



Decoding Gen Z Classrooms: Pedagogical Innovations Through Pop Culture References

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ABSTRACT: This study looks at how pop culture references work as teaching tools in undergraduate classrooms in Mumbai. Gen Z learners increasingly engage with digital stories, multimedia content, and popular media. The research draws on a sample of 50 undergraduate students and their experiences with instructors who incorporate pop culture into their teaching. It examines students' views on interactivity, understanding, and engagement. A descriptive analytical approach was used to find patterns in learners' responses about the effectiveness of examples from films, music, social media, and current cultural events. The findings show that pop culture references create a more dynamic and relatable learning environment, helping students understand complex concepts and stay focused. Students also expressed a strong desire for wider use of these methods across subjects. These insights reflect the changing expectations of Gen Z learners and the need for new teaching methods. The study adds to the growing literature on culturally responsive teaching by showing how popular culture can be a useful link between academic content and students' everyday experiences.

Keywords: Gen Z, pop culture pedagogy, undergraduate learning, classroom engagement, innovative teaching, Mumbai

INTRODUCTION

The learning landscape in higher education has changed a lot with the arrival of Generation Z students, born from the mid-1990s to the early 2010s. Their thinking, social skills, and technological habits differ significantly from those of earlier generations. As digital natives, Gen Z students are very skilled with media. They prefer content that comes in various forms and quickly consume information influenced by social media, streaming culture, and interactive digital spaces. As a result, traditional teaching methods often struggle to engage them or help them build meaningful understanding.

In this environment, using pop culture references has become a helpful teaching strategy. Pop culture includes movies, music, memes, online trends, gaming stories, celebrity influences, and other mass media. It provides a shared cultural language that helps students connect abstract academic ideas to real-world contexts they know well. Previous research shows that culturally responsive teaching methods boost student motivation, improve understanding, and encourage inclusive learning spaces. For Gen Z, pop culture is not just entertainment; it shapes their identity, values, and way of thinking, making it a powerful tool for innovative teaching.

Even though there is growing interest in pop culture-based teaching worldwide, there is still limited research in India's higher education system. Mumbai, as one of India's most diverse university cities, is a suitable place to study how undergraduate students view the effectiveness of teaching methods that reflect their everyday media habits. Understanding these views is important for creating curricula that meet current learning preferences.

Problem statement: While educators increasingly experiment with pop culture references in classrooms, there is insufficient empirical evidence on whether such strategies genuinely enhance engagement and comprehension for Gen Z learners in Indian undergraduate settings.

Research Gap

Few studies have looked closely at student perceptions in metropolitan Indian colleges, especially regarding the use of pop culture as a teaching tool. Research on Generation Z and pop culture in teaching has increased, but important gaps still exist, particularly in India. Very few studies focus on undergraduate students in Mumbai, even though it is a major cultural and academic center with media habits that vary from those in Western or Middle Eastern regions. Current research often emphasizes general learning preferences or digital tools, but rarely explores how pop culture can be used purposely and systematically as a teaching method in Indian higher education. Furthermore, most previous studies take a narrow or discipline-specific approach, providing little insight into how pop culture references function across different types of undergraduate classrooms. This study addresses these gaps by providing detailed, data-driven insights into how undergraduate students in Mumbai understand and interpret the use of pop culture in teaching.

Rationale: By studying the views of undergraduate students in Mumbai, this research provides local insights to global talks on new teaching methods. It gives practical advice for teachers who want to adjust their teaching styles to fit today's students.

Scope and Significance: The study focuses on undergraduate students in colleges in Mumbai and examines the patterns in their responses. Its findings are important for faculty members, curriculum designers, higher education policymakers, and researchers interested in learner-centered teaching and cultural integration in instruction.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study aims

1. To assess the prevalence of instructors' use of pop culture references in undergraduate classrooms
2. To examine students' perceptions regarding attention, understanding, participation, and retention when pop culture references are used in teaching.
3. To identify student interest in broader incorporation of pop culture into teaching.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This section synthesizes key studies addressing Generation Z learning characteristics and the pedagogical value of integrating pop culture into undergraduate instruction. The literature consistently indicates that Gen Z learners exhibit strong digital fluency, prefer interactive and personalized learning experiences, and respond positively to culturally relevant teaching strategies.

