



Speaking Gen Z: A Register-Authenticity Framework for Brand Tagline

Development

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Abstract: Generation Z is often described as a generation that can tell, almost instantly, when a brand is “trying too hard.” Nowhere is this more visible than in taglines the short, repeatable lines meant to carry a brand's identity in a handful of words. Much of the existing guidance on slogan-writing still treats a tagline mainly as a persuasion device, judged by memorability, distinctiveness, and fit with brand positioning. This conceptual paper argues that for a Generation Z audience, a tagline succeeds or fails earlier than that at the level of language itself: does it sound like something a real member of this generation would actually say, or does it sound like an adult institution performing youth? Drawing on sociolinguistic register theory and the consumer brand-authenticity literature, this paper proposes the Register-Authenticity Framework (RAF), which organizes tagline language along three dimensions: register alignment, relational tenor, and authenticity cueing and translates them into a seven-item Register-Authenticity Checklist (RAC) that marketers, student-affairs offices, and university communication teams can apply directly to a draft tagline. A short illustration from Thai higher education marketing shows the framework in use, and the paper closes with implications for practice and a short research agenda.

Keywords: Generation Z, brand tagline, brand authenticity, consumer language

Introduction

A short-video feed moves fast, and a Generation Z viewer's thumb moves faster. In the space of a caption or a spoken line at the top of a video, a viewer already senses whether a brand is speaking to them or performing at them. McKinsey's ethnographic study of Generation Z across several countries described this cohort as unusually oriented toward “truth” quick to notice a gap between what a brand says and what it plausibly means (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). Advertising research on this generation reaches a similar conclusion from a different angle: Generation Z consumers have grown up saturated with branded content

and have developed a correspondingly sharper filter for language that feels manufactured rather than lived (Southgate, 2017).

A tagline is where this filter is tested most directly, because a tagline has almost no room to argue its case. It cannot build an argument across several sentences the way an advertisement or a landing page can; it is a handful of words meant to be repeated, remembered, and ideally adopted into how people already talk about a brand (Kohli, Leuthesser, & Suri, 2007). Existing guidance on writing effective slogans is genuinely useful: it tells a marketer to keep a tagline simple, to link it clearly to brand positioning, and to give it room to last across several years of campaigns (Kohli et al., 2007). What this guidance does not address directly is a question that matters specifically for a Generation Z audience: whose voice does this tagline sound like, and what relationship does that voice assume with the person reading it?

This paper proposes that register the systematic way language varies according to who is speaking, to whom, and in what situation (Halliday, 1978) together with the brand-authenticity literature (Napoli, Dickinson, Beverland, & Farrelly, 2014; Beverland & Farrelly, 2010), offers a more precise lens for this question than persuasion-focused slogan guidance alone. The paper introduces the Register-Authenticity Framework (RAF), a conceptual model with three dimensions, and translates it into a short practical tool: the Register-Authenticity Checklist (RAC) that a communication team can run a draft tagline through before it goes further into testing or production.

This paper sits alongside Generation Z's social commerce behavior, the Digital Trust Journey (DTJ) model, which described trust as something built step by step across a shopping journey rather than fixed at one point. The concern here is different but related: rather than asking which step of a journey a Generation Z consumer is in, this paper asks what happens inside a single unit of brand language: a tagline — before a journey has even started. In DTJ terms, register misalignment is one plausible reason a piece of content never earns the first impression that begins Discovery at all. The primary illustrative domain used throughout this paper is higher education marketing: how Thai universities and colleges speak to prospective and current Generation Z students. Though the framework and checklist are written to generalize to other sectors that must speak to this generation in a handful of words.

Why Register and Authenticity, Not Persuasion Alone

The established guidance for writing slogans is organized mostly around outcomes: is the line simple, is it differentiating, is it durable across time, and is it linked clearly to the brand's positioning (Kohli et al., 2007). These are reasonable questions, and none of them is wrong. But they are largely silent on a prior question not whether the line is persuasive, but whether it is recognizable as coming from someone the reader would actually trust to speak this way. A line can be simple, distinctive, and perfectly linked to brand positioning, and still fail with a Generation Z audience because it is written in the wrong voice for who is saying it.

The consumer-authenticity literature offers one reason why this failure matters more for this generation than for earlier ones. Authenticity, in this literature, is not simply “truthfulness” treated as a single yes-or-no judgment; consumers assess it along several concrete cues at once, including whether a brand appears committed to quality, whether its communication feels sincere rather than performative, and whether it is recognizably rooted in a real place, history, or community rather than a generic global voice (Napoli et al., 2014). Consumers do not receive authenticity passively — they actively search for and weigh cues that let them judge a brand as genuine, and language is one of the most immediate cues available, arriving before a product is ever tried (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010). For a generation raised on branded content and unusually attentive to the gap between claim and reality (Francis & Hoefel, 2018), a tagline's wording is often the first, and sometimes the only, authenticity cue a brand gets the chance to offer.

