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Gen Z and Group Work: How Communication Styles Affect Free-Riding Behaviours

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the effect of communication styles on free-riding behaviours in group work among Generation Z (Gen Z) undergraduate students. A mixed-methods approach was employed, which included quantitative survey data from 186 undergraduate students in Malaysia and qualitative insights gathered from 24 students through focus groups. Findings indicate significant differences in free-riding experiences across groups with varying communication styles. Students exhibiting passive and passive-aggressive communication styles were noted to have higher levels of free-riding behaviours. Conversely, those demonstrating assertive communication showed substantially lower instances of free riding. Qualitative analysis further reveals the influence of technology preferences, conflict avoidance, and accountability challenges on the prevalence of free-riding behaviours. Digital communication, as favoured by this generation combined with a tendency to avoid confrontation, was found to increase unequal participation in group tasks. The study demonstrates the significance of creating a structured environment with clear expectations to address free-riding behaviours. There is also a need to establish ways to promote transparent collaboration practices beyond peer evaluation to enhance the effectiveness of group work. These findings contribute to developing pedagogical strategies to improve collaborative learning experiences and prepare Generation Z students for successful teamwork in both academic and professional contexts.

Keywords: *Free riding, Gen Z, group work, communication styles, social loafing.*

INTRODUCTION

Generation Z (Gen Z), encompassing individuals born between 1995 and 2009, is the first generation to have grown up entirely in the digital age so much so that they are regarded as digital natives (Bhalla et al., 2021; Chen & Ha, 2023). This upbringing has profoundly shaped their values, behaviours, and preferences, which also influence the way they communicate (Yang et al., 2024). Regardless of the debate surrounding the labelling of the Gen Z population, their early exposure to modern technology and a distinct economic situation has undeniably influenced their behaviours and interactions in both academic and professional contexts (Imjai et al., 2024).

Gen Z's attitudes towards teamwork are complex and often appear contradictory. While some studies suggest a preference for individual work (Aldjic & Farrell, 2022; Tolstikova et al., 2023), others highlight the importance of social interaction and collaboration for this generation (Janssen & Carradini, 2021; Katz et al., 2021). This apparent paradox may stem from the tension between what Gabrielova and Buchko (2021) noted as Gen Z's desire for autonomy and control over their work and their inherent need for social connection and a

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sense of belonging. They value individual expression and the ability to pursue their own goals, but they also seek validation and support from their peers (Jamilah et al., 2024; Janssen & Carradini, 2021).

Furthermore, Gen Z displays a strong preference for remote work (Nichols & Smith, 2024), which is aligned with their desire for flexibility although Becker (2022) argued that the COVID-19 pandemic experience has made them more inclined to choose in-person interactions. Despite that, they are adept at utilising virtual communication tools for quick exchanges of information and collaboration. This preference can influence their approach to group projects, with a tendency to favour virtual meetings and online collaboration tools over traditional face-to-face interactions. However, this reliance on technology can also present challenges, potentially hindering the development of strong interpersonal relationships and trust within the group.

Adding to this complexity, studies have shown that Gen Z may be more anxious about group work compared to previous generations (Schlee et al., 2020). This anxiety is often a result of their concerns about unequal contributions from team members, fears of failing to meet expectations, and a perceived lack of control over project outcomes (Schlee et al., 2020). Generation Z's unique attitudes toward group work, shaped by their digital upbringing and socio-economic context, provide a reasonable ground for examining specific challenges in collaborative settings.

One such challenge is the issue of free-riding behaviour (Benning, 2024), where some group members contribute less than their fair share of effort. This problem is not unique to Gen Z, yet its manifestation in this generation may differ due to their distinctive communication preferences and work styles. While collaboration remains an integral component of both academic and professional environments, as pointed out by Anand and Lui (2023), the effectiveness of group efforts often hinges on the dynamics of communication within the team, particularly in navigating issues like free riding.

