

The Use of Social Media Slang in Selected Tiktok Videos by Malaysian Gen Z Influencers

¹Muhammad Aqmarafiq Mohd Sukri @ Mohd Zahir, ^{*2}Nor Eleyana Abdullah, ³Mafarhanatul Akmal Ahmad Kamal, ⁴Ilham Alia Mat Isa, ⁵Noor Shariena Zaraini, ⁶Mohd Fadhli Shah Khaidzir

^{1,2,3,4,5}Academy of Language Studies Universiti Teknologi MARA, 40450 Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia

⁶Pusat Pengajian Citra Universiti, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 UKM Bangi, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia

***Corresponding Author**

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the linguistic forms and social functions of social media slang in TikTok videos produced by Malaysian Generation Z influencers. Drawing on Labov's (1972) sociolinguistic theory of linguistic variation and Eckert's (2000) framework of lexical repertoire and indexicality, a qualitative content analysis was conducted on a purposive sample of 20–30 videos. The findings reveal that influencers employ diverse linguistic forms, including lexical slang, abbreviations, acronyms, code-mixing, emoji-based slang, and viral phrases. These forms are not random but follow recognizable Gen Z speech norms, blending global internet slang with local Malaysian English features. Functionally, slang serves as a communicative resource for identity construction, solidarity and rapport, humor and entertainment, trend alignment, emphasis, and evaluation. By strategically combining global and local repertoires, Malaysian Gen Z influencers construct relatable personas, sustain audience engagement, and participate in TikTok's fast-paced trend culture. This study highlights slang as both a lexical repertoire and a social practice, underscoring its role in shaping digital youth identity and discourse.

Keywords: TikTok slang, Generation Z, Malaysian English, Influencers, Identity construction, Digital discourse

INTRODUCTION

The English language has evolved through centuries of cultural exchange, historical events, and technological innovation. In the contemporary era, digital communication has accelerated linguistic change, particularly through social media platforms that foster informal, creative, and rapid exchanges (Saric & Pavlovic, 2022; Sen, 2024). Among Generation Z, often described as digital natives, platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and X have become central to everyday communication. These platforms have developed a distinct digital language often called as social media slang, which includes abbreviations, emojis, internet slangs, acronyms, and widely shared phrases. This kind of language helps Gen Z communicate in online spaces in ways that are creative, casual and fast (Paoletti & Mujahidah, 2025). Examples of this kind of slang include phrases such as “no cap” and “bet” as well as the use of emojis and abbreviations like “BRB” and “LOL”. These expressions functions as signals of shared identity and cultural awareness in Gen Z groups (Telaumbanua et al. 2024).

Social media influencers play a pivotal role in shaping these linguistic practices. As highly visible content creators, influencers strategically adopt slang to construct relatable personas, strengthen audience rapport, and maintain relevance in fast-moving digital cultures (Duffy, 2020). Their use of slang not only reflects generational speech norms but also amplifies trends, ensuring that expressions such as *no cap*, *rizz*, or *spill the tea* circulate widely across online communities. In Malaysia, TikTok has emerged as a particularly influential space where Gen Z influencers blend global slang repertoires with local linguistic features, creating hybrid forms that resonate

with both local and international audiences. While global studies have examined slang as a sociolinguistic phenomenon, limited attention has been given to its localized use in Malaysian contexts.

Previous studies, such as Nurliyana Mohd Nor Sham et al. (2025), provide a foundation by examining semantic shifts and sociocultural motivations behind Malaysian Gen Z slang on TikTok. Similarly, Mustapha and Marzuki (2024) explored usage patterns and acquisition contexts among Malaysian Gen Z TikTok users. However, these studies did not focus specifically on Malaysian Gen Z influencers' TikTok video content, leaving a gap in understanding their linguistic choices and the social functions of slang in influencer discourse. Addressing this gap is crucial for understanding how Malaysian Gen Z influencers use slang not only as a linguistic repertoire but also as a social practice that shapes identity, builds rapport, and sustains relevance in digital communities.

