

Exploring Slang Dynamics and Semantic Shifts in Digital Communication: A Study of Generation Z on TikTok

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ABSTRACT

In the evolving digital communication landscape, slang has become a dominant linguistic tool among Generation Z, particularly on digital platforms such as TikTok. However, the semantic shifts and sociocultural motivations behind slang usage remain underexplored, primarily through established linguistic frameworks. This study aims to identify the types of slang used by Generation Z in selected TikTok videos, analyse the semantic changes occurring within these slang expressions, and determine the sociocultural factors influencing their usage. The research adopts a qualitative methodology, analysing seven high-engagement TikTok videos themed around Generation Z marketing style and ten semi-structured interviews with Malaysian Generation Z TikTok users aged 24–26. The findings reveal that the most common slang types used are fresh and creative, flippant, clipping, imitative, and acronyms. Regarding semantic change, metaphor was the most frequently observed process, followed by generalization of meaning, specialization of meaning, metonymy, and synecdoche. Interview data showed that slang fosters relatability, expresses emotions, asserts identity, and communicates efficiently in casual contexts. These findings highlight TikTok as a linguistic and cultural space where semantic innovation thrives. The study offers significant implications for language educators, content creators, and sociolinguistic researchers by demonstrating how slang reflects digital identity, cultural values, and communicative adaptation in the Generation Z community.

Keywords: digital platforms, semantic shifts, slang

INTRODUCTION

In today's digitally driven society, language is quickly changing, with slang emerging as a defining feature of online communication, especially among Generation Z. Social media platforms provide the primary spaces where language inventiveness thrives, shaping not only how young people interact but also how they construct identity and foster belonging. Among these platforms, TikTok has distinguished itself as a central hub of linguistic innovation, driven by its brief-format, visually engaging, and intensely engaging content. The speed at which trends and expressions spread across TikTok underscores the platform's capacity to influence language conventions and reshape everyday communication patterns. TikTok enables and fosters users to respond succinctly, creatively, and comedically (Hu, 2024). These features promote the development of unique slang, particularly among Generation Z (Gen Z), the group most active on the worldwide platform. TikTok's widespread nature, where users remix and parody existing content, increases the rapid adoption and spread of new linguistic creativity trends (Hautea et al., 2021).

Gen Z refers to individuals born between 1996 and 2012 and is regarded as part of the digital-native generation (Din et al., 2022). Gen Z is the generation that drives remarkable linguistic innovation on social media platforms such as TikTok, with 98% of Gen Z having continuous access to the internet and 99% owning smartphones (Ahmed, 2019). They are a generation that has grown up in a world fully integrated with the Internet, where technology shapes their routines and behaviours, making the Internet an essential tool in their daily lives (Cervi, 2021). Hence, their active engagement and participation in digital platforms, particularly TikTok, have positioned Gen Z as the main driver for the constant evolution of language, especially slang.

This language evolution is shaped by the widespread use of TikTok and the platform's unique ability to promote linguistic creativity. Beyond its entertainment value, content creators are encouraged to create new words, meanings, and expressions, often reflecting their social identities and cultural trends (Karpova & Borymska, 2022). These linguistic innovations are rapidly amplified through TikTok's algorithm-driven content discovery, which creates a dynamic space where slang terms gain visibility and adoption at an unprecedented rate (Maghfira & Pratiwi, 2022). Moreover, slang terms that are localised on TikTok, such as "*wasabi*" (WhatsApp application) and "*cincot*" (the act of taking a screenshot), are widely used, especially by seller accounts. The sellers modified and adopted the terms due to TikTok's strict control, which prohibits mentioning other brands or platforms because their accounts might be at risk of being banned (Schaefer, 2024). Therefore, these variations of localised TikTok slang exhibit how rapidly and easily new slang can be created in response to the platform's rules and social dynamics.

While slang words have been an important element of everyday communication, the universal nature of TikTok has also increased its influence by developing a cross-cultural language innovation. With multiple users from diverse cultural backgrounds blending cultural influences to produce a hybrid language, it reflects the value of sharing a global community (Zeng et al., 2021). Geographical or cultural borders do not limit these slang terms; they collectively represent Gen Z's identity on social media. Given the high impact of TikTok on the current generation's communication styles, this study aims to identify the nature of slang words used by Gen Z, the semantic changes of the slang words, and the reasons why they are used. This paper also shows the role of sociolinguistics in the growth and diversification of language on the TikTok platform. It helps individuals to understand better and appreciate the role of technology and culture in aligning with the digital communication trends for the young generation.

