

# “Bro”, “Bestie”, and “Slay”: Slang and Digital Identity Among Generation Z WhatsApp Communication

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## ABSTRACT

The increasing use of social media platforms has significantly influenced the communication patterns of Generation Z, particularly through the widespread use of slang in digital interactions. As digital natives, Generation Z users frequently employ slang expressions on platforms such as WhatsApp to construct identity, express humour, establish intimacy, and maintain social belonging within online communities. This study explores the usage of slang among Generation Z users on WhatsApp by examining the types of slang and morphological processes present in their digital communication. Using a qualitative research design, semi structured interviews were conducted with five Generation Z participants aged between 23 and 25 years old who actively use WhatsApp in their daily interactions. The findings revealed that participants frequently utilised fresh and creative slang expressions such as *slay*, *bro*, and *bestie* to create casual, relatable, and socially connected interactions. The study also identified several morphological processes involved in slang formation, with suffixation emerging as the most dominant process through expressions such as *cooked*, *ghosted*, and *clapped*. In addition, the findings demonstrated that slang acquisition was strongly influenced by peer interaction, social media exposure, and online culture. The use of localised slang and dialect expressions further reflected the multilingual and multicultural nature of Malaysian digital communication. Overall, the study highlights how WhatsApp functions not merely as a communication platform but also as a digital social space where linguistic creativity, identity construction, and contemporary youth culture are continuously negotiated and expressed among Generation Z users.

**Keywords:** Generation Z, slang, digital communication, WhatsApp, identity, online culture, morphology

## INTRODUCTION

Language continuously evolves alongside social, cultural, and technological changes within society. One of the most noticeable forms of language variation in contemporary communication is slang, particularly among younger generations who actively engage with digital communication platforms. Slang is commonly associated with informal language use that reflects creativity, identity, humour, intimacy, and group belonging within specific social communities. With the rapid advancement of technology and social media platforms, slang expressions are now disseminated more quickly and widely than ever before, particularly among Generation Z users (Suhaini & Mumin, 2025).

Generation Z, often described as individuals born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s, is widely recognised as the first generation to grow up fully immersed in digital technology and internet culture. As digital natives, Generation Z users rely heavily on social media and mobile communication platforms in their daily interactions, making digital communication an integral aspect of their social lives. The accessibility of

smartphones, social networking applications, and instant messaging platforms has significantly transformed how this generation communicates, interacts, and constructs social relationships online (Alruthaya et al., 2021).

Among the most widely used communication platforms is WhatsApp, which functions as a major medium for personal, educational, and professional interactions. The platform enables users to communicate through text messaging, voice notes, video calls, emojis, images, and group conversations in real time. Previous studies have shown that WhatsApp is not merely a communication tool but also a digital social space where users negotiate identity, humour, social closeness, and belonging through language use (Crystal, 2011).

The increasing use of social media has also accelerated the emergence and circulation of contemporary slang expressions. Digital platforms encourage fast, informal, and expressive communication, leading users to adopt abbreviations, clipped forms, acronyms, creative spellings, and figurative expressions in everyday interaction. Studies on Generation Z slang have demonstrated that slang expressions often function beyond simple vocabulary innovation, serving instead as markers of social identity, intimacy, humour, and online participation (Khairunissa & Budiwati, 2025). Expressions such as *slay*, *bestie*, *bro*, and *spill the tea* are frequently used to establish solidarity, relatability, and shared understanding among younger users within online communities.

In addition, the development of digital slang reflects the dynamic relationship between language and online culture. Previous research has highlighted how social media platforms contribute to linguistic creativity and rapid language evolution among younger users. Generation Z users actively manipulate language forms through clipping, acronym formation, infixation, borrowing, and other morphological processes to create more efficient, expressive, and humorous forms of communication (Ramadhani & Pujiyatno, 2025). These linguistic practices are often influenced by meme culture, online trends, peer interaction, and multilingual environments.

