

Trends in Teenagers' Language Use on TikTok: A Systematic Literature Review Comparing Malaysia and the United States

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ABSTRACT

TikTok has rapidly evolved into a dominant communication platform among teenagers, enabling unique forms of language play, identity display, and social interaction. This systematic literature review compares linguistic trends among Malaysian and American adolescents aged 13–19 on TikTok, focusing on slang and viral expressions, code-mixing and translanguaging practices, identity construction, and language–culture relations. Guided by PRISMA 2020, a comprehensive search was conducted across Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, LLBA and Google Scholar, covering studies published between 2020 and 2025. Twenty-nine peer-reviewed publications met the inclusion criteria. Thematic synthesis reveals that (i) American teenagers drive global slang innovation shaped by pop culture, African American Vernacular English (AAVE), and fandom discourse; (ii) Malaysian teenagers engage in extensive creative code-mixing between English, Malay, and local vernaculars to perform humour, solidarity, and online persona; (iii) TikTok's multimodal affordances encourage linguistic hybridisation, enabling young users to construct cultural identity and navigate peer norms; and (iv) digital trends increasingly influence offline youth communication in both countries. The review highlights significant gaps in longitudinal data, Southeast Asian representation, AI-mediated captions, and ethical considerations in researching minors on social media. Implications emphasise the need for culturally responsive digital language policies in Malaysian education to recognise youth multimodal repertoires. Future research should include computational linguistic analysis and cross-regional comparison of youth TikTok communication practices.

Keywords: TikTok; teenagers; youth language; Malaysia; United States; slang; code-mixing; identity; digital communication; PRISMA 2020

INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

Introduction

The rapid expansion of social media has reshaped how teenagers communicate, construct identity, and participate in digital communities globally (Abidin & Kaye, 2023; Chen, 2024). Among the platforms dominating youth culture, TikTok stands out as an influential multimodal space where meaning making, linguistic creativity, and peer interaction occur through short-form videos, captions, filters, voiceovers, and comment features (Montag et al., 2021; Liao, 2023). Teenagers, typically aged between 13 and 19, are the most active contributors to this evolving linguistic ecosystem, often driving viral trends that influence both online and offline communication. In Malaysia and the United States, TikTok functions as a site where language intersects with popular culture, humour, and social belonging, allowing adolescents to negotiate identity and express creativity in public yet personalised ways (Marx & Tulloch, 2022; Rahim & Harun, 2023). While US-based youth communication commonly draws from African American Vernacular English (AAVE), internet slang, and fandom cultures (Kytölä, 2022), Malaysian youth discourse reflects multilingual patterns including Malay–English code-mixing, translanguaging with Mandarin and Tamil influences, and regionally specific vernaculars (Aziz et al., 2023).

Despite a growing volume of research on digital communication, academic understanding of linguistic patterns specific to TikTok teenagers remains fragmented. Most studies focus on content analysis, psychological effects, or platform behaviours, with less emphasis on linguistic trends shaped by multimodal interaction and algorithmic dissemination (Medina Serrano et al., 2022; Zhu et al., 2024). Comparative research between Global North and Global South contexts including Malaysia versus the United States remains especially limited. Therefore, this systematic literature review seeks to synthesise emerging evidence on youth TikTok language in both countries to answer the following research questions:

1. What linguistic features characterise teenagers' language use on TikTok in Malaysia and the United States?
2. How do teenagers use language to construct social identity and cultural belonging on TikTok?
3. What socio-cultural and technological forces drive language trends in these two contexts?
4. What gaps remain in current scholarship on youth language practices on TikTok?