Although the role of online slang in creating group identity and enabling communication has been previously studied (Barrot, 2021; Hafner & Pun, 2020), little attention has been paid to the linguistic changes that slang terms experience and the reasons why they are used. The performative and visual nature of TikTok is scarcely explored, with most of the previous research being dedicated to text-based social networks, including WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram (Bahri et al., 2023; Chaudhuri & Sarkar, 2020; Indra & Marhamah, 2024; Jeresano & Carretero, 2022; Rosvita et al., 2024). In addition, the studies regarding the use of English slang in TikTok have not addressed the broader sociocultural implications of the slang dynamic, particularly on how Gen Z uses the slang in various cultural and sociolinguistic settings (Yuniar, 2022; Yuniar et al., 2023). Furthermore, although some research has already been conducted to analyse the nature and frequency of slang use on TikTok (Mackey, 2023; Syafa'ah & Haryanto, 2023), there is no comprehensive study of how online slang terms are transforming in digital communication. Thus, it is critical to explore this gap to identify the relationship between youth communication and linguistic transformation. Exploring the development and reasons behind online slang usage in digital communication will give people a clearer idea and picture of how social media applications could shape one's identity, personality, and cultural expression in real time.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reveals the selected theoretical frameworks that fulfil the research objectives and provides a rich interpretation of the study findings.

Types of Slang Words:

Fresh and Creative, Flippant, Imitative, Acronym, and Clipping Allan and Burridge (2006) define slang as an informal and playful language typically used by a specific group of people or in an informal context. They categorise slang into five classes: Fresh and Creative, Flippant, Imitative, Acronym, and Clipping. These varieties derive from their particular social and linguistic functions and apply to the study of slang, where humour and brevity are the dominant values of communication. The first research objective was informed by this systematic framework in recognising the patterns and types of slang that were utilised in the selected TikTok Gen Z marketing videos.

Fresh and Creative slang is the emergence of new words or innovative wordplay, which may be a revival of unknown old words or the creation of new ones. For example, slang terms "dope", "buddy", and "fella" are

identified as fresh and creative slang (Sulaiman & Syafitri, 2022). This class can be observed in the TikTok context, such as “delulu” and “bed rotting” (Jose et al., 2025). The slang is psycholinguistic (how language influences cognitive behaviour and communication preference). It is convenient for Gen Z to show their newness and novelty, as their culture appreciates originality and humour.

Next, flippant slang is informal language that is sarcastic and metaphorical. In general communication, this kind of language is expressed by terms such as “third wheel” and “ride or die” (Yulia & Ningsih, 2024). On TikTok, slang terms like “rat phase” or the cynical phrase “keyboard warriors” are used ironically and socially to comment on the situation (Jaya et al., 2025). From a sociolinguistic perspective, these flippant slangs represent Gen Z's performative and scornful identity through indirect humour and roasting culture.

On the other hand, imitative slang is the altered forms of standard words used in new social surroundings, such as “weirdos”, “peeps”, and “sweetie” (Sulaiman & Syafitri, 2022). The term “sheesh” can be classified as imitative in the TikTok context as it is built on an existing interjection that has been recontextualised (Nadeem & Shahzad, 2025). Although “sheesh” is initially used to express irritation or incredulity, Gen Z has redefined its meaning to show admiration or emphasis through overpronouncing it and making exaggerated gestures. This shift demonstrates the creative adaptation of ordinary expressions to the new digital and social environments.

Acronym slang is a type of slang that is composed of abbreviations and phrases extracted from the first letters. For example, DUI (Driving Under the Influence) (Manurung et al., 2020), and TikTok acronyms, such as IJK (I Just Know) (Nadeem & Shahzad, 2025). The short-form video format of TikTok lends itself to these particularly appropriate acronyms and allows one to communicate efficiently and concisely. The short-form video format of TikTok enables these particularly appropriate acronyms and allows one to communicate efficiently and concisely.

The last type in the typology proposed by Allan and Burridge (2006) is clipping, which entails shortening longer words frequently used in both spoken and digital slang. This tendency toward quick, casual, and catchy language can be seen in examples like “comfy” (based on comfortable) (Sulaiman & Syafitri, 2022) and “eepy” (based on sleepy) (Jaya et al., 2025). Such shortened words are suitable in TikTok, where succinct and quick communication is required. This slang type is simple, which enhances readability and memorability, making it suitable for use in captions, comments, and audio-based trends.

Semantic Change Typology: Metaphor, Metonymy, Synecdoche, Specialisation of Meaning, Generalisation of Meaning

The development and expansion of the meaning of words, or semantic change, is often caused by technological advancements and changing social surroundings. Semantic change occurs more rapidly in the digital age, particularly within the dynamic environment of platforms like TikTok. Gen Z and other users often recontextualise, repurpose, and reinterpret words and expressions creatively and unpredictably. The Semantic Change Typology by Blank (1999) is one of the most systematic frameworks of semantic change analysis, and it categorises shifts into five broad processes: Metaphor, Metonymy, Synecdoche, Specialisation of Meaning, and Generalisation of Meaning. This typology not only maps how meanings evolve but also offers support for the cognitive and communicative reasons behind these changes.