In the context of Malaysia (and countries with similar ethnic diversity), the challenges surrounding group work and free-riding behaviours are further compounded by the nation's multicultural and multilingual environment (Ong, 2023). Malaysian Generation Z individuals, shaped by a unique blend of cultural values, tend to exhibit varying communication styles influenced by ethnic, linguistic, and socio-economic factors (Tjiptono et al., 2020). For example, the collectivist nature prevalent among many Malaysian ethnic groups might promote harmony and group cohesion but can also lead to a reluctance to confront free riders, especially among those with passive communication tendencies (Azmi et al., 2023). Addressing these challenges requires a deeper understanding of how Malaysian Gen Z's communication styles interact with their perceptions and experiences of free-riding in group work. This study explores such phenomenon through Gen Z's communication styles and their free-riding behaviour during group work. In particular, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How do different communication styles affect the free-riding behaviours among Gen Z students in group work?
2. What are the underlying factors through which communication styles affect Gen Z's free-riding behaviours in group work?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Free Riding in Group Work

Free riding is a prevalent issue in group work, where certain members contribute less, relying on others to shoulder the workload (Benning, 2024). This behaviour can lead to decreased group productivity, efficiency, and morale. Free-riding behaviour is related to the social loafing theory (Latané et al., 1979) which elucidates the tendency of individuals to exert less effort when working in a group compared to working alone (Gabelica et al., 2022). Latané et al. (1979) demonstrated this effect through experiments showing that individuals produced less noise when asked to cheer or clap as part of a group than when performing alone. This reduction in effort was attributed to the diffusion of responsibility within the group, where individuals felt less accountable for the overall output.

Studies have shown that free riding often arises when individuals feel their contributions are dispensable or when they believe their lack of effort will go unnoticed. For instance, Luo et al. (2021) conducted a mixed-methods study to investigate the factors leading to social loafing in student group work. Their research identified several key antecedents, including unclear group goals, lack of individual accountability, and poor group cohesion. They found that students' perceptions of unequal workload distribution and insufficient peer evaluations contributed to reduced individual effort. Similarly, Wong et al. (2022) in their qualitative study on nursing students found that students' insecurity about working in groups made them choose to work individually.

However, the role of communication styles in mitigating or increasing free-riding behaviour remains relatively understudied. As highlighted by Boulu-Reshef et al. (2020), free riding is also an unwanted outcome of interpersonal and communicative challenges. Hence, the exploration of how different communication styles influence group dynamics could provide valuable insights into addressing this pervasive issue.

Communication Styles and Group Dynamics

Communication styles play a pivotal role in shaping group dynamics and significantly influence the prevalence of free-riding behaviour within the team (Keyton et al., 2021). According to Ervin and Keyton (2019), group communication, if not managed properly can affect decision-making, which eventually determines the overall quality of collaborative efforts. Research indicates that clear and open communication channels can mitigate misunderstandings and reduce the likelihood of free-riding behaviour. For instance, Adesina et al. (2023) suggest that well-structured communication strategies through peer assessment could enhance individual accountability, thereby diminishing the chances of members shirking responsibilities.

In addition, the establishment of social norms through consistent communication plays a crucial role in addressing free riding. Imam and Zaheer (2021) mentioned that when group members openly discuss expectations and collectively agree on knowledge sharing, it creates a sense of mutual responsibility. This shared understanding encourages members to contribute fairly, as deviations from the norm are more readily identified and addressed. However, these studies showed that although communication is key, in the case of students, they often find it hard to communicate effectively with their peers.

Four communication styles are commonly identified, as listed in Table 1. Examining these styles would provide deeper insights into how group interactions influence the emergence or mitigation of free-riding behaviour (Keyton et al., 2021).

Table 1: Common communication styles studied about free-riding behaviour

Style	Description
Assertive	Expressing needs and opinions clearly and respectfully while considering others' perspectives.
Aggressive	Dominating conversations, disregarding others' opinions, and using forceful language.
Passive	Avoiding conflict, suppressing one's own needs, and failing to express opinions.
Passive-Aggressive	Indirectly expressing hostility through sarcasm, procrastination, or subtle resistance.

Gen Z and Group Work Communication

Gen Z is characterised by their fluency with technology and preference for digital communication tools (Bhalla et al., 2021). They have grown up in a hyper-connected world, where instant messaging, social media, and collaborative platforms are integral to daily life. In group work, this generation thrives when technology is seamlessly integrated into the process (Dass et al., 2021). Platforms such as Slack, Microsoft Teams, or Google Workspace allow them to communicate efficiently, share documents, and manage tasks in real time.