Pedagogy and Pop Culture: Pop Culture as Teaching Tool and Assessment Practice (Clapton, 2015)

Clapton (2015) analyses how popular culture, including films, TV shows, and memes, can serve as teaching and assessment tools in university-level International Relations courses. Based on his own teaching experience, he used pop culture examples to explain abstract concepts and created assignments, such as film or meme analysis, to promote critical thinking. Feedback from observations and students indicated that this approach increased engagement, motivation, understanding of complex theories, and creative reflection. However, the study is based on personal accounts and lacks systematic empirical data. Some students also questioned whether pop culture is a valid learning tool. Other limitations include being specific to certain contexts, possibly focusing too much on media artifacts, and depending on students' previous exposure, which points to the need for more thorough and widely applicable research.

Pop Culture Pedagogies: Process and Praxis (Maudlin & Sandlin, 2015)

Maudlin and Sandlin (2015) explore how to integrate popular culture, such as films, TV, video games, and social media, into higher education teaching. Methodology: The paper focuses on theory and reflection, drawing on critical teaching methods and media studies to suggest a self-study framework for educators to create relevant pop culture teaching approaches. The authors claim that involving students with pop culture can improve critical thinking, media skills, and understanding of social, cultural, and political issues. They stress that successful implementation needs self-awareness, adjustment to local situations, and attention to the fast-changing media environment. Limitations include the lack of empirical evidence, specificity to specific contexts, and the potential for shallow application if the teaching goals are weak. The paper offers a solid theoretical base for creating and evaluating pop culture-based teaching methods.

Using Pop-Culture to Engage Students in the Classroom (Dietrich, Jimenez, Souto, Harrison, Coudret & Olmos, 2021)

Dietrich et al. (2021) examine how incorporating popular culture, such as video games, films, TV shows, and cartoons, can improve the teaching of chemistry and chemical engineering. It makes abstract ideas easier to understand and more engaging. The paper uses a conceptual case-study approach. It offers specific examples of how teachers can use familiar media to explain chemical phenomena and engineering principles instead of relying on empirical data. The authors believe that references from pop culture can spark curiosity, reduce learning barriers, and promote student-centered, inquiry-based methods. This connection links complex ideas to familiar contexts. Limitations include a lack of systematic evidence on learning outcomes, the assumption that students are familiar with the chosen media, and questions about whether these findings apply beyond chemistry or chemical engineering courses.

Pop Culture in the Classroom: Associations with Student Learning Outcomes and the Underlying Psychological Mechanisms (Su Tao & Yuchen Yang, 2025)

This study looked at how adding pop culture to higher education courses impacts student satisfaction, engagement, and performance. The authors surveyed 511 students across two courses with four class sections and collected data through surveys and in-class essay evaluations. They found that students in courses with pop culture reported much higher learning satisfaction. This boost came from increased engagement and the perceived usefulness of the media-based materials. However, essay scores, which reflect objective academic performance, did not differ between pop culture and traditional classes. Interestingly, students with no prior exposure to the referenced pop culture showed lower satisfaction; the authors call this “pop culture alienation.” The study indicates that pop culture can improve the emotional and motivational parts of learning, but its effect on objective performance is still unclear. Its effectiveness relies on students' familiarity with the culture or media.