By comparing two contrasting yet highly engaged TikTok populations, this review contributes to sociolinguistic literature by demonstrating how local cultural norms intersect with global digital discourse, while offering implications for educators, policymakers, and researchers in both regions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

TikTok's structure encourages short, creative, and fast-paced communication that relies heavily on the integration of gesture, sound, and written text, resulting in what scholars describe as multimodal discourse (Zulli & Zulli, 2022). Within this environment, meaning is not conveyed through language alone but through the orchestration of multiple semiotic resources that work together to produce layered interpretations. For instance, captions and on-screen text often function as anchoring devices that clarify or reframe visual content, while audio memes, background sounds, and lip-syncing practices contribute emotional and contextual depth. Emojis, filters, and visual effects further enhance expressive potential by allowing users to signal tone, irony, or stance in ways that traditional text-based communication cannot fully capture. In addition, hashtag-driven participation connects individual videos to broader participatory cultures, enabling users to engage in shared trends and collective meaning-making processes.

These multimodal tools collectively enable a form of performative language use that blends verbal, visual, and auditory semiotics in dynamic ways. Teenagers, in particular, play a fundamental role in driving language change and online slang innovation, as they actively experiment with linguistic forms and rapidly circulate new expressions across digital networks (Tagg & Seargeant, 2023). This constant innovation is accelerated by TikTok's algorithmic amplification of viral content, which rewards novelty, creativity, and emotional resonance, thereby reinforcing the rapid diffusion and decay of slang expressions. In this sense, youth linguistic practices are not only reflective of existing trends but are also generative, contributing to the continuous evolution of digital vernaculars.

In the Malaysian context, teenagers demonstrate a particularly creative engagement with English slang, often localising it through code-mixing and translanguaging practices that incorporate elements of Malay, English, and other linguistic resources. This process reflects both linguistic flexibility and cultural adaptation, where global slang forms are recontextualised within local communicative norms. Such adaptations often carry pragmatic and affective functions, allowing users to express humour, solidarity, and identity positioning within peer groups. This localisation process further demonstrates how global digital language practices are reshaped through local linguistic ecologies, resulting in hybrid forms that are both globally recognisable and locally meaningful.

TikTok's comment sections also function as dynamic conversational arenas, where teenagers actively negotiate meaning, humour, and social approval in real time (Yildiz, 2024). These spaces extend beyond passive commentary, functioning instead as interactive micro-discourse communities in which users co-construct interpretations of videos, respond to emerging jokes, and reinforce or challenge social norms. The immediacy of

comment interactions allows for rapid feedback loops that further shape linguistic creativity and community belonging. Within these interactions, linguistic hybridity becomes a key resource for identity performance, enabling users to position themselves socially while simultaneously aligning with peer-group expectations.

This linguistic hybridity reinforces cultural identity and peer belonging, particularly among multilingual youth who draw on multiple linguistic repertoires to navigate digital spaces. Research highlights that TikTok not only reflects existing bilingual practices but also intensifies creative mixing as teenagers perform different identities across contexts (Siti Nur Alia & Yunus, 2023; Jiang, 2024). Such identity performances are often fluid and context-dependent, with users shifting between linguistic codes to index humour, authenticity, modernity, or cultural affiliation. In this way, TikTok becomes a site of identity experimentation where language choice is closely tied to social meaning-making.

Comparatively, among US youth, code-mixing between English and Spanish or other heritage languages is increasingly visible, reflecting the multilingual realities of many communities (Martínez & Lewis, 2024). However, while bilingual and multilingual practices exist, code-mixing is often less central in US TikTok discourse compared to Malaysian contexts, where multilingualism is more structurally embedded in everyday communication. Instead, US TikTok language practices tend to emphasise stylistic variation within English, including African American Vernacular English (AAVE)-influenced slang, internet neologisms, and rapidly circulating meme-based expressions. These differences highlight how linguistic innovation is shaped by distinct sociolinguistic environments.

Youth slang on TikTok is generally fast-cycling, performative, and highly trend-driven, with expressions gaining popularity quickly before being replaced by newer forms (Tagg & Seargeant, 2023). The United States, in particular, plays a dominant role in global slang production due to the influence of its pop culture industries, including music, film, celebrity culture, and influencer economies. As a result, many viral expressions originate from US-based content creators before being adopted and adapted by global audiences, including Malaysian users, who reinterpret them within local cultural frameworks.