Apart from that, their strong desire for purpose and authenticity (Konstantinou & Jones, 2022) influences their approach to group work communication. Gen Z tends to engage more actively when they feel the project aligns with their values or has a tangible impact (Gabrielova & Buchko, 2021). This generation is also skilful at seeking feedback and using it constructively to improve outcomes. Yet, they may struggle with over-reliance on asynchronous communication, which may lead to potential delays or misunderstandings if expectations are not clearly established (Katz et al., 2021).

Despite their strengths, free riding remains a prevalent issue among Gen Z in group work settings. While their inclination towards inclusivity and collaboration fosters equitable participation (Raslie & Ting, 2021), some team members may exploit the democratic nature of the group, contributing minimally or not at all. The reliance on digital communication can exacerbate this, as it lacks the immediacy and accountability inherent in face-to-face interactions. This makes it easier for some individuals to evade responsibilities or delay contributions (e.g., refuse to read or reply to text messages or emails), which creates an imbalance in workload distribution. Interestingly, Clark (2024) highlighted that Gen Z's tendency to prioritise task completion over interpersonal connection in digital communication may also hinder the establishment of trust and accountability. Without strong interpersonal bonds, it is easier for free riders to detach from their responsibilities. Group members might hesitate to hold each other accountable due to a lack of established rapport or fear of being perceived as overly critical.

To address this gap, this study investigates the interplay between communication styles and free-riding behaviours in the context of Gen Z group work. While existing research highlights the role of communication in mitigating group conflicts and enhancing accountability, limited attention has been paid to how specific communication styles influence the emergence or reduction of free riding.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A sequential explanatory mixed-methods research design was adopted to investigate the relationship between communication styles and free-riding behaviour among Gen Z undergraduate students. This approach combined quantitative survey data (Creswell & Plano

Clark, 2017) with qualitative insights from focus groups (Morgan, 1997) to allow researchers to uncover more details based on the results obtained through the survey.

Participants

The study included 186 undergraduate students, which consisted of 82 males (44%) and 104 females (56%) from diverse academic disciplines at a public university. In terms of year of study, 62 of them were in Year 1 (33%), 58 in Year 2 (31%), 36 in Year 3 (19%) and 30 in Year 4 or above (17%). Participants were selected through a simple random sampling method, ensuring both diversity and voluntary involvement, while minimising potential biases on the part of the researchers. Moreover, 24 students (10 male and 14 female) were purposively sampled to participate in focus group discussions. These students were contacted via the email addresses they had voluntarily provided at the end of the survey, indicating their willingness to join the focus group interviews.

Data Collection Procedure

For the quantitative data, a survey instrument was designed and administered through Google Forms to explore students' communication styles and their free-riding behaviours in group work settings. The survey comprised three sections: Section A (Demographics), Section B (Communication Styles), and Section C (Free-Riding Behaviours in Group Work). Section A collected participants' demographic information, namely gender and year of study. The items in Section B were developed using the instruments by Keyton et al. (2021) and according to the four common groups of communication styles in Table 1. Those in Section C were developed based on Gabelica et al. (2022) and grounded in social loafing theory (Latané et al., 1979). Both Sections B and C utilised 5-point Likert scale items, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), to capture respondents' perceptions and experiences. On the front page of the form, participants were given details about their rights and measures taken to ensure the confidentiality of their data and identity. Only those who agreed to the terms and provided their consent were allowed to proceed to complete the form.

The survey instrument underwent a pilot test to evaluate its reliability and suitability before its application in the main study. As part of this process, Cronbach's alpha was calculated to measure the internal consistency of the survey items. The obtained Cronbach's alpha value was 0.812, which indicates a high degree of reliability (Brown, 2002).

As for the qualitative data, participants were asked in groups of four, the following questions:

1. How do you feel different communication styles affect your willingness to contribute to group tasks? Can you share specific examples?
2. How do your preferences for digital communication platforms, such as WhatsApp or collaborative tools (Google Docs), affect your contribution in group tasks?
3. What strategies do you think could encourage transparent collaboration and ensure equal participation in group tasks?