This study addresses that gap by analyzing the linguistic forms and social functions of slang in selected TikTok videos produced by Malaysian Gen Z influencers. Specifically, it explores how slang operates as both a linguistic repertoire and a social practice, shaping identity, building rapport, and sustaining relevance in digital communities. Therefore, this study investigates the linguistic forms and social functions of slang in TikTok videos produced by Malaysian Gen Z influencers, situating its analysis within Labov's (1972) sociolinguistic theory of variation and Eckert's (2000) framework of language and identity based on these two research questions (RQ):

1. What linguistic forms of social media slang are used by Malaysian Gen Z influencers in selected TikTok videos?
2. What social functions do these slang expressions perform in selected TikTok videos?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Media Slang in Digital Communication

Digital communication has transformed language use, particularly among Gen Z, who are widely recognised as digital natives. Social media slang includes lexical innovations, abbreviations, acronyms, code-mixing, emojis, and viral phrases, spreading rapidly through algorithm-driven interactions (Saric & Pavlovic, 2022; Sen, 2024). Expressions such as *bruh*, *GOAT*, *spill the tea*, and *caught in 4K* illustrate how online communities continually generate and reshape language to reflect cultural practices. Beyond brevity, slang functions as a cultural resource: it expresses emotion, constructs identity, demonstrates cultural competence, and strengthens relationships (Paoleti & Mujahidah, 2025; Telaumbanua et al., 2024). To sum up, its circulation establishes shared norms that define digital communities.

TikTok as a Site of Linguistic Innovation

Among contemporary social media platforms, TikTok represents one of the most influential environments for linguistic innovation. Its short-form video format encourages rapid communication through combinations of spoken language, captions, hashtags, visual effects, music, and trends. Unlike text-based platforms where language is primarily written, TikTok integrates multiple communicative modes that collectively shape meaning. Hence, TikTok is a great place for language innovation because of its multimodal format. Its recommendation algorithm accelerates the diffusion of new expressions, enabling slang to spread faster than in traditional speech communities (Sthal & Literat, 2023; Muzani & Loftie, 2022).

Influencers play a central role in this process. Their repeated use of slang normalises expressions among followers and contributes to the creation of new linguistic practices (Duffy, 2020). While prior research has examined TikTok from educational and marketing perspectives, including its acceptance as a tool for English language learning among Malaysian university students (Eleyana Abdullah et al., 2023), few studies particularly in Malaysia's multilingual context have explored how influencers strategically employ slang to perform identity and engage audiences (Nurliyana Mohd Nor Sham et al., 2025; Mustapha & Marzuki, 2024).

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by Labov's (1972) sociolinguistic theory of variation and Eckert's (2000) language and identity framework. Labov emphasises that linguistic variation is systematic and socially meaningful, with slang functioning as patterned markers of group identity and solidarity. Key principles relevant to this study include:

- Systematic variation – slang follows recognizable patterns tied to social orders and contexts.
- Speech community norms – Malaysian Gen Z influencers and their audiences form a speech community with shared slang repertoires.
- Contextual distribution – slang appears at specific points in discourse (e.g., greetings, punchlines) to serve interactional purposes.
- Social meaning of variation – slang conveys solidarity, informality, and trend alignment, reinforcing group identity.

Eckert extended Labov's insights by emphasizing language as a resource for identity construction. Her concept of *indexicality* explains how linguistic forms “point to” social meanings, signaling stances, attitudes, or affiliations. For influencers, slang becomes a deliberate tool for projecting personas whether humorous, relatable, or authoritative. Key principles relevant to this study include:

- Indexicality – slang terms index cultural alignment and youth identity (e.g., *spill the tea* signals trend awareness).
- Style as social practice – influencers adopt slang strategically to craft digital identities and engage audiences.
- Communities of practice – TikTok influencers and followers co-create slang norms through repeated interactions and shared challenges.
- Local meaning – slang adapts to Malaysian contexts, where terms like *lah* or *walao* carry culturally specific meanings.
- Agency in language use – influencers employ slang to affiliate with or distance themselves from particular identities and groups.