Within the Malaysian context, digital slang usage is further shaped by multilingualism and cultural diversity. Malaysian users frequently blend English with Malay expressions, regional dialects, and local slang in online communication. Such linguistic hybridity reflects how Generation Z users negotiate both global internet culture and local cultural identity simultaneously (Androutsopoulos, 2015). Despite the growing number of studies examining digital slang and Generation Z communication, limited research specifically explores how Malaysian Generation Z users utilise slang within WhatsApp interactions, particularly from the perspectives of identity construction, intimacy, humour, and online belonging.

Therefore, this study explores the usage of slang among Generation Z users on WhatsApp by examining the types of slang expressions and morphological processes present in their digital communication. More importantly, the study explores how slang functions as a linguistic resource through which Generation Z users construct identity, express social closeness, participate in online culture, and maintain belonging within digital communities. By focusing on WhatsApp communication within the Malaysian context, this study contributes to contemporary discussions on sociolinguistics, digital discourse, youth language practices, and online communication culture.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Slang as a Sociolinguistic Practice

Slang has long been recognised as a form of informal language that reflects social identity, group membership, and contextual meaning (Allan & Burridge, 2006; Eble, 1996). Rather than functioning merely as non standard vocabulary, slang often serves important communicative and social purposes, particularly among younger speakers. In sociolinguistic research, language variation is not viewed as random or meaningless, but as a resource through which speakers construct identity and express social positioning (Eckert, 2012). This perspective suggests that the use of slang is closely connected to how individuals present themselves within particular social environments and communities.

The use of slang is also often associated with solidarity and in group interaction (Tagliamonte & Denis, 2008). Individuals who share similar slang expressions are often perceived as belonging to the same social or cultural

circle. Through slang, speakers are able to create familiarity, reduce social distance, and establish a sense of mutual understanding within conversations (Allan & Burridge, 2006). In contemporary society, slang has become increasingly visible among younger generations due to the influence of digital communication and social networking platforms. As communication shifts into online spaces, slang continues to evolve rapidly according to trends, cultural references, and social interaction patterns among users (Androutsopoulos, 2015; Crystal, 2011).

This sociolinguistic perspective is particularly relevant to the present study because Generation Z users do not use slang merely to shorten communication, but also to signal humour, intimacy, identity, solidarity, and belonging within their digital peer networks. Therefore, slang should be understood not simply as informal language, but as a meaningful linguistic practice shaped by social interaction and digital culture (Androutsopoulos, 2015; Eckert, 2012).

### **Slang in Digital Communication**

In digital communication, slang has become increasingly prominent due to the rapid circulation of language through social media and messaging platforms. Crystal (2011) argues that internet language has created new forms of written interaction that combine characteristics of spoken and written communication. Unlike traditional written communication, digital interaction tends to be immediate, conversational, interactive, and highly informal. Consequently, users frequently employ abbreviations, slang expressions, emojis, acronyms, and playful spellings to create more expressive and relatable interactions online (Androutsopoulos, 2015; Tagliamonte & Denis, 2008). Recent studies have also shown that digital communication environments encourage linguistic creativity and the rapid adaptation of informal language practices among younger users, particularly Generation Z (Ramadhani & Pujiyatno, 2025; Suhaini & Mumin, 2025).

This phenomenon is particularly evident on platforms such as WhatsApp, where communication often occurs in fast paced and casual conversational settings. WhatsApp allows users to engage in instant messaging, group conversations, voice notes, and multimedia sharing, creating an environment that encourages informal communication styles. Within such digital spaces, users are more likely to adopt slang expressions that reflect humour, spontaneity, and emotional expression (Yusuf et al., 2022). Abbreviated forms such as *OTW*, *AFK*, and *BTW* demonstrate how users prioritise speed and convenience while maintaining conversational flow. In addition, WhatsApp communication often resembles spoken interaction due to its conversational immediacy, which further contributes to the frequent use of informal and slang based expressions in everyday communication (Crystal, 2011).

Furthermore, digital communication platforms have accelerated the spread and normalisation of slang across different communities and cultures. Slang expressions can rapidly gain popularity through memes, viral content, influencers, and online interactions. This rapid circulation contributes to continuous linguistic innovation among younger users, particularly Generation Z (Androutsopoulos, 2015). Previous studies have demonstrated that online slang frequently reflects current internet culture, humour, and social trends, making digital communication spaces highly influential in shaping contemporary language use (Khairunissa & Budiwati, 2025; Sadigzade, 2026). Therefore, slang in digital communication should not be viewed as a decline in language quality, but rather as an adaptive linguistic response to evolving communication technologies and online interaction practices.