The focus group sessions were audio-recorded with the participant's consent, ensuring anonymity by refraining from identifying individual names.

Data Analysis Procedure

For the survey data, descriptive statistics were calculated to summarise participants' demographic information, communication styles, and free-riding behaviours. One-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was then conducted to examine differences in free-riding behaviours across groups with distinct communication styles.

For the qualitative data, thematic analysis was used to analyse focus group transcripts. The process involved familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, identifying themes, and reviewing and defining themes. Themes were triangulated with quantitative findings as well as with peer-checking among the researchers to identify consistencies and contradictions. Any confidential data or personal information mentioned during the sessions was also redacted during transcription and not used for analysis.

RESULTS

Communication Styles

To find out the communication styles, participants were asked to respond to four categories of communication items. The style with the highest overall mean was identified as the dominant one. Table 2 presents the mean (*M*) and standard deviation (*SD*) values for the items corresponding to each communication style.

Table 2: Mean and standard deviation of items for each communication style (N=186)

Style		Items	*M*	*SD*
Assertive	1.	I express my ideas clearly while respecting the contributions of others.	3.92	1.51
	2.	When I disagree with someone, I explain my perspective.	2.97	1.43
	3.	I listen actively to group members and incorporate their suggestions into decisions.	3.83	1.12
	4.	I assert my needs while remaining open to compromise.	3.26	1.34
	5.	I provide constructive feedback to group mates.	2.91	1.38
Aggressive	1.	I tend to make discussions follow my preferred direction.	3.08	1.41
	2.	I openly criticise my group mates' ideas.	2.52	1.21
	3.	I often insist on my solutions or opinions.	3.15	1.36
	4.	I use strong language to emphasise my views.	2.91	1.16
	5.	I disregard group consensus if I believe my idea is superior.	2.48	1.53
Passive	1.	I avoid sharing my ideas even when I have a good suggestion.	2.85	1.34
	2.	I stay silent during group conflicts, hoping they will resolve on their own.	3.81	1.57
	3.	I often feel uncomfortable asserting my opinions.	2.87	1.49
	4.	I allow others to make decisions for the group.	4.16	1.28
	5.	I hesitate to ask for help or clarification even when I need it.	3.02	1.36
Passive-Aggressive	1.	I express dissatisfaction through sarcasm rather than addressing issues directly.	2.42	1.48
	2.	I delay completing my tasks to show my disagreement.	3.29	1.31
	3.	I agree with the group's decisions but undermine them in private.	3.12	1.26
	4.	I make general remarks that suggest I am unhappy with certain group decision	3.76	1.52
	5.	I express resentment about my responsibilities privately without telling my group mates.	2.89	1.39

In terms of an assertive style of communication, participants showed consistency in expressing ideas while respecting others (*M* = 3.92, *SD* = 1.51) and actively listening to group members (*M* = 3.83, *SD* = 1.12). However, the slightly lower means for providing constructive feedback (*M* = 2.91, *SD* = 1.38) and asserting needs while compromising (*M* = 3.26, *SD* = 1.34) suggest that while assertiveness is valued, certain elements like balancing self-expression with group needs may be less consistently applied.

In contrast, the aggressive style displayed moderate to low mean values, indicating less frequent reliance on confrontational behaviours. While participants moderately endorsed behaviours like steering discussions toward their preferences (*M* = 3.08, *SD* = 1.41) or emphasising their views strongly (*M* = 2.91, *SD* = 1.16), they showed minimal tendencies to disregard group consensus (*M* = 2.48, *SD* = 1.53) or openly criticise their group mates' ideas (*M* = 2.52, *SD* = 1.21). This suggests a critical gap in understanding whether these traits reflect a strategic prioritisation of personal views over group harmony.

The passive style revealed a notable reluctance to engage in active conflict resolution. High scores for behaviours such as staying silent during group conflicts (*M* = 3.81, *SD* = 1.57) and allowing others to make decisions (*M* = 4.16, *SD* = 1.28) highlight a preference for avoidance rather than participation. Lower scores for hesitating to seek help (*M* = 3.02, *SD* = 1.36) suggest that while passivity is present, it may not completely inhibit proactive behaviour.