Together, these frameworks provide a dual lens. Labov explains how slang operates as structured variation within speech communities, while Eckert highlights how influencers use slang as identity practice and audience engagement strategy. This combined perspective underpins the analysis of Malaysian Gen Z influencers' TikTok discourse which is analysed based on the categories of each dimension this analytical framework:

Table 1 Analytical Framework

Dimension	Category	Description	Example
Linguistic Form (Labov: linguistic variables; Eckert: lexical repertoire)	Lexical slang	Non-standard words unique to a group	<i>no cap, rizz</i>
	Abbreviations	Shortened words/phrases	<i>LOL, BRB</i>
	Acronyms	Initial letters from multi-word expressions	<i>GOAT</i>
	Code-mixing/switching	Alternating between languages/dialects	<i>Chill lah</i>

	Emoji-based slang	Emojis functioning as words	☐ = amazing
	Viral phrases/memes	Catchphrases from trends/pop culture	<i>It's giving...</i>
Social Function (Labov: social meaning of variation; Eckert: indexicality, style as practice)	Identity construction	Signals in-group membership or persona	<i>sus</i> for gaming culture
	Solidarity/rapport	Builds closeness with audience	<i>fam</i> to address viewers
	Humour/entertainment	Adds comedic value	Over-the-top <i>bruh</i>
	Trend alignment	Participates in ongoing challenge/meme	<i>gyatt</i> in a trending dance
	Emphasis/intensification	Heightens emotional impact	<i>no cap!</i>
	Evaluation/stance	Expresses judgment/opinion	<i>woke</i> in a political comment

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative descriptive content analysis to examine the linguistic forms and social functions of slang in TikTok videos produced by Malaysian Gen Z influencers. The data consisted of publicly accessible TikTok videos produced by Malaysian Gen Z influencers. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select content that was information-rich and directly relevant to the research objectives. Purposive sampling is widely used in qualitative research because it enables researchers to identify cases that best illustrate the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 2015). The sampling strategy was adopted to ensure alignment with the study's objectives, with inclusion criteria such as requiring videos to be publicly available, posted within the past 12 months, produced by Malaysian Gen Z influencers aged 18–27, containing at least one slang expression, and featuring clear audio quality for accurate transcription.

Approximately 20 to 30 videos were selected, with the range reflecting the flexibility of qualitative research where data sufficiency is determined by saturation rather than fixed numerical thresholds (Guest, Namey, & Chen, 2020). Videos were identified using TikTok's search and recommendation features, guided by hashtags and trending content associated with Malaysian Gen Z influencers. The selected videos specifically featured Malaysian Gen Z influencers who produced content that engaged with current trends, challenges, or topics relevant to their youth followers. Once identified, eligible videos were downloaded and transcribed verbatim. Captured screenshots and still frames from the videos were also recorded to provide additional context and accuracy. The transcriptions included both spoken dialogue and any captions or text on screen to capture slang in different modes. Next, a coding checklist on Excel was created to mark slang expressions and their functions.

Data analysis followed a two-stage coding procedure. The first coding involved the identification of slang expressions into their linguistic forms: lexical slang, abbreviations, acronyms, code-mixing/switching, emoji-based slang, and viral phrases/memes. Following the identification of linguistic forms, a second round of coding examined the communicative functions performed by each slang expression. Functional categories were developed through thematic analysis and informed by previous sociolinguistic research on online discourse. These categories included: identity construction, solidarity/rapport, humour/entertainment, trend alignment, emphasis/intensification, and evaluation/stance. Finally, coded data were synthesised into tables and thematic summaries, highlighting patterns in slang usage and linking them to Labov's theory of variation and Eckert's framework of identity.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

RQ1: What linguistic forms of social media slang are used by Malaysian Gen Z influencers in selected TikTok videos?