### **Generation Z and Online Culture**

Generation Z is often associated with digital nativity because this generation grew up alongside smartphones, internet access, and social media platforms as part of everyday life (Alruthaya et al., 2021). Unlike previous generations that gradually adapted to digital technology, Generation Z users have been continuously exposed to online communication from a young age. As a result, their communication practices are strongly influenced by digital culture and social media interaction (Prensky, 2001). Platforms such as WhatsApp, TikTok, Instagram, X, and Telegram have become important spaces where Generation Z users socialise, exchange information, and express themselves through language (Androutsopoulos, 2015).

The rapid growth of social media has also contributed to the widespread use of slang among Generation Z users. Slang expressions frequently emerge from memes, influencer discourse, online trends, peer interaction, and digital communities (Crystal, 2011; Ramadhani & Pujiyatno, 2025). Since social media platforms enable information and trends to circulate rapidly, slang expressions can quickly become normalised within online communication. Expressions such as *slay*, *bestie*, *bro*, *sus*, and *spill the tea* are now commonly integrated into digital interaction among younger users. These expressions often function as markers of humour, relatability, and social belonging within online communities (Khairunissa & Budiwati, 2025).

Previous studies have highlighted the strong relationship between Generation Z communication and slang usage in digital environments. Yusuf et al. (2022), in their study of Generation Z slang usage in WhatsApp groups, found that young users frequently employed slang forms such as fresh and creative slang, flippant expressions, imitative forms, acronyms, and clipping. Their findings demonstrate that slang has become an integral component of online interaction among younger users. Similarly, Suhaini and Mumin (2025) reported that internet slang plays an important role in shaping informal communication practices among Gen Z users within digital spaces. These studies are particularly relevant to the present research because they similarly position WhatsApp and social media platforms as digital social spaces where informal language practices are continuously created, shared, and adapted among Generation Z users.

### Slang and Identity Construction

The use of slang among Generation Z users can also be closely linked to identity construction in online communication. Eckert (2012) explains that linguistic variation carries social meaning because speakers use language to project particular identities and align themselves with specific social groups. Similarly, Androutsopoulos (2015) argues that online communication environments allow users to strategically employ linguistic resources to perform digital identities and participate in online communities. Within digital communication, slang therefore functions as more than a linguistic shortcut, as it also reflects how users present themselves socially within online environments.

Expressions such as *bro*, *sis*, *bestie*, *bruh*, and *slay* may be interpreted as identity markers that position users within a youthful, informal, and digitally connected community. These expressions help users sound current, relatable, humorous, and socially aligned with their peers. Previous studies have shown that Generation Z users frequently adopt trending slang expressions to maintain social relevance and demonstrate participation in contemporary online culture (Ramadhani & Pujiyatno, 2025; Yusuf et al., 2022). In this sense, slang becomes a performative linguistic resource that allows users to project a particular online persona and participate in contemporary youth culture.

Moreover, identity construction through slang is strongly influenced by online trends and peer interaction. Generation Z users often adopt certain slang expressions because they are widely used within their social circles or online communities. The use of trending slang therefore signals participation in shared digital culture and demonstrates awareness of current online discourse (Suhaini & Mumin, 2025). As online communication increasingly shapes social interaction among younger users, slang continues to function as an important marker of identity and social positioning in digital spaces.

### Slang, Intimacy, and Social Closeness

Apart from identity, slang also functions as a marker of intimacy and social closeness in communication. Informal address terms such as *bro*, *dude*, *sis*, and *bestie* reduce social distance between speakers and contribute to a more relaxed conversational atmosphere (Allan & Burridge, 2006). In WhatsApp communication, these expressions help users maintain interpersonal warmth, familiarity, and emotional connection during interaction.

The use of slang often reflects the closeness of relationships between users. Individuals are generally more likely to use slang with friends, peers, or people within their social circles compared to formal communication settings (Eble, 1996). Through slang, users create interactions that feel more personal, friendly, and relatable.