As for the passive-aggressive style, behaviours such as expressing dissatisfaction through sarcasm (*M* = 2.42, *SD* = 1.48) or privately undermining group decisions (*M* = 3.29, *SD* = 1.31) were infrequent. Nevertheless, moderate mean values for making general complaints about decisions (*M* = 3.76, *SD* = 1.52) reveal underlying tensions that may not surface overtly. This highlights a potential issue where dissatisfaction is not addressed directly, which is in line with the item within the passive style of letting a conflict resolve on its own.

Table 3: Overall distribution of participant's dominant communication style

Style	***Count***	***Percentage***
Assertive	48	26%
Aggressive	25	13%
Passive	62	33%
Passive-Aggressive	51	27%

Table 3 shows the total number and percentage of respondents by their dominant communication style. The passive style was the most common, with 62 participants (33%) identifying it as their primary communication approach. This finding may reflect a tendency among participants to avoid confrontation and defer to others in group settings. Interestingly, the passive-aggressive style was reported by 51 participants (27%), making it the second most common approach. Again, this seems to support conflict avoidance. The assertive style, typically regarded as the most effective in fostering collaboration, was the third most dominant, with 48 participants (26%). Its relatively lower representation compared to the passive style highlights potential barriers to assertiveness, such as cultural factors influencing communication norms. The aggressive style was the least common with only 25 participants (13%) identifying it as their dominant style.

Free-Riding Behaviours

To examine participants' free-riding behaviours, they were required to provide their response to ten items that attempt to gauge their self-reported behaviours in free-riding. Table 4 illustrates the mean (*M*) and standard deviation (*SD*) values for the items. The findings reveal a pattern of disengagement, with participants demonstrating varying degrees of reliance on others, avoidance of responsibility, and rationalisation of their lack of contribution.

Table 4: Mean and standard deviation of items for free-riding behaviours (N=186)

	Items	*M*	*SD*
1.	I tend to let other group members complete their tasks before contributing.	3.21	1.32
2.	I avoid taking the lead in group activities, assuming someone else will do it.	3.69	1.26
3.	I rely on others to compensate for my lack of effort in group work.	3.37	1.35
4.	I deliberately reduce my participation when I know others will perform well.	3.62	1.42
5.	I contribute minimally to group projects to avoid taking responsibility.	3.23	1.53
6.	I prioritise other commitments over my group tasks.	3.12	1.67
7.	I only engage in group discussions when explicitly asked for my opinion.	2.74	1.52
8.	I avoid completing my assigned tasks until reminded by group members.	2.63	1.13
9.	I prefer to work on less demanding aspects of the project	3.45	1.29
10.	I justify my lack of involvement by claiming I am too busy or lack the skills.	3.28	1.42

As shown in Table 4, a notable finding is the strong tendency to avoid leadership roles and proactive engagement. Avoiding taking the lead in group activities (*M* = 3.69, *SD* = 1.26) and deliberately reducing participation when others are expected to perform well (*M* = 3.62, *SD* = 1.42) emerged as the most common behaviours. These results seem to indicate that participants often defer to others to take responsibility, which shows a preference for passive participation as revealed in the dominant communication style.

Reliance on others to compensate for individual shortcomings was another important pattern, as seen in the moderately high mean (*M* = 3.37, *SD* = 1.35). Similarly, contributing minimally to group tasks (*M* = 3.23, *SD* = 1.53) and prioritising other commitments over group work (*M* = 3.12, *SD* = 1.67) indicate a preference for limiting personal involvement. Participants also displayed tendencies to rationalise their lack of involvement. Justifying non-participation by claiming to be too busy or lacking the necessary skills (*M* = 3.28, *SD* = 1.42) was common. They also preferred to focus on less demanding aspects of group projects (*M* = 3.45, *SD* = 1.29), further showing their effort-avoidant approach. Interestingly, more passive forms of disengagement, such as avoiding tasks unless reminded (*M* = 2.63, *SD* = 1.13) or engaging in discussions only when explicitly asked (*M* = 2.74, *SD* = 1.52), were less common. This implies some participants were willing to contribute when directly prompted.