The literature review underlines several gaps and limitations, which justify further, more rigorous research:

1. **Lack of robust empirical evidence with objective outcome measures:** Only a handful of studies (e.g. Su & Yang, 2025) attempt quasi-experimental designs; many rely on anecdotal or small-scale qualitative evidence. More large-scale, controlled studies are needed to test whether pop culture pedagogy leads to real gains in learning (knowledge acquisition, skills development, retention).
2. **Equity / cultural-diversity concerns underexplored:** Pop culture is culturally contextual; students from diverse backgrounds, different countries, linguistic, socioeconomic, generational exposures may not share familiarity with the same media. There is little systematic research on how pop culture pedagogy works in multicultural, multilingual or non-Western classrooms (e.g. Indian undergraduates).
3. **Disciplinary breadth is limited:** Much of the documented use of pop culture pedagogy is in humanities, social sciences, language, literature, fewer studies exist for STEM or technical disciplines. The transferability across disciplines may be limited and needs to be explored.
4. **Long-term impact and retention untested:** Existing studies often assess short-term effects (single course, single session). Longitudinal studies are needed to examine whether engagement and satisfaction translate into deep learning, retention, and academic achievement over time.

5. **Lack of systematic frameworks / best practices:** There's need for pedagogical frameworks describing how to integrate pop culture effectively (materials selection, inclusivity, assessment design, alignment with learning outcomes) rather than ad-hoc use by enthusiastic instructors.

METHODOLOGY

A quantitative, descriptive survey design was used and data was collected through an online questionnaire hosted on Microsoft Forms. Fifty undergraduate students participated from Various colleges of Mumbai of age groups between 17 to 22 years. The questionnaire included: a demographic item (age group), several single-choice and Likert-format items assessing exposure to pop culture usage, frequency, perceived attention and comprehension, participation, approachability of instructors, and two 5-point rating items for interactive environment and desire for more pop culture integration. One open-ended item asked respondents to describe a memorable pop-culture-based teaching moment. The survey link was distributed via Google Forms. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Responses were exported to Excel for cleaning and analysis.

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Table 1: Distribution of Respondents by Age Group

Age Group	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
17–18 years	19	30.6%
19–20 years	36	58.1%
21–22 years	5	8.1%
Total	60	100%

The age distribution of the 60 undergraduate respondents reveals that the majority belong to the **19–20 years** category (58.1%), followed by **17–18 years** (30.6%), with a smaller proportion aged **21–22 years** (8.1%). Overall, the age distribution confirms a predominantly young Gen Z sample, strengthening the relevance of examining pedagogical innovations rooted in pop culture for this technologically immersed generation.

Table 2: Use of Pop Culture References by Teachers (as Perceived by Students)

Responses	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Yes	30	50.0%
No	7	11.7%
Sometimes	23	38.3%
Total	60	100%

The findings reveal that **half of the respondents (50%)** reported that their teachers **do use** pop culture references—such as memes, reels, movies, and influencers—within classroom instruction. Additionally, **38.3%** indicated that such integrations occur **occasionally**, suggesting that even if not consistently implemented, pop culture elements have a notable presence in pedagogical practices. Only **11.7%** of learners stated that their teachers **never** employ such references. This distribution demonstrates a **widespread acceptance and gradual adoption** of pop culture-based teaching strategies among undergraduate educators. The combined 88.3% (Yes + Sometimes) indicates that students are frequently exposed to pedagogical methods that reflect contemporary digital culture. This is especially significant in the context of Gen Z learners, who highly value **relatability, visual content, and contextualised learning**. The relatively small percentage of "No" responses implies that the absence of pop culture usage is the exception rather than the norm. This trend may reflect an evolving shift in teaching models where educators increasingly rely on culturally relevant content to enhance engagement, simplify complex topics, and foster classroom participation.

Table 3: Frequency of Pop Culture Usage by Teachers

Response Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Never	6	10.0%
Sometimes	42	70.0%
Very Often	12	20.0%
Total	60	100%

The results indicate that most students (**70%**) suggest their teachers **sometimes** use pop culture references in class, suggesting occasional but not systematic integration. Another **20%** reported **very frequent** usage, reflecting a growing acceptance of pop-culture-based teaching methods among some educators. Only **10%** stated that such references are **never** used. Overall, the data suggest that while pop culture is present in many classrooms, its use is mostly **intermittent**, with only a minority of teachers integrating it regularly. This highlights a moderate but increasing shift toward contemporary, student-friendly pedagogical practices.