This demonstrates that online communication is not emotionally empty or impersonal, as users actively rely on informal linguistic resources to express relational closeness and social bonding (Tagliamonte & Denis, 2008).

In addition, the conversational nature of WhatsApp further encourages the use of intimate and informal language practices. Since users communicate frequently and instantly through messaging applications, communication styles often resemble casual spoken interaction (Crystal, 2011). Consequently, slang becomes a natural component of digital conversation among Generation Z users, particularly in maintaining social relationships and everyday interaction.

### Humour and Linguistic Creativity in Slang

Humour is another important function of slang in digital communication among Generation Z users. Expressions such as *spill the tea*, *bro ate and left no crumbs*, *un-frickin-real*, and *guaran-damn-tee* demonstrate playfulness, exaggeration, and linguistic creativity. These expressions often rely on shared cultural knowledge, internet trends, and meme culture to convey humorous meanings within conversations (Crystal, 2011).

Generation Z users frequently manipulate language structures to produce expressive, entertaining, and memorable slang expressions. Such linguistic creativity reflects how online communication encourages experimentation with spelling, pronunciation, and word formation (Androutsopoulos, 2015). In digital environments, users are not restricted by formal language conventions, allowing them to creatively modify existing words and phrases according to communicative needs and online trends.

Lihawa et al. (2021) examined Generation Z slang through word formation processes and found that slang expressions can be formed through borrowing, compounding, clipping, acronyms, prefixation, infixation, and suffixation. These findings demonstrate that slang involves not only semantic change but also morphological creativity. Similarly, Ramadhani and Pujiyatno (2025) found that social media platforms encourage the creation and adaptation of highly expressive slang expressions among Generation Z users. This is particularly relevant to the present study because many slang expressions used by participants similarly reflect playful linguistic modification and innovative word formation processes in WhatsApp communication.

### Belonging and Malaysian Digital Identity

The concept of belonging is also important in understanding Generation Z slang usage. Slang often functions as an in-group code where users who understand and use certain expressions demonstrate membership within a particular social or digital community (Allan & Burridge, 2006). Shared slang usage allows users to feel connected to peers who participate in similar online cultures, trends, and communication practices.

Androutsopoulos (2015) explains that digital communication enables networked multilingual practices, where users draw from multiple linguistic resources while participating in online interaction. This perspective is particularly relevant to the Malaysian context, where multilingualism and cultural diversity strongly influence everyday communication. Malaysian Generation Z users frequently combine English slang with Malay expressions, regional dialects, and culturally specific terms during online interaction.

Expressions such as *fuiyoh*, *walaweh*, *tapau*, *kantoi*, and Kelantan dialect words demonstrate how Malaysian digital slang reflects both global internet culture and local linguistic identity. The blending of English with local expressions highlights how Generation Z users negotiate multiple cultural influences simultaneously within digital communication spaces (Suhaini & Mumin, 2025). Therefore, Malaysian slang usage on WhatsApp reflects not only online participation, but also cultural identity and multilingual belonging among users.

### Morphological Processes in Slang Formation

Morphology provides another important lens for analysing slang because many slang expressions are formed through word formation processes. Yule (2010) explains that processes such as borrowing, compounding,

clipping, acronyms, prefixation, infixation, and suffixation contribute to the creation of new words and meanings. These processes are particularly common in informal communication, where users prioritise creativity, expressiveness, and communication efficiency.

In the context of Generation Z communication, morphological processes are often used flexibly and creatively. For example, expressions such as *ghosted*, *cooked*, and *clapped* demonstrate how suffixation contributes to slang meanings, while *lowkey* and *clapback* illustrate compounding processes. Similarly, expressions such as *OTW*, *AFK*, and *BTW* reflect the widespread use of acronyms and shortened forms in digital interaction (Crystal, 2011).

The frequent use of morphological modification among Generation Z users demonstrates how digital communication encourages linguistic innovation. Slang expressions are constantly adapted according to online trends, humour, and communicative needs, resulting in highly dynamic forms of language use (Lihawa et al., 2021). Therefore, analysing morphological processes within slang provides deeper understanding of how Generation Z users creatively manipulate language in digital communication environments.