The overall free-riding scores were computed and subsequently analysed using the one-way ANOVA to compare across four communication styles. The assumption of normality was assessed using the Shapiro-Wilk test. The results indicated that the data for the variable free-riding behaviours were normally distributed (*W* = .987, *p* = .954).

Table 5: One-Way ANOVA Results

	F	*df1*	*df2*	*p*
Free-Riding Behaviours	5.20	3	68.9	.014

As shown in Table 5, the one-way ANOVA revealed a statistically significant difference in free-riding behaviours across the four communication styles, $F(3, 68.9) = 5.20$, $p = .014$. This result indicates that communication style has a significant effect on free-riding behaviours.

Table 6: Group descriptives for one-way ANOVA

	Communication Styles	*N*	*M*	*SD*	*SE*
Free-Riding Behaviours	Assertive	48	2.81	0.436	0.0640
	Aggressive	25	2.92	0.412	0.0698
	Passive	62	3.37	0.425	0.0429
	Passive-Aggressive	51	3.41	0.448	0.0591

Table 6 summarises free-riding behaviours across communication styles. Passive-aggressive communicators show the highest mean score (*M* = 3.41), closely followed by the passive group (*M* = 3.37), indicating a greater tendency for free-riding behaviours among students preferring these communication styles. Assertive (*M* = 2.81) and aggressive communicators (*M* = 2.92) show lower mean scores, indicating they are less likely to engage in such behaviours. The lower mean for aggressive communicators could also be attributed to the smaller sample size. However, in general, it can be said that there is a link between communication styles and free-riding tendencies, with passive and passive-aggressive communication styles being most associated with these behaviours.

Factors Linking Communication Styles to Free-Riding

To further understand the students' free-riding behaviours in relation to their communication styles, focus group sessions were conducted with 24 volunteers. Table 7 outlines the emerging themes derived from the thematic analysis.

Table 7: Emerging themes from the thematic analysis of focus group

Theme	Sub-Themes	Example Excerpts
Communication Styles and Willingness to Contribute	Tone of Communication	*Aggressive and direct communication styles often intimidate me. I become hesitant to say my opinions.*
	Clarity and Precision	*When communication is unclear, how am I supposed to know what to do?*
	Inclusivity and Empathy	*Sometimes, I wish my group mates understand my situation better. It's not like I don't want to do, but I have problems to handle.*
Digital Platforms	Communication Tools	*We all use WhatsApp for quick updates since I know when new texts from my friends through noti(fication) but too may texts can be annoying too.*
	Collaborative Tool	*Google Docs and Canva are excellent for us to work together. Just add everyone and can work on the same file. But for some group works, some leaders refuse to use.*
Leadership	Role Assignment	*When a leader assigns specific roles, it's easier to know what's expected, of course leaders need to be fair too.*
	Ambiguity in Leadership	*In one of my group work, the leader tries to be nice to everyone until we don't know what to do because no leadership.*
Challenges in Group Dynamics	Conflict Avoidance	*Of course we don't yell at each other. I personally try to avoid-lah, better lose marks than lose a friend. So unequal contribution will happen anyway.*
	Accountability	I mean it's obvious that we are not assessed for group participation. We don't evaluate our group mates.

Four key themes emerged from focus group discussions, highlighting the challenges and dynamics that contribute to unequal participation. The first theme, Communication Styles and Willingness to Contribute emphasises the significant role communication plays in

group collaboration. Participants expressed that aggressive or overly direct communication often created a sense of intimidation, discouraging them from sharing opinions freely.

The second theme revolves around Digital Platforms and their influence on group dynamics. Students relied heavily on tools like WhatsApp for quick updates, but many found the constant notifications and excessive messages to be overwhelming. On the other hand, collaborative tools such as Google Docs and Canva were appreciated for streamlining teamwork by allowing members to work on a shared platform.

Leadership emerged as the third theme, which highlights the importance of effective role assignment and clear direction. Groups with strong leadership that assigned roles explicitly experienced better organisation and fairness in task distribution. Conversely, ambiguous leadership often left members confused and unmotivated, as they waited for guidance or avoided taking initiative altogether.