Sociolinguistics gives a name to what goes wrong when a brand's wording fails this test even while using individually familiar words. Register describes how language varies systematically with field (what is being talked about), tenor (who is talking to whom, and their relationship), and mode (the channel the language travels through) (Halliday, 1978). A brand that borrows current slang without also matching the relationship those words normally carry produces a register mismatch: something native users of that language variety can sense immediately, even if every individual word is technically correct. This is closer to what practitioners informally call “cringe” language that is lexically current but relationally wrong. Higher education marketing makes a useful test case for this argument. Universities are institutions almost by definition hierarchical, credential-granting, and formally accountable which places them at maximum distance from the peer-to-peer register that Generation Z uses among itself. Chapleo's (2010) study of what makes a university brand feel “successful” found that the strongest university brands manage to balance emotional and rational content rather than defaulting to purely institutional language. This paper

argues that, for a Generation Z audience specifically, that balance is achieved or lost largely at the level of register and authenticity cueing, not at the level of the claim being made. Two taglines can promise the same thing belonging, opportunity, transformation and one can feel like a genuine invitation while the other feels like a poster in a corridor no one reads.

The Register-Authenticity Framework (RAF)

The Register-Authenticity Framework (RAF) organizes tagline language along three dimensions, summarized in Table 1 and explained below. Each dimension is deliberately kept at the level of observable, practitioner-usable features vocabulary, tone, positioning, and specificity rather than a taxonomy of the finer rhetorical and cognitive mechanisms through which language shapes meaning as well as being intentionally left outside the scope of this applied, practice-facing paper.

Register Alignment -Register alignment asks whether a tagline's vocabulary, topic framing, and level of formality match how the target audience actually talks about the subject among themselves, rather than how an institution talks about that same subject. A university tagline built around words such as “excellence,” “leadership,” or “opportunity” is using the institution's own internal register the language of mission statements and accreditation reports rather than the register a prospective student would use to describe what they actually want from the experience. Register alignment also includes mode: a line written for a printed banner does not automatically work as a spoken line at the start of a short video, or as text layered over a fast-moving clip, and Generation Z's primary media diet runs through exactly these short-form, spoken and captioned modes (Southgate, 2017).

Relational Tenor -Tenor describes the relationship a piece of language assumes between speaker and audience whether the speaker is positioned above, alongside, or below the listener (Halliday, 1978). A tagline can position a brand as an authority speaking down to its audience, in the manner of a parent or an official notice, or it can position the brand as a peer speaking alongside its audience. Generation Z research consistently finds a preference for lower power-distance communication brands that feel like they are inside the conversation rather than announcing something into it (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). But this dimension has a ceiling as well as a floor: a brand that overcorrects into exaggerated peer-mimicry, adopting slang and syntax with no institutional distance at all, risks reading as a performance of youth rather than a genuine adjacent voice. The workable target for most institutions, including universities, is best described as a credible near-peer tenor an adult presence that clearly understands the audience's world without pretending to be a member of it.

Authenticity Cueing -This dimension adapts the three-factor structure of consumer-based brand authenticity quality commitment, sincerity, and heritage (Napoli et al., 2014) into cues that a few words of tagline copy can plausibly carry. Commitment cues favor specific, checkable claims over vague superlatives; a line that could be pasted onto almost any institution without modification is, by definition, failing this cue. Sincerity cues involve a degree of plain talk or even acknowledged imperfection, rather than uniformly glossy claims, echoing the finding that consumers read authenticity partly through a brand's willingness to be plain rather than performative (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010). Belonging cues, adapted from the heritage factor for institutions that may not have long individual histories to draw on, ask whether the tagline is rooted in a real, locatable community, place, or shared experience, rather than voiced in a generic global register that could belong to any institution anywhere.

Three Propositions -To keep the framework testable, its logic can be stated as three propositions.

P1: Register alignment functions primarily as a gate rather than a driver a tagline that fails register alignment is unlikely to be evaluated at all on relational tenor or authenticity cueing, because a Generation Z audience disengages from mismatched register before those later judgments have a chance to occur.

P2: Relational tenor cues that assume too little power distance (an over-familiar, imitation-peer voice) damage perceived authenticity more sharply than tenor cues that assume too much power distance (a formal, institutional voice) in other words, a Generation Z audience is likely to penalize an unconvincing attempt to sound like a peer more visibly than it penalizes an honestly formal voice.

P3: Authenticity cueing (commitment, sincerity, and belonging) has a stronger relationship with whether a tagline gets repeated, shared, or folded into a Generation Z audience's own language than with whether it is remembered on first exposure meaning authenticity governs adoption more than it governs simple recall.