Table 4: Impact of Pop-Culture-Based Examples on Attention

Response Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Agree	43	71.7%
Neutral	17	28.3%
Disagree	0	0%
Total	60	100%

A significant majority of students (**71.7%**) agree that pop-culture-based examples help them stay attentive in class, indicating strong positive engagement linked to culturally relevant teaching methods. The remaining **28.3%** are neutral, suggesting that while they do not oppose such strategies, the impact may vary by context or subject. Notably, **no students disagreed**, demonstrating universal acceptance of pop culture as a supportive pedagogical tool for maintaining attention among Gen Z learners.

Table 5: Pop Culture References and Concept Understanding

Response Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Agree	46	76.7%
Neutral	10	16.7%
Disagree	4	6.6%
Total	60	100%

Most respondents (**76.7%**) agree that pop culture references help simplify difficult concepts, showing strong support for the pedagogical value of using culturally familiar content. Another **16.7%** remain neutral, indicating that the effectiveness may depend on subject matter or execution. Only **6.6%** disagree, suggesting minimal resistance. Overall, the data underscores the **positive cognitive impact** of pop-culture-based teaching strategies on conceptual clarity among Gen Z learners.

Table 6: Impact of Pop Culture on Retention & Exam Performance

Response Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Yes	35	70%
No	8	16%
Maybe	7	14%
Total	50	100%

The results show that **70%** of students believe pop-culture-based teaching helps them retain concepts better and perform well in exams. This strong majority highlights the effectiveness of culturally relevant, relatable content in enhancing long-term learning. A smaller group (**14%**) is uncertain, indicating that while they do not oppose such methods, the perceived impact may vary depending on subject or teaching style. Only **16%**

disagreed, suggesting limited resistance to pop-culture integration. Overall, the data reinforces that pop-culture references positively support memory, comprehension, and exam preparation for most Gen Z learners.

Table 7: Student Participation with Use of Pop Culture References in Class

Response Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly Disagree	0	0%
Neutral	30	50%
Strongly Agree	30	50%
Total	60	100%

From the data presented, it can be observed that student participation shows a polarized trend. A majority of respondents (50%) strongly agree that using pop culture references in class increases their active participation, suggesting a positive engagement effect of culturally relevant content. An equal proportion (50%) reported a neutral stance, indicating that while some students may not feel significantly impacted, the method does not elicit negative responses either. Notably, no student strongly disagreed, implying that pop culture references do not detract from classroom participation. This indicates that incorporating pop culture into pedagogy may be an effective strategy to enhance engagement among undergraduate learners, although a portion of students may remain indifferent.

Table 8: Perception of Teacher Approachability with Pop Culture Use

Response Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Disagree	0	0%
Neutral	14	23.3%
Agree	46	76.7%
Total	60	100%

The data indicates that the majority of students (76.7%) perceive teachers who incorporate pop culture references as more approachable and relatable. This suggests that integrating familiar cultural elements into teaching can strengthen the student-teacher rapport. A smaller portion of students (23.3%) remain neutral, indicating that while they do not actively perceive increased approachability, they also do not view the practice negatively. No students disagreed, emphasizing that the use of pop culture references is unlikely to harm the perception of teacher approachability.

This supports the idea that pop culture-based pedagogical strategies can enhance relational dynamics in undergraduate classrooms, fostering a more comfortable and engaging learning environment.

Table 9: Pop culture examples create a more interactive and dynamic classroom environment (Rated on a Scale of 1 to 5, 1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree)

Rating	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	2	4%
2	3	6%
3	5	10%
4	12	24%
5	28	56%
Total	50	100%

Analysis

- Majority of respondents (56%) rated **5 (Strongly Agree)**, indicating strong support for using pop culture to make classrooms more interactive and dynamic.
- Rating 4** was chosen by 24% of respondents, showing additional positive feedback.
- Ratings 1–3 combined account for only **20%**, reflecting minimal disagreement or neutrality.