The analysis revealed four consistent linguistic forms: lexical slang, abbreviations, acronyms, and code-mixing. These were not random but patterned, reflecting Gen Z norms and Malaysian English identity.

Table 2 Linguistic Forms of Social Media Slang in Malaysian Gen Z TikTok Influencer Videos

Form	Examples	Description	Function in Context
Lexical slang	<i>Bruh, Vibes, Toxic, Flex, Baddies, Deadass</i>	Non-standard words common in Gen Z online speech	Signal Gen Z identity; casual, relatable tone
Abbreviations	<i>Uni, Unc, CV</i>	Shortened forms of common words	Efficiency; playful teasing
Acronyms	<i>GOAT, RIP, NPC, GTA</i>	Condensed cultural references	Quick recognition; meme culture
Code-mixing	Macam macam food, <i>Nice ah, Boring lah, Kids nowadays lah</i>	English + Malay particles (<i>lah, ah</i>)	Local identity; solidarity; humour

Table 2 shows the findings for linguistic functions of slang follows clear patterns and appears in several main forms: lexical slang, abbreviations, acronyms, code-mixing, emoji-based slang, and viral phrases or memes. These patterns align with Labov's (1972) view that language variation is systematic rather than random, reflecting shared norms within a speech community. On TikTok, Malaysian Gen Z influencers and their followers function as a digital speech community where certain slang terms are anticipated, understood, and repeated.

The frequent use of terms such as *bruh*, *vibes*, *toxic*, and *flex* demonstrate the global nature of Gen Z online culture, as similar expressions have been documented in youth language studies across different countries (Paoleti & Mujahidah, 2025; Stahl & Literat, 2023). At the same time, code-mixing with particles like *lah*, *ah*, and *meh* illustrates how global slang is adapted to local contexts. This reflects Eckert's (2000) concept of indexicality, where language choices convey social meaning by simultaneously signalling participation in global youth culture and affirming Malaysian identity. Influencers therefore do not simply replicate global slang but reshape it to fit local speech practices and cultural dynamics.

RQ2: What social functions do these slang expressions perform in selected TikTok videos?

The findings revealed slang served multiple social functions beyond shaping linguistic styles, including identity construction, solidarity, humour, trend alignment, emphasis, and evaluation.

Table 3 Social Functions of Social Media Slang in Malaysian Gen Z TikTok Influencer Videos

Function	Examples	Description	Impact on Audience
Identity construction	<i>Bruh/bro, Deadass, Vibing, Lah, bestie, POV</i>	Projects youthful, authentic, and locally grounded identity; frames relatable scenarios	Reduces social distance; enhances relatability and cultural resonance
Solidarity & rapport	<i>Bro, Pookie, Cutie Patootie</i>	Builds warmth and peer-level interaction	Strengthens parasocial bonds

Humour & entertainment	<i>Caught in 4K, RIP, Unc, Walao</i>	Playful exaggeration; meme references	Keeps content engaging and entertaining
Trend alignment	<i>Baddies, Spill the tea, Aura, Flex</i>	Signals awareness of viral slang	Enhances relevance in algorithmic culture
Emphasis/intensification	<i>Fire, Slaps, Siot, Damn</i>	Strengthens emotional impact	Expresses strong stance quickly
Evaluation & stance	<i>Toxic, Red flag, Facts, Terror</i>	Quick judgements and attitudes	Positions influencer's opinion clearly

Table 3 illustrates the findings for social functions of slang in TikTok videos. The results indicate that slang is a central tool for online identity performance. Influencers use slang to construct relatable Gen Z personas, foster closeness with followers, provide humour, and maintain relevance by aligning with trends. This supports Eckert's (2000) view of style as social practice, where individuals actively employ language to present particular identities. Slang thus becomes a resource for influencers to express authenticity and relatability, strengthening parasocial bonds with audiences.

