

Language Innovation and Identity: The Sociolinguistics of Gen Z Slang on TikTok

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Abstract

The rapid growth of social media has significantly influenced language use, particularly among Generation Z. One prominent linguistic phenomenon in digital communication is slang, which functions as a marker of identity, creativity, and social interaction. This study aims to analyze the use of slang by Generation Z on TikTok from a sociolinguistic perspective, focusing on forms, meanings, and contextual usage. This study employed a qualitative descriptive method to collect data from TikTok video captions and comment sections created by Generation Z users. The slang expressions were analyzed based on their linguistic characteristics, including semantic shift, code-switching, and lexical innovation, and were further interpreted using Halliday's theory of register, which encompasses field, tenor, and mode. The findings indicate that semantic shift is the most dominant feature in Gen Z slang on TikTok, reflecting users' creative reinterpretation of existing vocabulary. In addition, frequent code-switching between English and Indonesian highlights the influence of global digital culture on local language practices. Slang usage on TikTok is shaped by informal social relationships and multimodal communication, which encourage abbreviated forms and playful meaning construction. This study contributes to sociolinguistic research by providing insights into how slang functions in digital discourse and how Generation Z negotiates identity through language in social media environments, while also offering practical implications for educators and researchers seeking to understand contemporary youth language.

Keywords: Register Theory; Slang; Sociolinguistics.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Language plays an essential role in human interaction as a medium for expressing ideas, identity, and social relationships. In sociolinguistics, language is not viewed as a fixed system but as a dynamic entity that continually changes across social contexts and speaker communities (Wijana, 2012). One of the most prominent forms of language variation among young people is slang, which functions as an informal linguistic variety used to create intimacy, express creativity, and mark group membership (Jeresano & Carretero, 2022).

The development of digital technology has significantly influenced language use, particularly through social media platforms. Social media enables rapid interaction and wide dissemination of linguistic forms, allowing slang expressions to spread quickly and undergo changes in meaning (Lutfiah et al., 2024). Previous studies have shown

that slang usage on social media reflects social identity and group solidarity, especially among Generation Z, who dominate online communication spaces (Budiasa, 2021; Herawati et al., 2025).

TikTok has emerged as one of the most popular social media platforms among Generation Z, providing a unique environment for linguistic innovation. Through short videos, captions, comments, and audio features, users actively create and reinterpret slang expressions. A recent study in the *ELTR Journal* demonstrates that the use of slang and code-switching by Gen Z Indonesians on social media serves as a marker of digital identity and social belonging, highlighting the importance of online platforms in shaping contemporary language practices.

In addition to identity construction, slang expressions on social media often undergo semantic shifts, with meanings extended, altered, or creatively reinterpreted. These semantic changes allow speakers to adapt language to new communicative needs and social trends (Trimastuti, 2017). Studies on semantic shift in slang have emphasized that meaning change is a natural linguistic process influenced by social usage and context (*A Study of Semantic Shift (Slang) in English Language*). On TikTok, such shifts are often intensified by viral trends and repeated use, leading to new meanings that differ from standard definitions.

Several studies have examined slang usage among Generation Z in different social media contexts (J. T. L. Situmorang et al., 2024). Syafaah and Haryanto (2024) found that TikTok slang often undergoes semantic shifts, reflecting youth creativity in redefining meanings. Tambunsaribu (2019) analyzed morphological processes of slang among Jakarta teenagers, highlighting negative effects on academic performance. Tasyarasita et al. (2023) emphasized the sociolinguistic functions of slang on TikTok, showing its role in solidarity and humor. Budiasa (2021) revealed that slang on Instagram reflects group identity and cultural belonging. Herawati et al. (2025) studied English slang use on TikTok, focusing on its role in language learning. Yusuf et al. (2023) investigated slang in WhatsApp conversations, identifying five types and seven functions of slang among Gen Z. Jeresano and Carretero (2022) examined digital culture and slang in Facebook/Messenger, finding that slang aids fluency but creates barriers with older generations. Hasbiah (2025) analyzed slang use on TikTok and X, showing its impact on students' written language skills and the need for contextual awareness.