Based on the reviewed literature, slang in WhatsApp communication should not be treated merely as informal or non standard language. Instead, it should be understood as a meaningful sociolinguistic practice shaped by identity, intimacy, humour, belonging, digital culture, and morphological creativity. Previous studies have demonstrated that slang plays important communicative and social roles within Generation Z online interaction, particularly in relation to self expression, peer solidarity, and participation in digital culture (Eckert, 2012; Yusuf et al., 2022).

However, despite the growing number of studies on Generation Z slang and social media communication, limited research specifically explores how Malaysian Generation Z users employ slang within WhatsApp interactions. Furthermore, many previous studies focus primarily on categorising slang forms rather than examining their broader social meanings within digital communication. Therefore, the present study contributes to existing literature by examining not only the types and morphological structures of slang, but also the social meanings attached to slang usage among Malaysian Generation Z users in WhatsApp communication.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the use of slang among Generation Z users in WhatsApp communication. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study aimed to examine participants' language practices, experiences, and interpretations of slang usage within naturally occurring digital communication contexts. Qualitative research allows researchers to gain deeper understanding of social behaviour, meaning making, and language practices within specific communities and environments (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The study focussed on examining the types of slang expressions used by Generation Z users, the morphological processes involved in slang formation, and the social meanings associated with slang usage in digital communication. In addition, the study explored how slang reflects identity, humour, intimacy, and belonging within online interaction among younger users.

### Participants

The participants consisted of five Generation Z individuals aged between 23 and 25 years old who actively used WhatsApp as part of their daily communication. Purposive sampling was employed in selecting participants because the study specifically required individuals who frequently engaged with digital communication and were familiar with contemporary slang usage. All participants were former students from the bachelor's degree in English for Professional Communication programme and were selected based on their active use of WhatsApp and familiarity with online slang expressions.

Although the number of participants was relatively small, the study aimed to provide exploratory insights into slang usage among Generation Z users rather than produce generalisable findings. The small sample size also allowed more focused and in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and language practices within digital communication settings.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through semi structured interviews conducted online via Google Meet. Semi structured interviews were selected because they allowed flexibility for participants to elaborate on their experiences and perceptions regarding slang usage while still maintaining alignment with the research objectives (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). The interviews were conducted individually according to participants' availability and comfort. The interview questions focused on participants' use of WhatsApp, frequency of slang usage, understanding of slang meanings, situations where slang was commonly used, and sources from which participants learned slang expressions. Participants were also asked to provide examples of slang expressions frequently used in their online communication.

With participants' consent, all interviews were audio recorded for transcription and analysis purposes. The recordings were later transcribed verbatim to ensure accurate representation of participants' responses and language use during the interviews.

### **Data Analysis**

The collected data were analysed using thematic analysis. The interview transcripts were examined to identify recurring slang expressions, communicative patterns, and participants' perspectives regarding slang usage in WhatsApp communication. Slang expressions identified in the data were categorised according to the slang categories proposed by Yusuf et al. (2022), namely fresh and creative slang, flippant slang, imitative slang, acronyms, and clipping.

In addition, the morphological processes involved in slang formation were analysed using the framework proposed by Lihawa et al. (2021), which includes borrowing, compounding, clipping, acronyms, prefixation, infixation, and suffixation. The analysis also considered the social meanings attached to slang usage, particularly in relation to identity construction, humour, intimacy, and online belonging among Generation Z users.

Thematic analysis was conducted by repeatedly reviewing the interview transcripts to identify meaningful patterns and relationships within the data. Relevant slang expressions and participant responses were grouped according to recurring themes related to digital communication and sociolinguistic practices.

### **Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations**

Several steps were taken to ensure the trustworthiness and ethical integrity of the study. Firstly, established theoretical frameworks from previous studies were adopted to support the categorisation and analysis of slang expressions. Secondly, the use of interview recordings and verbatim transcription helped maintain accuracy and consistency during data analysis.

Participants were informed about the purpose of the study prior to the interviews, and their participation was entirely voluntary. Consent was obtained before recording the interviews, and participants' identities were kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms. The collected data were used solely for academic and research purposes.