A Short Illustration -A brief example may make the three dimensions easier to picture. Imagine a Thai university preparing a tagline for its new-student orientation campaign, and two draft lines under consideration. Draft A reads, "Shaping Tomorrow's Leaders Today" Draft B, developed after listening to how current students actually described their own first weeks on campus, reads, "You got in. Now make it yours."

Run through the RAF, Draft A shows a clear pattern of weaknesses. Its vocabulary "shaping" "leaders" belongs to the institution's internal register of mission statements, not to how a student describes their own first semester, so it fails register alignment. Its tenor is that of an authority announcing

an outcome onto the student rather than speaking alongside them, positioning the university as the sole active agent. And its authenticity cueing is weak on the commitment dimension in particular, since “tomorrow's leaders” is a claim any institution could paste onto any campaign without changing a word. Draft B performs differently on all three dimensions without changing the underlying promise that the university experience belongs to the student who begins it. Its register matches plain, direct address rather than institutional language. Its tenor places the student, not the university, as the grammatical subject of the second sentence, producing a near-peer rather than authority-down relationship. And its authenticity cueing is stronger on sincerity and belonging: it is plain rather than glossy, and it names a real, locatable moment having just been admitted rather than an abstract future outcome. Neither line is more “true” than the other in a factual sense; the difference the framework identifies is entirely in how each line is likely to be read, and by extension trusted, by the audience it is written for.

Table 1 The Register-Authenticity Framework (RAF): three dimensions, what each signals and the risk of misalignment.

Dimension	What It Signals	Risk If Misaligned	Practical Cue
1. Register Alignment	Whether the vocabulary and mode match how the audience actually talks about the subject	Line reads as institutional language performing youth (“cringe”)	Borrow phrasing from real audience speech, not marketing copy
2. Relational Tenor	Whether the brand speaks down, alongside, or as an imitation peer	Either an authority-down tone, or an overcorrected fake-peer tone	Aim for a credible near-peer: adjacent, not disguised
3. Authenticity Cueing	Commitment, sincerity, and belonging carried in a few words	Vague superlatives; glossy claims with no plain talk or local specificity	Replace generic superlatives with one specific, locatable detail

The Register-Authenticity Checklist (RAC): A Practical Tool

The RAF is useful conceptually, but a communication team drafting a tagline under deadline needs something more direct to work from. The Register-Authenticity Checklist (RAC) translates the three RAF dimensions into seven questions that can be applied to any draft tagline in a few minutes, before it goes into wider testing. As with the framework above, each item is written at the level of an observable check rather than a rule about specific rhetorical devices, so that it can be used by a marketing team, a student affairs office, or a university communication unit without specialist training in linguistics.

1. Read-aloud peer test. Say the line aloud as if speaking to a friend rather than reading it as copy. If it sounds like something no real person in the target age group would say out loud, it fails register alignment.

2. Vagueness audit. Underline every superlative or abstract noun (“excellence,” “leaders,” “opportunity”). If the line could be pasted onto a different, unrelated institution without changing a word, it fails the commitment cue.

3. Power-distance check. Identify who is the grammatical subject of the line the institution or the audience. A line where the audience is the actor, not the recipient, is closer to a near-peer tenor.

4. Fake-peer check. Flag any slang, abbreviation, or slogan-style trend language borrowed for the sake of sounding current. If it would not survive being said by someone outside the target age group without sounding forced, cut it overcorrection reads as performance, not connection.

5. Local-specificity check. Confirm the line contains at least one detail a place, a moment, a shared experience that could not belong to just any institution. This is the belonging cue.

6. Platform-mode check. Test the line as a spoken opening line in a short video, as on-screen text, and as a static caption. A line that only works in one mode has a mode mismatch that will surface across a multi-platform campaign.

7. Identity-room check. Confirm the line invites the audience to bring their own meaning to it, rather than telling them who they are or what they will become. Lines that assign an identity (“tomorrow’s leaders”) tend to close this room; lines that open a space (“make it yours”) tend to keep it open.

A tagline does not need a perfect score on all seven items to be usable some institutional contexts call for a more formal tenor, for example, and that is a legitimate strategic choice rather than a failure. What the RAC offers is not a pass-fail gate but a diagnostic: it tells a team precisely which dimension a weak-performing draft is weak on, so that revision effort goes to the actual problem rather than to a general sense that “this doesn’t feel right yet.”

What This Means in Practice

For Thai higher-education institutions, Generation Z is no longer an emerging audience but the primary enrolling cohort, and much of the language used in prospectuses, orientation campaigns, and social media accounts still carries the institutional register of mission statements and accreditation documents. Routing a draft tagline through the RAC before it reaches external testing is a low-cost step that can catch register and tenor problems long before a campaign is produced, at the point where correction is cheapest. The present author's own experience managing digital communication and content strategy for a doctoral program's outreach materials suggests that this same register gap is not limited to undergraduate-facing lines postgraduate and professional program communication aimed at younger academic audiences shows a similar tendency to default to institutional register even when the intended reader is closer in age and outlook to the Generation Z cohort discussed here.