The fourth theme, Challenges in Group Dynamics, sheds light on interpersonal issues that exacerbate free-riding behaviours. Many students reported a tendency to avoid conflicts, even if it meant tolerating unequal contributions from their peers. For instance, one participant admitted to avoiding confrontation to maintain group harmony, even though it resulted in some members contributing significantly less. Furthermore, the absence of accountability mechanisms was another concern. Students expressed frustration over the lack of evaluation systems to address non-participation. This makes it easier for individuals to evade their responsibilities without facing consequences.

Thus, the thematic analysis reveals that free-riding behaviours are not merely the result of individual attitudes but are deeply embedded in other factors such as communication styles, leadership dynamics, digital tools, and group interactions. While fostering empathy, clarity, and accountability is critical, these efforts must be balanced with structural changes that address systemic issues, such as power imbalances in leadership and the lack of mechanisms for accountability checking. Over-reliance on digital tools without addressing their limitations highlights the need for training on digital collaboration.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight the effect of communication styles on free-riding behaviours among Gen Z students. In the first research question, the study confirms that communication styles significantly affect free-riding behaviours, with passive and passive-aggressive styles showing higher frequencies of leading to such tendencies. These findings align with Latané et al.'s (1979) social loafing theory, which highlights the role of accountability in mitigating effort reduction in groups. Passive communicators, as reflected in this study, often avoid conflict and defer to others, leading to unequal workload distribution, a phenomenon supported by Azmi et al. (2023) in collectivist cultures. Similarly, passive-aggressive individuals resort to indirect resistance, such as procrastination or subtle defiance, which mirrors the findings of Luo et al. (2021) regarding avoidance behaviours as key antecedents to free-riding. Conversely, assertive communication significantly reduced instances of free-riding, reinforcing Keyton et al.'s (2021) assertion that transparent and respectful dialogue fosters accountability. These results extend the understanding of communication's role by highlighting the detrimental impact of conflict avoidance and indirect dissent on group cohesion and productivity.

In answering the second research question, the mechanisms linking communication styles to free-riding behaviours reflect a combination of interpersonal and structural factors. The study's thematic analysis identifies leadership ambiguity, ineffective role assignment, and

conflict avoidance as recurring themes. This echoes the findings of Wong et al. (2022), who noted that unclear expectations exacerbate group inefficiencies, allowing free riders to evade responsibility. The reliance on digital tools, while facilitating collaboration, also enables disengagement, as supported by Clark (2024), who highlighted that Gen Z's task-oriented digital interactions often lack the interpersonal connection needed to establish trust and accountability. The findings also align with Adesina et al. (2023), who argued that poorly managed communication can hinder the development of shared social norms, which is essential for fostering mutual responsibility within groups. Furthermore, the preference for avoiding confrontation, as observed in Malaysian Gen Z students, aligns with Raslie and Ting's (2021) exploration of cultural influences on communication styles, particularly in collectivist societies where maintaining harmony is often prioritised over addressing inequities.

CONCLUSION

The present study highlights the need to promote assertive communication training and establish mechanisms such as peer evaluation and role clarity to mitigate free-riding among Gen Z students. In addition, educators should encourage the balanced use of digital tools, fostering both efficiency and interpersonal engagement. This approach could help bridge the gap between technological reliance and the development of trust-based group dynamics. Integrating these measures into pedagogical practices can create more equitable and effective collaborative environments, which can prepare Gen Z students for teamwork in professional contexts. Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be addressed in future research. Firstly, the sample was drawn from a single public university in Malaysia, limiting the generalisability of the findings to other cultural or institutional contexts. Secondly, although the gathered data from this study suggest that participants were rather truthful in their responses, the reliance on self-reported survey data introduces the potential for social desirability bias, as participants may underreport behaviours perceived as negative. Studies in the future could include objective measures, such as peer evaluations or observational data. Finally, the study primarily focused on communication styles without accounting for other potential variables, such as personality traits or motivational factors, that might interact with these styles to influence free-riding behaviours. Future research should adopt a more comprehensive framework to examine these interdependencies. All in all, with the right communication and structure, Gen Z can turn free riding into a shared ride to success.

BIODATA

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