miscommunication

Category	Codes	Theme	Description	Sample Supporting Excerpts
Conflicting generational expectations	Generational differences in politeness and communication norms;	On Reddit, the Gen Z stare is discussed as a	The stare is frequently discussed in routine public encounters where	“greetings were the bare minimum”; “no hello, how are you, welcome in, nothing”; “a

Category	Codes	Theme	Description	Sample Supporting Excerpts
in every-day interaction	Retail and public encounters are key sites of intergenerational friction	sign of inter-generational mismatch in communication norms.	one person expects verbal acknowledgment and reads silence as rude, awkward, or improper.	simple hello or acknowledgement"; "the inability or unwillingness to communicate"
Generational labeling and blame	Older generations frame the stare as a youth problem; The stare is contested as a nonexclusive or recurring cross-generational behavior; The label itself makes younger people feel judged, mocked, or misunderstood	Reddit users also frame the Gen Z stare discourse as a form of generational blaming and stereotyping.	Many users resist the idea that the stare is exclusive to Gen Z and treat the term as another way older generations criticize younger ones.	"older generations have considered younger generations unmotivated"; "Gen Z didn't start it"; "trying to peg you as the awkward generation"; "What Gen Z is doing now is what older generations also did"; "transcends all generations"
Explanations for the communication gap	Socialization gaps, screens, and disrupted interaction are used to explain the divide	The communication gap is commonly explained through differences in upbringing, social practice, and digital life.	Users connect the stare to weaker social practice, more screen exposure, Covid disruption, and reduced training in work or family settings.	"prior generations may have failed Gen Z"; "I haven't seen as much of that kind of social 'practicing'"; "stuck on screens more than other generations"; "socially and emotionally stunted from Covid and the phone"; "people are no longer being trained to do their jobs"
The stare as a non-verbal response to older people	The stare can function as a response to older people's rude, intrusive, or exhausting behavior	In some discussions, the Gen Z stare is presented as a quiet response to older people's intrusive, offensive, or exhausting behavior.	A smaller group of comments treats the stare as a controlled nonverbal reply that avoids argument while expressing refusal or irritation.	"when customers say something dumb"; "are you serious right now?"; "I'm not here to have a conversation"; "old people... take this as their opportunity to gush"; "I didn't agree with anything he said, so I just looked at him"

Reddit users frequently frame the Gen Z stare as a point of intergenerational miscommunication in everyday interaction. Much of this disagreement centers on conflicting expectations about politeness, acknowledgment, and verbal response. Many users, especially older commenters or those speaking as customers,

interpreted the stare as a lack of greeting, refusal to speak, or failure to follow basic social etiquette. Comments about checkout counters, store encounters, and routine public exchanges indicate that the stare becomes noticeable when one person expects a simple verbal script, such as "hello" or "thank you," and

instead receives silence or a blank look. Within this pattern, miscommunication arises because one side reads silence as rude or improper, while the other side may not attach the same meaning to that silence. This concern is consistent with studies on intergenerational communication, which note that gaps in norms, language use, and response patterns can create friction even in ordinary social encounters (Bukhari et al., 2025; Raslie, 2021). Seen in this way, the Gen Z stare becomes a mismatch between older expectations of verbal politeness and younger habits of minimal, delayed, or non-verbal response (Irshad, 2024).

This mismatch has particular relevance in the Philippine setting, where respect for older people and expectations of proper interpersonal conduct can affect the interpretation of silence, facial expression, and verbal acknowledgment. In schools, workplaces, and service encounters, a blank stare or limited response can be read as discourtesy when older participants expect greetings, politeness, and visible attentiveness. Gabriel et al. (2020) positions intergenerational workplace relations within the Philippine context, where differences between younger and older employees might affect everyday interaction. Although the present dataset does not represent Filipino Reddit users exclusively, the findings provide an interpretive basis for considering similar communication gaps in contemporary social settings of the country.

Another prominent pattern treats the discourse itself as a form of generational labeling. Many Reddit users argued that descriptions of the stare as a Gen Z problem repeat older patterns of criticism directed at younger people. In these discussions, the phrase “Gen Z Stare” does more than describe a behavior. It converts ordinary awkwardness, poor customer service, or a deadpan expression into supposed evidence of generational decline. Several users challenged this framing and argued that blank looks, detached expressions, and awkward silences have long existed among members of other generations. For these commenters, the concern extends beyond the stare to the social meaning assigned to it by older observers who interpret it as evidence of youth failure. The discourse becomes a space where generations assign blame and interpret one another

through stereotypes. This argument corresponds with Bukhari et al. (2025), who state that generational gaps persist because of differences in expression and the judgments attached to communicative styles and perceived appropriateness. Public commentary on the Gen Z Stare also proposes that viral naming can rapidly convert a loosely defined behavioral pattern into a moral judgment about an entire age cohort (López Restrepo & Venkat, 2025; Beddington, 2025).