At the same time, Malaysian studies reveal stronger cultural norm regulation that shapes linguistic expression on TikTok. Values such as modesty, respect for authority, and Islamic cultural principles influence what forms of language use are considered appropriate or publicly acceptable (Rahim & Harun, 2023). These sociocultural constraints do not limit linguistic creativity but rather guide it into culturally aligned forms, often resulting in more indirect humour, euphemistic expression, and context-sensitive language choices.

In contrast, the US context tends to reflect more individualistic identity expression, with greater openness toward politically explicit, socially critical, and ideologically charged discourse (Marx & Tulloch, 2022). TikTok thus becomes a platform where identity is not only performed but also publicly negotiated through visible stance-taking on social and political issues. While both contexts utilise TikTok for identity expression, the thematic orientation differs significantly, with US youth more likely to engage in political commentary and activism-oriented content, whereas Malaysian teens tend to prioritise entertainment, humour, and social bonding (Rahim & Harun, 2023). These differences underscore the importance of cultural context in shaping how multimodal and linguistic resources are mobilised within digital environments.

METHODOLOGY

This systematic literature review followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020) guidelines (Page et al., 2021), ensuring that the review process was comprehensive, transparent, and replicable. The use of PRISMA provided a structured framework for identifying, screening, and selecting relevant studies in a consistent manner, thereby enhancing the reliability of the review findings.

Databases Searched

To ensure interdisciplinary coverage across linguistics, communication, and digital media studies, a systematic search was conducted across multiple academic databases. These included Scopus, Web of Science (WoS), ERIC, and the Linguistics and Language Behaviour Abstracts (LLBA). In addition, Google Scholar was used as

a secondary source to support backward citation tracking and identify potentially relevant studies that may not have been indexed in the primary databases. A manual snowballing strategy was also employed to trace additional articles from reference lists and citation networks, ensuring that no significant studies were overlooked.

Search String Strategy

The search strategy was developed using Boolean operators adapted to the syntax requirements of each database. The core search string combined platform-related terms with population, linguistic focus, and geographical scope as follows: (“TikTok” OR “Douyin”) AND (teen* OR adolescen* OR youth) AND (language OR discourse OR slang OR “code-mixing” OR “translanguaging” OR “multimodal” OR “identity construction”) AND (“Malaysia” OR “United States” OR “USA” OR “American”). The search was further refined using filters that limited the timeline to publications between 2020 and 2025, restricted the language to English, and included only peer-reviewed journal articles and conference proceedings.

Eligibility Criteria

Eligibility criteria were established to ensure the relevance and quality of the included studies. The population of interest was teenagers aged between 13 and 19 years, while studies focusing on adults or children outside this age range were excluded. Only studies examining TikTok or Douyin as the primary or clearly linked platform were included, while those focusing on other social media platforms without a TikTok connection were excluded. The review specifically focused on linguistic practices; therefore, studies centred solely on psychological aspects without any language-related analysis were excluded. Geographically, the review included studies conducted in Malaysia and/or the United States, while studies from other countries were excluded unless they offered direct comparative relevance. Only full-text, peer-reviewed publications were included, whereas abstract-only records and non-scholarly sources such as magazines and social commentary were excluded.

Screening Procedure

The screening process was conducted in two stages. The first stage involved title and abstract screening to identify potentially relevant studies, followed by a full-text screening phase to confirm eligibility based on the predefined criteria. Duplicate records identified during the search process were removed using Mendeley reference management software. This systematic screening ensured that only studies meeting all inclusion criteria were retained for final analysis.

Quality Appraisal

The methodological quality of the included studies was assessed using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT), which allows for the evaluation of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods research designs within a unified framework. Each study was assessed and assigned a trustworthiness rating of low, moderate, or high based on its methodological rigour. This appraisal process ensured that the synthesis was grounded in studies of acceptable quality and reduced the risk of bias in the overall findings.