In addition, the researchers remained aware of potential subjective interpretation during the analysis process by ensuring that findings were consistently grounded in participants' responses and existing literature. As the study focused on exploratory understanding rather than statistical generalisation, emphasis was placed on producing meaningful interpretation of participants' language practices within their digital communication contexts.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Slang as Informal Digital Communication

The findings revealed that slang has become a normalised component of everyday WhatsApp communication among Generation Z users. All participants reported actively using slang expressions in daily interactions with friends, classmates, colleagues, and family members. Participants explained that slang made conversations feel more relaxed, conversational, and natural during online interaction.

One participant explained that slang was frequently used because “it feels less formal and easier to talk with friends,” while another participant stated that slang expressions made communication feel “more natural and friendly” during WhatsApp conversations. These responses suggest that slang functions as an important linguistic strategy for creating conversational informality within digital communication among Generation Z users.

The findings also showed that participants frequently relied on abbreviations, shortened forms, and informal expressions such as OTW, BTW, AFK, and frfr to maintain fast and efficient communication flow. This supports Crystal’s (2011) argument that internet communication combines features of spoken and written discourse, resulting in highly interactive and conversational forms of communication. Similarly, Tagliamonte and Denis (2008) found that digital messaging environments encourage informal and abbreviated language practices among younger users.

Table 1 Frequently Used Slang Expressions Among Participants

| Slang Expression | Meaning/Function            | Communicative Purpose      |
|------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------|
| bro              | informal address term       | solidarity and familiarity |
| bestie           | close friend                | intimacy and closeness     |
| slay             | praise or approval          | humour and self expression |
| bruh             | reaction expression         | casual interaction         |
| spill the tea    | sharing gossip/ information | humour and engagement      |
| otw              | on the way                  | communication efficiency   |
| btw              | by the way                  | conversational transition  |
| frfr             | for real                    | emphasis and relatability  |

The use of these expressions demonstrates that slang functions not merely as linguistic simplification, but as part of contemporary digital communication culture among Generation Z users. This finding also supports Yusuf et al. (2022), who found that slang usage in WhatsApp communication reflects informal interaction and social engagement among younger users.

### Slang and Identity Construction

The findings further demonstrated that slang usage among participants was closely connected to identity construction and self-presentation within digital communication. Participants frequently used expressions such as *bro*, *bestie*, *slay*, *sis*, and *bruh* to project a youthful, relatable, and socially connected identity during WhatsApp interaction.

Several participants explained that using trending slang expressions helped them sound more “current” and socially connected with their peers. One participant described *bro* and *broski* as “another way to call close



friends,” while another participant explained that *bestie* was commonly used as “derived from bestfriend.” Slang expressions therefore functioned as markers of participation within Generation Z online culture. This finding supports Eckert’s (2012) argument that linguistic variation carries social meaning and contributes to identity construction within specific social groups. Similarly, Androutsopoulos (2015) argues that online communication environments allow users to strategically employ linguistic resources to perform digital identities and align themselves with online communities.

The findings also indicated that slang usage reflected peer alignment and social belonging. Participants often adopted slang expressions commonly used within their social circles or online communities, particularly slang popularised through TikTok, Instagram, memes, and influencer discourse. Expressions such as *slay* and *bestie* were frequently associated with internet culture and contemporary online trends among younger users. One participant explained that *slay* was used “in a casual way of saying did a great job,” reflecting how such expressions functioned as positive affirmation and peer engagement during online interaction.

Furthermore, participants were generally more likely to use slang with individuals of similar age groups because such expressions were perceived as more relatable and easily understood among peers. This suggests that slang functions as a generational linguistic marker that differentiates younger users from older speakers while simultaneously reinforcing social belonging within Generation Z communities.

### Slang as Intimacy and Social Bonding

Apart from identity construction, the findings revealed that slang also functioned as a marker of intimacy and social closeness within WhatsApp communication. Informal address terms such as *bro*, *dude*, *sis*, and *bestie* were frequently used to reduce social distance and create more comfortable conversational environments.