However, these studies generally focus on morphological or semantic aspects, or treat social media broadly without fully considering TikTok's multimodal environment. This research differs by applying Halliday's register theory (field, tenor, mode) to analyze slang in TikTok discourse, highlighting not only semantic shifts but also creative misuses and code-switching. The novelty lies in showing how multimodal features (text overlays, emojis, visuals) shape slang innovation and identity construction, a dimension that has not been explicitly addressed in previous work.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive method to explore the characteristics and functions of slang used by Generation Z on TikTok. The design was chosen because it allows for detailed interpretation of linguistic phenomena in their natural digital environment, focusing on meaning, social function, and identity construction rather than statistical measurement (Khakimov, 2025). The scope of the research is limited to slang expressions found in TikTok videos and comment sections actively used by Generation Z. The objectives are to identify the forms of slang, analyze their communicative functions through Halliday's register theory, and interpret how technological exposure and sociocultural factors influence Gen Z's linguistic choices.

Halliday's register theory (field, tenor, mode) served as the primary analytical tool, enabling systematic interpretation of both correct usage and creative distortions of slang in multimodal TikTok discourse. The primary data consisted of TikTok videos, captions, and comment sections created and interacted with by users under 24. Slang items such as POV, slay, ate, coquette, and rage bait were selected based on frequency and distinctiveness. The research setting was the digital environment of TikTok, focusing on public accounts, trending hashtags, and verified creator content. Data were collected through non-participant observation, with the researcher systematically recording slang expressions and documenting multimodal features, including text overlays, emojis, and visuals.

Operationally, slang expressions were categorized into correct usage, creative misuse, and semantic shifts.

Data analysis followed Miles and Huberman’s interactive model, including:

- **Data Reduction:** filtering irrelevant or repetitive slang items.
- **Data Display:** organizing findings into tables, excerpts, and thematic narratives.
- **Conclusion Drawing:** interpreting recurring patterns of slang diffusion, identity construction, and solidarity.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Findings

Table 1 presents selected slang expressions frequently used by Generation Z on TikTok and analyzes them using Halliday’s register framework, consisting of field, tenor, and mode. The table illustrates how each slang item functions within specific communicative contexts, whether through correct usage, semantic shift, or creative misuse. By examining these elements, the table highlights how slang operates not only as a linguistic form but also as a marker of identity, solidarity, and humor in TikTok’s multimodal digital discourse.

Table 1. Slang Expressions and Their Register Functions

No	Slang	Usage Type	Field	Tenor	Mode	Interpretation
1	LOL	Semantic shift	Digital humor & sarcasm	Peer-to-peer, mocking	TikTok video combining text and emoji.	Functions as an ironic insult marker rather than literal laughter
2	OOT	Misinterpretation	Slang/acronym discussion	Peer teasing & solidarity	Written TikTok comment	Acronym misunderstood as Indonesian slang oon; becomes a humor device
3	POV	Misuse	Meme entertainment	Informal, relatable	Text overlay + visual meme	Used as a label instead of a viewer perspective
4	POV	Correct use	Digital storytelling	Expressive peers	Perspective-based video	Immersive viewer-centered narration
5	Rage bait	Correct use	Online provocation	Sarcastic audience address	Meme/image post	Refers to the intentional trolling trigger
6	Coquette	Correct use	Fashion & aesthetic talk	Expressive peers	Comment + emoji	Style label expressing aesthetic identity
7	Slay	Semantic shift	Identity & style discourse	Playful peers	Image + caption	Shift from achievement → identity label
8	Fishy	Literalization	Meme humor	Sarcastic peers	Visual meme	Idiom turned into a literal visual joke
9	Crash out	Meaning expansion	Emotional expression	Relatable peers	Text meme	Redefined as emotional overload/shutdown
10	Ate	Semantic shift	Empowerment humor	Peer-to-peer, informal	Video + emoji caption	Means “dominated/performed excellently”