Data Extraction Protocol

A structured data extraction protocol was used to systematically collect relevant information from each included study. The extracted data included author(s) and year of publication, country of study, research design, and participant characteristics. In addition, key linguistic focuses such as slang usage, code-mixing, translanguaging, identity construction, and cultural expression were recorded. Platform-specific features analysed in the studies, including captions, comments, and multimodal content, were also extracted, along with key findings and their relevance to the research questions. A comparative matrix was subsequently developed to facilitate synthesis and enable systematic comparison of similarities and differences between Malaysia and the United States.

Inter-rater Reliability

To ensure consistency and reduce subjectivity in the screening and coding process, inter-rater reliability was

established. A second trained coder independently reviewed 20% of the randomly selected studies, including both screening decisions and thematic coding structures. The level of agreement between coders was measured using Cohen's Kappa, which yielded a value of $\kappa = 0.86$, indicating strong inter-rater reliability and a high level of consistency in the evaluation process.

RESULTS AND THEMATIC FINDINGS

A total of 29 studies were synthesised, comprising 12 studies from Malaysia and 17 from the United States. The analysis revealed six major thematic patterns that characterise teenagers' linguistic behaviour on TikTok. These themes demonstrate the complex interplay between culture, technology, identity, and social interaction in shaping youth language practices across both contexts.

Theme 1: Slang and Viral Expression Cycles

The findings indicate that TikTok's highly dynamic and fast-paced environment accelerates both the creation and abandonment of slang expressions among teenagers. In both Malaysia and the United States, adolescents employ slang to appear current, humorous, and socially connected. However, the sociolinguistic functions of slang differ across cultural contexts. Malaysian teenagers frequently use expressions such as "Slay gila weh" and "Cun habis lah beb," which combine global internet slang with local linguistic markers. In contrast, American teenagers commonly use phrases such as "She ate, no crumbs left" and "Be so for real rn," many of which originate from African American Vernacular English (AAVE). The analysis suggests that American slang often indexes confidence, assertiveness, and trend awareness, whereas Malaysian slang tends to convey humour, friendliness, and humility. Furthermore, while AAVE functions as a significant source of trend-setting linguistic innovation on TikTok, Malaysian youth frequently localise these global expressions through the incorporation of discourse particles such as *weh*, *lah*, and *ah*, which soften the tone and maintain cultural norms of interpersonal harmony. These findings illustrate how youth linguistic identity is simultaneously shaped by participation in global digital cultures and adherence to local cultural expectations.

Theme 2: Translanguaging and Code-Mixing as Everyday Practice

The synthesis revealed that translanguaging and code-mixing are integral features of youth communication on TikTok, particularly among Malaysian teenagers. In Malaysia, linguistic hybridity appears to be a normalised communicative practice, with users seamlessly blending English, Malay, emojis, and internet slang within a single utterance. For example, captions such as "Weh bestie, video ni slay habis weh" demonstrate the fluid integration of multiple linguistic resources to express solidarity, informality, and emotional engagement. By contrast, code-mixing in the United States is more commonly associated with specific ethnic communities, particularly Latinx youth, who frequently alternate between English and Spanish, as illustrated by expressions such as "Bruh estoy cansada fr." While the sociolinguistic motivations differ, both contexts demonstrate how young people exercise linguistic agency by challenging rigid language boundaries and adapting language to suit diverse communicative needs. The findings suggest that translanguaging serves not only as a communicative strategy but also as a marker of identity and belonging.

Theme 3: Identity Construction and Persona Performance

TikTok functions as a platform for identity construction, enabling teenagers to curate and perform digital personas through language use. The review indicates notable differences between Malaysian and American youth in their approaches to self-presentation. Malaysian teenagers tend to prioritise modesty, relatability, and socially appropriate behaviour, reflecting broader cultural expectations regarding respectability and communal harmony. Conversely, American teenagers are more likely to adopt confident, attention-seeking, and highly individualised online personas. Concepts such as "Main Character Energy" have become symbolic of social visibility and popularity among American youth, whereas Malaysian users often seek to achieve a form of socially acceptable coolness that balances trend participation with cultural expectations. The findings further suggest that stronger familial and community influences in Malaysia contribute to greater linguistic self-regulation and sensitivity to social judgment. Consequently, identity performance on TikTok reflects not only personal expression but also culturally specific understandings of acceptable behaviour.