Participants explained that slang was commonly used with close friends and familiar social circles rather than in formal interactions. One participant described *bro*, *dude*, and *sis* as “another way to call close friends,” while another participant explained that expressions such as *bestie* created friendlier and more casual interaction among peers. This finding aligns with Allan and Burridge (2006), who argue that slang often functions as a marker of solidarity and interpersonal familiarity within social interaction. Similarly, Eble (1996) notes that slang usage is strongly associated with in group communication and shared social relationships.

The findings also suggested that conversations without slang sometimes appeared “too serious” or distant among participants. Through slang usage, participants created interactions that felt more emotionally expressive, relatable, and socially engaging. Expressions such as *bro* and *bestie* were not used merely as vocabulary substitutions, but as linguistic strategies for maintaining conversational warmth and relational closeness during online communication.

Additionally, participants frequently adjusted their slang usage depending on the closeness of their relationships with communication partners. Slang was used more extensively with peers who shared similar communication styles and online exposure. This adaptability indicates that slang usage is socially negotiated according to relationship closeness and conversational context.

### Humour and Linguistic Creativity in Slang

Participants frequently used humorous slang expressions to make conversations feel more entertaining and expressive. One participant explained that *spill the tea* was used “to tell gossip,” while another participant described *bro ate and left no crumbs* as an expression used when someone “did a great job.” These expressions often relied on shared understanding of internet culture, memes, and social media trends. This finding supports Crystal’s (2011) view that online communication encourages creative and experimental language practices among users.

The findings also revealed that participants actively manipulated spelling, pronunciation, and word structure to produce expressive slang forms. Such linguistic creativity reflects how Generation Z users adapt language

dynamically according to communicative and social purposes within digital spaces. Androutsopoulos (2015) similarly explains that online communication environments encourage flexible and hybrid language practices among users.

Moreover, several slang expressions identified in the study demonstrated creative morphological modification. Expressions such as *un-frickin-real* and *guaran-damn-tee* involved playful insertion of linguistic elements for emphasis and humour. This finding aligns with Lihawa et al. (2021), who found that Generation Z slang frequently involves creative word formation processes such as infixation, compounding, clipping, and suffixation.

The findings therefore suggest that humour and linguistic creativity play significant roles in shaping online interaction among Generation Z users. Slang allows users to communicate not only information, but also personality, emotion, and entertainment within digital conversations.

### Online Culture and the Influence of Social Media Trends

The findings revealed that social media platforms strongly influenced participants' understanding and adoption of slang expressions. Most participants reported learning new slang through TikTok, Instagram, X, memes, influencer content, and peer interaction.

Participants explained that slang expressions often became popular after repeated exposure through online trends and viral content. One participant stated that slang terms were commonly encountered "through TikTok and people around us," while another participant explained that many expressions became familiar after repeatedly appearing on social media platforms. These responses demonstrate how digital communication environments accelerate the circulation and normalisation of slang among younger users.

Table 2 Main Sources of Slang Acquisition Among Participants

| Source            | Influence of Slang Usage          |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------|
| TikTok            | exposure of trending slang        |
| Instagram         | influencer and meme culture       |
| Friends and peers | daily conversational adaptation   |
| X/Twitter         | viral discourse and online humour |
| WhatsApp groups   | repeated social interaction       |

The findings support Ramadhani and Pujiyatno (2025), who found that social media platforms significantly contribute to the spread and adaptation of slang expressions among Generation Z users. Similarly, Suhaini and Mumin (2025) reported that internet slang has become increasingly integrated into informal communication practices among younger digital users.

Furthermore, participants often adopted slang expressions because they were widely used within their social circles and online communities. This suggests that slang usage is closely connected to online participation and social belonging. Understanding trending slang enabled participants to remain socially relevant and actively engaged within contemporary digital culture.

### Malaysian Digital Identity and Localised Slang Usage

The findings also highlighted the presence of multilingual and localised slang expressions within participants' WhatsApp communication. Participants frequently combined English slang with Malay expressions, regional dialects, and culturally specific terms during interaction.

Expressions such as *fuiyoh*, *walaweh*, *tapau*, *kantoi*, and Kelantan dialect words demonstrated how Malaysian digital slang reflects both global internet culture and local linguistic identity. These expressions were commonly used to express humour, surprise, emphasis, and emotional reactions within conversations. One participant explained that local slang expressions felt “more natural when talking with Malaysian friends,” demonstrating how local linguistic elements contributed to conversational familiarity and shared cultural understanding.