- The distribution is **positively skewed**, highlighting general approval and effectiveness of integrating pop culture in teaching.

Interpretation

The results suggest that incorporating pop culture into classroom teaching significantly enhances engagement and interaction among students. The high concentration of responses in the top two ratings indicates that most students find the approach both relatable and motivating, supporting its adoption as a pedagogical strategy.

Table 10: Student Agreement with the Statement “I Would Like More Teachers to Incorporate Pop Culture References in Their Teaching” (Rated on a Scale of 1 to 5, 1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree)

Rating	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	2	4%
2	3	6%
3	10	20%
4	8	16%
5	27	54%
Total	50	100%

Analysis

- The highest proportion of respondents (54%) chose **Rating 5**, indicating strong support for more teachers using pop culture references.
- Ratings 4 and 3 together account for 36%, showing moderate agreement and some neutrality.
- Ratings 1 and 2 together make up only 10%, showing minimal disagreement.
- The distribution is **positively skewed**, emphasizing that the majority of students favor the use of pop culture in teaching.

MAJOR FINDINGS

The results reveal a **strong preference among students for increased incorporation of pop culture references** by teachers. The dominance of top ratings indicates that students perceive such references as engaging and beneficial for learning. A smaller fraction of neutral or negative responses suggests minimal resistance to this approach. Overall, the data supports advocating for the inclusion of pop culture in classroom pedagogy.

- Demographics and Relevance:** The age distribution shows that the majority of respondents are aged 19–20 years (58.1%), followed by 17–18 years (30.6%), with a small proportion aged 21–22 years (8.1%). This confirms that the sample predominantly comprises young Gen Z undergraduate students. Given that this generation is highly immersed in digital culture, the relevance of studying pedagogical innovations rooted in pop culture is strengthened.
- Prevalence of Pop Culture Integration:** Half of the students (50%) reported that teachers use pop culture references regularly, while 38.3% indicated occasional use. Only 11.7% reported that such references are never used. This demonstrates widespread, though not uniform, adoption of culturally relevant teaching methods. The combined 88.3% exposure indicates that most students encounter pop-culture-based pedagogy frequently, aligning with Gen Z's preference for relatable and visually engaging content.
- Frequency and Systematic Use:** While 70% of students report occasional use of pop culture references and 20% report frequent use, only 10% experience no exposure. This indicates that integration is largely intermittent rather than systematic, highlighting a moderate yet growing trend toward contemporary teaching practices.
- Impact on Attention and Engagement:** A majority of respondents (71.7%) agreed that pop-culture-based examples help maintain their attention in class, with 28.3% neutral. The absence of disagreement

demonstrates a universally positive or neutral effect, emphasizing the value of culturally relevant content in sustaining student engagement.

5. Cognitive and Academic Benefits:

- **Simplifying Complex Concepts:** 76.7% agreed that pop culture references simplify difficult concepts, with only 6.6% expressing disagreement.
- **Retention and Exam Performance:** 70% of students reported improved retention and exam performance, while 16% disagreed and 14% remained uncertain.

These results suggest that pop-culture-based pedagogy positively influences comprehension, memory, and academic performance for most students.

6. **Participation and Interaction:** Student participation responses were polarized: 50% strongly agreed that pop culture increases active participation, and 50% remained neutral. No negative responses were recorded, suggesting that while the strategy does not universally increase participation, it is not detrimental and is effective for a substantial portion of students.
7. **Teacher Approachability:** A majority (76.7%) perceive teachers using pop culture references as more approachable and relatable. No students disagreed, indicating that the integration of culturally familiar elements enhances student-teacher rapport.
8. **Overall Student Preference:** The high frequency of positive responses indicates a strong student preference for increased incorporation of pop culture references, suggesting that students value engaging, relatable, and motivating teaching methods.