Figure 1. Misinterpretation of “LOL” in TikTok Slang

The first example concerns the slang term *LOL* (see Figure 1), which shows a semantic shift in TikTok discourse. In this context, the field is digital humor and sarcasm, the tenor reflects peer-to-peer interaction with a

mocking tone, and the mode is multimodal, combining text and visual elements. Rather than expressing literal laughter, the term functions as an ironic marker and sarcastic punchline, indicating how Generation Z reshapes global acronyms for humorous identity performance.



Figure 2. Misunderstanding of “OOT” in TikTok Comments

The acronym *OOT* (see Figure 2) was misinterpreted as an Indonesian slang term meaning “stupid.” The field involves metadiscussion of slang meaning; the tenor is informal and teasing among peers; and the mode is written comments supported by emojis. This example illustrates how misunderstanding becomes a resource for humor and social bonding rather than a communication breakdown.



Figure 3. Misuse of “POV” in TikTok Memes



Figure 4. Correct Use of “POV” in TikTok Content

The slang marker *POV* is used both correctly and incorrectly. In the misuse case (see Figure 3), the field is meme entertainment, the tenor is informal and relatable, and the mode combines text overlay and humorous visuals. The term is used as a general situation label rather than a viewer-centered perspective. In contrast, the correct usage (see Figure 4) maintains the original narrative perspective, positioning the viewer inside the scenario. This contrast shows how Gen Z alternates between conventional and creative uses of platform slang.



Figure 5. Correct Use of “Rage Bait” in TikTok Memes

The expression *rage bait* (see Figure 5) is correctly used to refer to content intentionally designed to provoke anger. The field centers on online provocation culture, the tenor is sarcastic and audience-directed, and the mode

is meme-style visual posting. The slang operates as a meta-commentary on trolling practices and reflects shared digital literacy among users.



Figure 6. Correct Use of “Coquette” in TikTok Comments

The term *coquette* (see Figure 6) is used correctly as an aesthetic and fashion label. The field involves style discourse, the tenor is supportive and expressive among peers, and the mode is short written comments enhanced with emojis. Its adoption shows lexical borrowing shaped by trend culture and identity signaling.



Figure 7. Misuse of “Slay” as an Identity Label

The slang word *slay* (see Figure 7) shows a semantic shift. Originally meaning to perform exceptionally well, it is reinterpreted as an identity descriptor for certain personality or style traits. The field relates to identity and appearance discourse; the tenor is playful and expressive; and the mode is a multimodal image-caption format. This reflects meaning expansion through repeated social use.



Figure 8. Literalization of “Fishy” in TikTok Memes

The idiomatic term *fishy* (see Figure 8) undergoes literalization in meme usage. The field is humor and irony; the tenor is casual peer interaction; and the mode combines visual and textual puns. Suspicion meaning is transformed into a visual joke, showing multimodal reinterpretation.



Figure 9. Ambiguous Use of “Crash Out” in TikTok Memes

The phrase *crash out* (see Figure 9) demonstrates meaning expansion, referring to emotional overload or dramatic reaction. The field concerns emotional self-expression, the tenor is relatable and introspective, and the mode is meme text with expressive imagery. This reflects how slang evolves to describe shared emotional experiences.

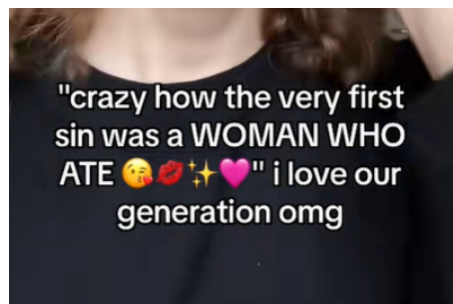


Figure 10. Semantic Shift of “Ate” in TikTok Humor

Finally, the slang *ate* (see Figure 10) shows a semantic shift toward praise and empowerment. The field is celebratory humor, the tenor is enthusiastic peer interaction, and the mode is video caption with exaggerated emojis. The word no longer relates to eating but to dominating or performing impressively, illustrating generational rebranding of vocabulary.