For Thai small and medium-sized enterprises, the framework connects directly to the Discovery step of the Digital Trust Journey model: before a shopper ever evaluates a product claim, they form a first impression of whether the content and the voice behind it feel genuine. A tagline or short caption that fails register alignment can foreclose that first impression before a product's actual merits ever considered, regardless of how strong the underlying offer is.

For researchers, the RAF offers a testable lens that sits beneath persuasion-outcome measures such as recall and purchase intention. Rather than asking only whether a tagline was remembered or liked, future studies can ask which of the three dimensions — register alignment, relational tenor, or authenticity cueing a given line succeeded or failed on, and whether that pattern predicts sharing and organic repetition specifically, as Proposition 3 suggests, rather than recall alone.

A further practical implication concerns process rather than wording alone. Register misalignment is difficult for an institution to self-diagnose, because the people drafting a tagline are usually fluent in the institution's own register and are, for that reason, the least likely to notice when a line still carries it. This suggests that the RAC works best not as a solitary drafting exercise but as a short review step involving current students, recent graduates, or younger staff members who are closer in register to the intended audience — not necessarily as focus-group participants evaluating finished concepts, but as an early read-aloud check on drafts still in progress. This distinction matters operationally: testing a nearly finished campaign for reactions is a validation step, while running the RAC earlier, on rough drafts, is a diagnostic step, and the two should not be collapsed into a single late-stage research exercise.

It is also worth noting what the RAF is not designed to do. It does not replace positioning work, and a tagline that is well aligned on register, tenor, and authenticity but disconnected from what the institution actually offers will still fail, just for a different reason than the ones this framework addresses. The RAF and the existing slogan literature (Kohli et al., 2007) are best used together: the established guidance still governs whether a line is strategically right for the brand, while the RAF and RAC govern whether that strategically right idea has been rendered in language a Generation Z reader will actually recognize as genuine.

Limitations and Future Research

As a conceptual paper, the claims made here are propositions to be tested, not findings, and several limitations are worth stating plainly. The framework has not yet been validated empirically with Thai Generation Z respondents, and the propositions above should be treated as a starting point for such testing rather than as established relationships. A tagline is also only one small textual unit within a much larger brand voice; whether the same three dimensions apply cleanly to longer-form copy, customer-service tone, or spoken interaction in livestream selling contexts (Wongkitrungrueng & Assarut, 2020) is an open question rather than an assumption of this paper.

The framework was also developed with a bilingual, code-mixed Thai–English youth register in mind, which is common in Thai Generation Z communication but is not the only pattern in use; taglines written entirely in Thai, or in other regional languages, may surface register and tenor cues that this English-language illustration does not capture. Future work should test the RAC directly with Thai-language and Thai–English code-switched taglines, examine whether the ceiling effect proposed in P2 (fake-peer tenor damaging authenticity more than formal tenor) holds across different sectors, and extend the framework to the broader consumer-language work in progress within this research program, where the finer rhetorical and cognitive mechanisms bracketed out of this paper are addressed directly for an international, theory-building audience.

A related limitation concerns durability. Slogan guidance has long emphasized that an effective tagline should be able to last across several years of campaigns without needing to be replaced (Kohli et al., 2007), yet the youth register that P1 through P3 depend on is itself a moving target specific words and phrasings that read as authentically current to Generation Z today may read as dated within a short period. The RAF's emphasis on register alignment therefore carries a built-in tension with the durability goal that the broader slogan literature values, and future work should examine whether authenticity cueing

(commitment, sincerity, and belonging) ages more slowly than register alignment does, since the former depends less on specific vocabulary than the latter. If so, institutions may be better served by treating authenticity cueing as the stable core of a tagline and revisiting register alignment on a shorter cycle, rather than treating the whole line as equally fixed.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that for a Generation Z audience, a brand tagline is judged before it is persuasive at the level of whether its language sounds like it could plausibly come from someone the reader would trust to speak that way. The Register-Authenticity Framework organizes that judgment along three dimensions register alignment, relational tenor, and authenticity cueing — and the accompanying seven-item checklist turns the framework into something a communication team can apply directly to a draft line. As Thai higher-education institutions and Thai SMEs alike compete for the attention of a generation that treats corporate-sounding language as an immediate signal of distance rather than credibility, being able to diagnose a register problem, a tenor problem, or an authenticity problem separately is more useful, both for practice and for research, than optimizing a tagline for memorability alone. The three propositions offered here are meant as a starting point for testing this idea further, not as a finished answer.

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