Theme 4: Politeness, Moral Norms, and Social Surveillance

The analysis revealed that TikTok discourse frequently reflects underlying cultural values regarding politeness, morality, and social accountability. In Malaysia, user interactions often include advice, criticism, or reminders about socially acceptable behaviour. Comments such as “Jangan over sangat, malu dekat mak ayah nanti” exemplify indirect forms of social regulation that emphasise family reputation, modesty, and interpersonal harmony. In contrast, American teenagers frequently engage in “roast culture,” where playful teasing and direct criticism are interpreted as forms of humour and social bonding. Comments such as “Girl your hair be fighting for its life 🏠” illustrate a communication style that values directness, wit, and confidence. These patterns demonstrate how online discourse mirrors offline cultural ideologies, with Malaysian communication tending towards indirectness and relational harmony, while American communication often embraces directness and performative humour.

Theme 5: Algorithmic Visibility and Linguistic Inequality

Another significant finding concerns the role of TikTok’s recommendation algorithm in shaping linguistic visibility and influence. The analysis suggests that English-language content enjoys substantial advantages in terms of global reach and engagement, creating structural inequalities for creators who primarily use Malay or other heritage languages. Videos produced entirely in local languages often receive lower visibility and may be perceived as less trendy within global digital cultures. Conversely, English-language content generated predominantly by American creators frequently gains wider circulation and contributes disproportionately to the formation of global linguistic trends. As a result, many Malaysian creators strategically incorporate English captions, hashtags, and keywords such as #fyp, #viral, and #slay to overcome visibility barriers. These practices highlight the existence of algorithmic sociolinguistic inequality, whereby platform design indirectly privileges certain languages and linguistic identities over others.

Theme 6: Offline Diffusion and Language Change

The final theme concerns the diffusion of TikTok language beyond the digital sphere into everyday communication. Across both national contexts, evidence suggests that TikTok slang and communicative styles increasingly influence offline interactions among young people. In Malaysia, expressions such as “cringe,” “bestie,” and “slay” have become common in everyday conversations, often adapted to local linguistic norms. Similarly, educators and parents report shifts in pronunciation, vocabulary choices, and communicative styles influenced by popular content creators. In the United States, slang originating from AAVE and TikTok communities has become integrated into broader youth vernacular, with students frequently adopting online personas and speech patterns in face-to-face interactions. These findings indicate a significant shift in the direction of linguistic influence. Whereas language change was traditionally transmitted through family, school, and peer groups, contemporary youth increasingly acquire and disseminate linguistic innovations through digital platforms. The emerging pattern may therefore be characterised as a movement from peer networks to digital platforms and subsequently into educational and social settings, highlighting TikTok’s growing role as a powerful agent of language change.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this review demonstrate that TikTok has transformed teenage language practices in both Malaysia and the United States by functioning as a dynamic site of multimodal, algorithmically mediated discourse. While slang innovation, identity performance, and playful linguistic creativity are universal characteristics, the underlying cultural logics and power structures shaping these practices diverge substantially.

First, the review affirms that U.S.-based youth discourse is heavily influenced by African American Vernacular English (AAVE), which has historically served as a symbol of resistance and cultural identity (Baker-Bell, 2020). TikTok amplifies these styles through algorithmic circulation, turning linguistic forms originating in marginalised communities into global digital capital (Kytölä, 2022). Malaysian teenagers participate in this global trend economy but tend to adopt English- and AAVE-influenced slang through localisation, integrating Malay pragmatic particles (weh, lah, kan) that soften stance-taking and index sociocultural humility (Aziz et al.,

2023). This dual linguistic orientation illustrates glocalised language flows, whereby global prestige styles are reterritorialised within local norms (Blommaert, 2010).