3.2. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that slang usage among Generation Z on TikTok is largely characterized by semantic shifts, creative reinterpretations, and selective misuse of global lexical items. These linguistic patterns reflect how Gen Z adapts language to digital interaction, humor, and peer-based communication. Similar patterns of slang innovation and meaning transformation among young users have been reported in studies of social media discourse (Lutfiah et al., 2024; Trimastuti, 2017), confirming that semantic shift is a dominant feature of contemporary slang use.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, these findings align with previous research emphasizing slang as a marker of identity and group solidarity among Generation Z (Jeresano & Carretero, 2022; Tasyarasita et al., 2023; Yusuf et al., 2023). On TikTok, slang functions not only to convey meaning but also to express emotional stance,

humor, and social alignment. The frequent blending of English slang with Indonesian structures further reflects code-switching practices shaped by global digital culture, as also observed in studies on Indonesian Gen Z language use across social media platforms (Budiasa, 2021; R. M. A. Situmorang & Meisuri, 2025; Syaputra et al., 2024).

Halliday's register framework provides a useful analytical lens for understanding how slang operates within TikTok's multimodal environment. In terms of the field, slang is commonly used to discuss everyday experiences, online trends, and personal reactions. Regarding tenor, interactions are predominantly informal and symmetrical, reflecting peer-to-peer communication among users of similar age and social status. In terms of mode, communication relies on written text supported by audiovisual elements such as emojis, images, and text overlays. This finding supports earlier research highlighting the influence of digital platforms on linguistic creativity and register variation (Lukin et al., 2011; Nurhayati & Putri, 2024).

Compared to earlier studies that focused primarily on morphological processes or the general effects of slang on language use (Hasbiah, 2025; Tambunsaribu, 2019). This research highlights the role of multimodality in shaping the meaning and use of slang on TikTok. The presence of creative misuse, literalization, and ironic reinterpretation demonstrates that slang on TikTok is not merely linguistic deviation but a context-driven adaptation influenced by platform-specific affordances. This supports findings from Latifah and Hendar (2024) and Syafaah and Haryanto (2024), who emphasize that meaning in TikTok slang emerges through usage, repetition, and digital context rather than fixed dictionary definitions.

Overall, the discussion confirms that Generation Z's slang on TikTok functions as both a linguistic and cultural resource. By negotiating meaning through semantic shift, code-switching, and creative distortion, users actively construct digital identities and reinforce social belonging. These findings reinforce sociolinguistic arguments that youth language in online spaces reflects broader cultural dynamics and technological exposure (Damanik et al., 2025; Wie et al., 2025; Wijana, 2012).

4. CONCLUSION

This study finds that Generation Z's use of slang on TikTok is predominantly characterized by semantic shifts, creative reinterpretations, and playful distortions of global vocabulary, alongside correct usages that serve as markers of identity and social solidarity. Through Halliday's register framework, the analysis demonstrates that slang operates across field, tenor, and mode as a communicative strategy shaped by informal peer interaction and TikTok's multimodal environment. These findings confirm that slang on TikTok is not merely a linguistic deviation but a meaningful sociolinguistic practice through which Generation Z negotiates identity, creativity, and digital belonging, in line with the results presented in the abstract.

Future research is recommended to expand the scope beyond TikTok by examining slang use across multiple social media platforms and comparing linguistic practices across generations. Further studies may also adopt mixed-method approaches to systematically measure the frequency and impact of slang, providing deeper insight into the sociocultural influence of digital language innovation.

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