First, identity construction terms like *bruh/bro*, *deadass*, *vibing*, *bestie*, *POV*, and *lah* project authenticity and relatability while affirming Malaysian identity. These expressions reduced social distance and made influencers appear relatable, aligning with Eckert's (2000) view of style as social practice. Second, Solidarity & rapport terms such as *bro*, *pookie*, and *cutie patootie* build warmth and inclusivity, strengthening parasocial bonds. This supports Telaumbanua et al. (2024), who argue that Gen Z relies on informal communication to sustain social connections. Third, Humour & entertainment expressions like *caught in 4K*, *RIP*, and *walao* rely on shared meme culture to amuse audiences, which is consistent with Mehmood & Nazir (2024), who found that slang enhances audience engagement by making content entertaining. Next, trend alignment terms like *baddies* and *spill the tea* signal cultural awareness and algorithmic relevance. By adopting these expressions, influencers demonstrated cultural competence and algorithmic relevance, echoing Stahl & Literat (2023) on how trendy language boosts visibility on TikTok. Finally, Emphasis/intensification slang (*fire*, *slaps*, *siot*) heightens emotional impact, and evaluation & stance terms (*toxic*, *red flag*, *facts*) allow influencers to position their opinions quickly and clearly.

Importantly, the analysis included an "Impact on Audience" dimension to highlight how slang functions socially, not just linguistically. This addition moves the study beyond cataloguing slang forms to demonstrating their communicative significance. By showing how expressions reduce social distance, build rapport, entertain, or signal trend awareness, the findings reveal the social outcomes of language choices. This approach connects directly to Labov's (1972) principle of patterned variation and Eckert's (2000) concept of style as social practice, while clarifying how slang contributes to audience engagement, identity construction, and cultural localisation in Malaysian Gen Z TikTok discourse.

Overall, the findings show that slang is more than informal language: it is a multifunctional communicative tool. It enables identity construction, humour, trend participation, and emotional expression, illustrating how digital language practices are integral to everyday interactions and online culture.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that Malaysian Gen Z influencers on TikTok employ slang in patterned and purposeful ways. Linguistically, slang appears in identifiable categories such as lexical slang, abbreviations, acronyms, code-mixing, emoji-based slang, and viral phrases/memes. These forms are not random but reflect shared norms within a digital speech community, consistent with Labov's (1972) principle of systematic variation. Socially, slang fulfills multiple functions: identity construction, solidarity & rapport, humour & entertainment, trend alignment, emphasis/intensification, and evaluation & stance. These functions illustrate how slang is strategically mobilised to build community, entertain audiences, and maintain relevance in TikTok's algorithmic culture. Together, the findings confirm Eckert's (2000) view of style as social practice, showing that influencers use slang not only to communicate but to actively perform identity and cultivate audience

engagement. Overall, slang emerges as a multifunctional communicative resource that bridges global Gen Z discourse with local Malaysian identity, reinforcing the hybrid nature of digital language practices.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research should expand on these findings by examining slang use across different platforms such as Instagram Reels or YouTube Shorts to determine whether TikTok's affordances uniquely shape linguistic practices. Studies could also focus on audience reception, exploring how followers interpret and respond to slang in building parasocial relationships. A longitudinal approach would be valuable to trace how slang evolves, fades, or becomes mainstream over time, while comparative sociolinguistic studies across Southeast Asia could highlight regional similarities and differences in the localisation of global youth culture. Additionally, incorporating a multimodal perspective including emojis, gestures, and visual filters would deepen understanding of how meaning is constructed in short-form video. Finally, future work should investigate the role of TikTok's algorithm in amplifying certain slang terms, clarifying the relationship between platform design and linguistic diffusion.

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