Users frequently explain this communication gap through changing social conditions. A substantial group of comments associates the stare with limited social practice, weaker interpersonal training, extensive screen exposure, COVID-related disruption, and changing work environments. Some users stated that younger people received less pressure to practice conversation than previous generations. Others referred to inadequate customer-service training or social habits influenced by phones and digital media. These accounts do not completely dismiss criticism of the behavior, although they place it within a wider social context. The discussions present the stare as part of a communication gap associated with generational differences in upbringing, technology use, and everyday interaction. Under this interpretation, miscommunication does not arise simply because one generation behaves rudely while another follows the correct standard. It may also arise because generations have unequal exposure to the norms and routines that govern public social life. These explanations correspond with studies that associate Gen Z communication with screen-heavy environments, altered emotional expression, and mediated forms of interaction (Irshad, 2024; Lamba & Jain, 2025). They also correspond with local findings that connect social media engagement with psychosocial well-being among Gen Z, which can affect confidence, visible emotion, and participation during face-to-face interaction (Cabahug & Pescadero, 2023).

Some comments reverse the usual direction of judgment and present the stare as a reaction to older people’s behavior. In these accounts, users describe the stare as a deadpan or silent response to rude, intrusive, offensive, or exhausting remarks, particularly in customer-

service settings. Younger workers are therefore presented as individuals who withhold a response to avoid conflict, control irritation, or end an unwanted exchange. This suggests that Reddit discussions do not limit intergenerational miscommunication to older people's failure to understand younger people. Some users also describe it as younger people's resistance to the conversational demands or assumptions of older adults, particularly when they consider such demands unreasonable or excessively familiar. This reversal matters because it moves the discussion away from youth deficiency and places greater attention on situational responses to emotional labor, intrusive communication, and excessive familiarity. Robinson (2025) and Fagan (2025) present similar interpretations.

In general, the Reddit data suggest that the Gen Z Stare operates as a contested sign within intergenerational interaction. Some users associate it with declining manners or weak communication. Others regard it as a recycled criticism of youth, a result of altered socialization, or a nonverbal response to unpleasant conduct. The discussions treat the stare as more than a facial expression. It becomes a point at which generations misinterpret one another's intentions, expectations, and standards of interaction. Overall, the Gen Z Stare may be understood as a contested communicative sign situated at the meeting point of digital-era expressiveness, generational judgment, and unequal social expectations (Bukhari et al., 2025; Irshad, 2024; López Restrepo & Venkat, 2025).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study implies that the Gen Z Stare can be understood as a contemporary form of nonverbal communication influenced by digital culture, changing patterns of socialization, and shifting expectations in everyday interaction. Based on the Reddit discussions, the stare appears most commonly in routine public encounters, particularly in customer-service settings, awkward or uncertain face-to-face exchanges, and situations associated with irritation, exhaustion, or refusal. Within these contexts, the stare carries no single or fixed meaning. In some instances, it communicates hesitation, anxiety, or low

confidence. In others, it conveys emotional distance, boundary-setting, or quiet resistance to unwanted social demands. For this reason, the Gen Z Stare cannot be reduced to a simple indication of disrespect or poor manners.

Through a cultural studies perspective, the Gen Z Stare may be interpreted as a social sign produced under the conditions of contemporary youth life. Gen Z has developed within screen-based interaction, pandemic-related disruption, compressed attention, and increasing pressure to regulate emotions in public and workplace settings (Pal & Rashmi, 2026). Older generations might interpret the stare as rudeness or disengagement, whereas younger people may experience it as self-protection, emotional restraint, or a practical response to situations they consider strange, exhausting, or intrusive. The findings indicate that the Gen Z Stare forms part of a wider change in communicative norms. Silence, facial blankness, and minimal reaction have acquired recognizable meanings within a heavily mediated social environment.

The findings also position the Gen Z Stare as a sign of intergenerational miscommunication. Much of the conflict surrounding it arises through competing assumptions about politeness, responsiveness, and acceptable conduct in public interaction. In this sense, the stare becomes more than a facial expression. It becomes a cultural point of dispute where generations assign different meanings to the same act. Its circulation as a named phenomenon in online discourse further indicates that viral labels can quickly convert ordinary social behavior into a moral judgment about young people. The Gen Z Stare can be approached as a contested communicative practice connected to wider conflicts in digital-era social life, rather than as a generational defect. In the Philippine setting, the findings support a more careful reading of youth behavior in schools, workplaces, and service environments, particularly where generations attach different meanings to silence, facial blankness, and limited verbal response.

Future local studies may analyze the Gen Z stare through interviews, focus-group discussions, and non-participant observation in Philippine settings where intergenerational

communication and emotional labor are especially visible. Research may focus on BPO offices and retail establishments in Metro Manila or Laguna to witness the experiences of Filipino Gen Z employees during interactions with older customers, supervisors, and co-workers. Such studies can investigate the situations that prompt the stare, the meanings assigned to it by different age groups, and its effects on workplace communication, customer-service expectations, and perceptions of respect. Comparative studies across schools, industries, and retail environments might also determine whether the expression carries consistent meanings or changes according to institutional setting and relationship between participants.

As a whole, this study contributes to current discussions on youth culture, nonverbal communication, and generational tension by framing the Gen Z stare as a small but telling sign of cultural change in the present era.

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