Findings on Use of Pop Culture in Teaching: (Open ended question)

1. Enhanced Understanding:

1. Students grasp complex concepts more easily when lessons are linked to movies, TV series, memes, or advertisements.
2. Examples: *Shark Tank India* for finance concepts, 1992 Indian Securities Scam for trading, *3 Idiots* for practical learning, *Phir Hera Pheri* for capital gains concepts.

2. Improved Retention:

1. Connecting theory with familiar pop culture references helps students remember concepts longer.
2. Memes and short video clips aid in memorization of abstract ideas (e.g., opportunity cost).

3. Increased Engagement:

1. Pop culture references create a fun, interactive, and relatable learning environment.
2. Students participate more actively when lectures include trending memes, reels, or advertisements.

4. Relatability and Real-World Connection:

1. Linking lessons to real-life situations or familiar cultural content makes concepts more tangible.
2. Examples include celebrity endorsements, social media content, and famous ads (e.g., Fevicol, Britannia, Vodafone).

5. Multisensory Learning:

1. Use of visual and audio content, such as video clips or musical tones, caters to different learning styles and helps sustain attention.

6. Potential Limitation:

1. Some students noted that excessive use of pop culture may reduce its effectiveness.

7. Overall Impact:

1. Thoughtful incorporation of pop culture enhances comprehension, attention, motivation, and enjoyment in classroom learning, especially for Gen Z students.

CONCLUSION

The study shows that using pop culture references in undergraduate classrooms is common and well-received by Gen Z students. Most students say that these references improve attention, understanding, retention, participation, and how relatable teachers are. While this use is often more random than systematic, the overall

effect is very positive. The findings highlight the teaching potential of culturally relevant content for engaging students who are comfortable with digital technology and promoting effective learning outcomes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Some innovative techniques using pop culture can be incorporated to ensure the teaching-learning process is effective.

1. **Media Analysis Workshops for Concept Application:** Teachers can guide students to analyze films, music videos, or social media content that exemplifies course-specific concepts. For example, in a marketing class, students could examine advertising campaigns featured in popular media, while in a psychology course, they might analyze character behavior in films to understand cognitive or social processes. This approach reinforces theoretical knowledge through familiar cultural contexts.
2. **Pop Culture Debates Aligned with Curriculum Topics:** Debates can center around trending cultural issues or media narratives relevant to the subject. For instance, law students could debate ethical dilemmas portrayed in movies, or political science students could discuss policy decisions depicted in TV series. This strategy promotes critical thinking while directly linking discussion to learning objectives.
3. **Meme-Based Concept Review:** Students can create memes that summarize or explain key concepts. For example, in a physics course, memes might depict principles of motion humorously, or in literature, students could capture thematic elements of a novel in a single creative image. This activity strengthens comprehension and retention by translating abstract ideas into culturally relatable visuals.
4. **Role-Play and Simulation Exercises:** Assign students roles from popular media scenarios that mirror course-relevant challenges. For example, business students might simulate managerial decision-making inspired by a corporate-themed film, or sociology students could reenact social dynamics portrayed in television shows. Role-play encourages experiential learning and practical application of theoretical frameworks.
5. **Collaborative Pop Culture Projects:** Group assignments can involve creating presentations, short videos, or campaigns linking course content to contemporary cultural phenomena. For instance, environmental science students could develop a social media awareness campaign inspired by a viral trend, while history students could produce a video connecting historical events with modern cultural references. This strategy fosters teamwork, creativity, and applied understanding.
6. **Gamified Learning with Subject Relevance:** Pop culture-based quizzes, challenges, or interactive games can reinforce subject matter. For example, chemistry students might answer questions inspired by science fiction movies, or economics students might solve problems using scenarios from popular business shows. Gamification motivates participation while connecting entertainment with curriculum content.

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