The findings suggest that Malaysian Generation Z users negotiate both global and local cultural influences simultaneously through digital communication. While participants actively adopted globally popular internet slang, they also integrated local linguistic expressions into their communication practices. This reflects the multilingual and multicultural nature of Malaysian digital communication.

This finding aligns with Androutsopoulos (2015), who explains that online communication enables multilingual and hybrid linguistic practices among users participating in digital networks. Therefore, Malaysian slang usage on WhatsApp reflects not only participation in online culture, but also local identity construction and multilingual belonging among Generation Z users.

### Morphological Processes in Generation Z Slang

The findings further revealed that participants employed various morphological processes in the formation and adaptation of slang expressions. Among the processes identified were borrowing, compounding, acronyms, clipping, infixation, and suffixation.

Table 3 Morphological Processes Identified in Generation Z Slang

| Slang Expression | Morphological Process |
|------------------|-----------------------|
| ghosted          | suffixation           |
| cooked           | suffixation           |
| Lowkey           | compounding           |
| Clapback         | compounding           |
| OTW              | acronym               |
| AFK              | acronym               |
| BTW              | acronym               |
| fuiyoh           | borrowing             |
| walaweh          | borrowing             |
| un-frickin-real  | infixation            |

The findings showed that acronyms and shortened forms were commonly used due to the fast-paced nature of WhatsApp communication. Expressions such as *OTW*, *AFK*, and *BTW* reflected participants’ preference for efficient and convenient communication styles. One participant explained that abbreviated forms were easier to use because they were “faster and already understood by friends.” This supports Yule’s (2010) argument that morphological processes such as acronyms and clipping frequently emerge in informal communication environments.

In addition, suffixation appeared prominently in expressions such as *ghosted* and *cooked*, while compounding appeared in expressions such as *lowkey* and *clapback*. The findings suggest that Generation Z users actively manipulate language structures to create expressive and socially meaningful slang forms.

This finding aligns with Lihawa et al. (2021), who found that Generation Z slang frequently involves creative word formation processes shaped by digital communication culture. Therefore, the findings demonstrate that slang usage among Generation Z users involves not only semantic innovation, but also creative morphological adaptation within online interaction.

## CONCLUSION

This study explored the usage of slang among Generation Z users in WhatsApp communication by examining the types of slang expressions, morphological processes, and social meanings associated with slang usage in digital interaction. The findings revealed that slang has become a significant component of everyday communication among Generation Z users, particularly within informal online environments such as WhatsApp.

The study demonstrated that slang usage among participants extended beyond communication efficiency and functioned as an important sociolinguistic resource for identity construction, humour, intimacy, social bonding, and online belonging. Expressions such as *bro*, *bestie*, *slay*, and *bruh* reflected how Generation Z users construct youthful and relatable online identities while simultaneously strengthening peer relationships and participation within digital culture. The findings also highlighted the influence of social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and X in shaping contemporary slang usage and accelerating the circulation of trending expressions among younger users.

In addition, the findings revealed that Malaysian Generation Z users frequently integrated local linguistic elements, regional dialects, and Malay expressions into their digital communication. This demonstrates how Malaysian digital slang reflects both global internet culture and local cultural identity within multilingual online interaction. The study also identified various morphological processes involved in slang formation, including acronyms, borrowing, compounding, suffixation, and infixation, highlighting the linguistic creativity present within Generation Z communication practices.

Overall, the study contributes to sociolinguistic and digital communication research by demonstrating that slang should not be viewed merely as informal or non-standard language, but rather as a meaningful linguistic practice shaped by social interaction, identity performance, humour, and online culture. The findings provide further understanding of how Generation Z users negotiate communication, belonging, and self-expression within contemporary digital environments.

Despite its contributions, the study was limited by its relatively small sample size and focus on a specific group of Generation Z users within the Malaysian context. Future studies may explore larger and more diverse participant groups, compare slang usage across different social media platforms, or investigate generational differences in the interpretation and understanding of digital slang. Further research may also examine how evolving internet culture continues to influence language change and digital communication practices among younger generations.

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