Second, translanguaging practices among Malaysian youth reflect agentive multilingual identity construction, challenging the legitimacy of monolingual ideologies by positioning hybrid repertoires as authentic and socially meaningful (García & Li, 2014). In contrast, U.S. code-mixing is more tied to ethnic belonging, especially among Latinx teens (Martínez & Lewis, 2024), evidencing the continued sociopolitical salience of race in American linguistic identity. These differences reinforce that digital multilingualism does not operate as a universal practice but is contextually mediated by cultural histories of language and power.

Third, cultural norms influence how teenagers negotiate visibility and evaluation on TikTok. U.S. teens often embrace main-character performance, a stance of irony, self-confidence, and competitive individuality (Abidin & Kaye, 2023). Conversely, Malaysian youth discourse reflects relational sensitivity and moral accountability under community gaze, aligning with culturally embedded expectations of modesty and respect (*jaga adab*) (Rahim & Harun, 2023). Thus, online identity does not displace offline cultural values but rather extends them into new participation frameworks.

Crucially, the review highlights that algorithmic infrastructures shape linguistic prestige. TikTok's recommendation system disproportionately benefits English and U.S.-origin content (Medina Serrano et al., 2022; Zhu et al., 2024), reinforcing pre-existing linguistic inequalities. This phenomenon demonstrates the emergence of algorithmic sociolinguistic hierarchies, where visibility and by extension, legitimacy, is mediated not solely by community endorsement but by computational systems prioritising certain linguistic forms. Linguistic power is therefore redistributed from educational institutions to platform governance, positioning teenagers as primary arbiters of linguistic change.

Finally, TikTok discourse demonstrates increasing offline spillover effects, with teachers and researchers observing changing slang repertoires and communication norms among students in both contexts. Such digital-to-offline language flow suggests that TikTok is not merely a youth entertainment platform but a linguistic accelerator reshaping communicative norms in society. Taken together, these findings contribute new insight into the intersection of technology, culture, and youth sociolinguistics, arguing that analyses of digital language must centre algorithmic influence, glocal diffusion processes, and culturally grounded identity politics. The review underscores that TikTok is a glocal sociolinguistic ecosystem in which teenagers negotiate linguistic agency amid shifting power dynamics.

CONCLUSION

This systematic review has demonstrated that TikTok is a transformative sociolinguistic arena where teenagers in Malaysia and the United States actively shape, negotiate, and redistribute linguistic norms. While both contexts share rapid slang innovation, multimodal creativity, and the use of discourse for identity performance, the underlying motivations and sociocultural structures that frame linguistic choices vary considerably.

Malaysian adolescents adopt a glocalised linguistic repertoire, creatively blending global digital vernaculars with Malay pragmatic markers to maintain cultural appropriateness, relational harmony, and a collective sense of belonging. In contrast, U.S. teenagers leverage digital discourse as a means of self-branding, irony-based performance, and competitive visibility, supported by the algorithmic promotion of AAVE-driven slang as global prestige language. These findings emphasise that youth linguistic agency is simultaneously shaped by local cultural expectations and platform-level governance, illustrating the emergence of algorithmically mediated sociolinguistic hierarchies in the digital era.

Crucially, this review reveals that TikTok is not only a reflection of youth communication but also a driver of language change, with digital expressions increasingly permeating offline educational and social spaces. As such, educators and policymakers—especially in multilingual contexts such as Malaysia—should recognise and incorporate youth multimodal repertoires into language pedagogy and digital literacy initiatives. Empowering students to critically navigate global linguistic trends while valuing local identity practices is essential to sustaining cultural resilience.

Overall, the review advances theoretical understanding of youth digital discourse by foregrounding the role of algorithmic power, glocalised diffusion, and cultural normativity. TikTok provides a pivotal environment where adolescents assert linguistic creativity and claim space in the evolving landscape of global communication. Continued research, informed by ethical and culturally grounded approaches, is vital to further illuminate how young people construct meaning, belonging, and identity in a platform-governed world.

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