A metaphor transfers meaning based on perceived similarity, usually between an abstract idea and something more tangible. As an illustration, in the expression “the arm of the sea”, the word “arm” is used metaphorically to mean a long extension of the sea (Casotti et al., 2024). TikTok's slang term “clingy” is used metaphorically to describe interpersonal relationships. A physical trait can be reinterpreted as a social or emotional characteristic, such as friends or romantic partners who constantly seek attention, being called “clingy.” TikTok users also refer to playful intimacy or affection in close relationships as “clingy” (Nashrudina et al., 2025). Next, metonymy refers to associating a term with something closely related. For example, the American film industry is often called “Hollywood,” but technically, it is a district in Los Angeles (Chaira, 2022). An applicable instance in the TikTok space is the slang “blood” that is used to denote a “blood brother” or “blood sister,” extending the meaning of the word to the relations of family or kinship. This definition is a metonymic

use since blood refers to a common ancestry, an emotional attachment, or a community (Chaira, 2023). Such usage reflects how Gen Z recontextualises traditional terms to convey solidarity and connection within digital communities.

Meanwhile, synecdoche is a subtype of metonymy where a part can be used to denote the whole, or vice versa, as the word “wheels” (part of a car) can be understood as a car (the whole) (Chaira, 2022). Synecdoche in TikTok slang has not been studied extensively in the past. However, it is possible to find examples of it in the daily digital language of Gen Z. The term “face card” refers to face. This body part describes the entire person in terms of attractiveness, confidence, or social currency. The expression “face card never declines” represents gaining social acceptance or admiration because of one’s looks. It is claimed as a synecdoche semantic change, in which a part (the face) represents the whole personal identity or perceived value. On the other hand, specialisation of Meaning is the process of narrowing down the definition of a word over time. As an example, the Old English word “deor” was used to refer to any animal, but the modern word “deer” is applied to a specific species (De Wit, 2021). Although no extensive written studies document this process specifically in TikTok slang, the phenomenon can be observed in words like “diva.” Initially used in classical music contexts to refer to a distinguished female opera singer, “diva” has become a specialised slang term referring to someone, often in pop culture or social media, who behaves in a dramatic, high-maintenance, or attention-seeking manner. This demonstrates how language can undergo semantic narrowing when recontextualised within specific digital communities.

Contrary to specialisation, generalisation of meaning is a semantic change in which a word is generalised to include a broader scope of meanings. For instance, the word “horrible” used to have a specific meaning of dreadful or terrifying, but now it is used more generally as an intensifier (De Wit, 2021). Similarly, the word “business” has changed to refer to being busy or troubled, to a general term that refers to any form of work or commercial activity (Altakhaine, 2018). In TikTok discourse, an example is the word “slay,” which initially emerged from drag performance culture to mean performing exceptionally well, but has since generalised to praise any behaviour, style, or success, regardless of context. Although examples in existing literature remain limited, these observed uses suggest how meaning expansion occurs fluidly in fast-paced digital environments.

Sociocultural Theory

Vygotsky’s Sociocultural Theory (1978) is the foundational framework for understanding the motivations behind Gen Z’s use of TikTok slang in online interaction. This theory describes human development as inseparable from social and cultural activities that prioritise social interaction and cultural tools in developing cognitive abilities (Lasmawan & Budiarta, 2020). First, Vygotsky believed that social interaction is necessary for cognitive development (Brodie, 2025). On TikTok, slang is adopted and circulated by content creators, influencers, and other users who interact with each other. This interaction allows Gen Z to build a mutual understanding of slang, and that situation can be used to analyse how Gen Z slang reflects their social and cultural contexts. Next, language is a primary cultural tool that dominates thinking and behaviour (Rahmatirad, 2020). On TikTok, language, particularly slang, is vital for communication and self-expression. It enables Gen Z to communicate in a way that is creative and culturally relevant to their generation’s values and trends. This observation aligns with Vygotsky’s perspective that language is a tool for communication and cognitive development, which helps users navigate social and cultural landscapes (Brodie, 2025).

Vygotsky’s theory of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) can also be applied to comprehend the acquisition and use of slang by Gen Z. The ZPD is the area between what a learner can do without help and what they can do with help (Lasmawan & Budiarta, 2020). On TikTok, younger users are exposed to new slang terms they might not fully understand. However, they learn to discover and use these new slang terms with guidance from influencers, peers, or comment sections. Hence, the social nature of TikTok enables users to bridge the gap between their existing knowledge and the new language trends they encounter.

Finally, the theory proposed by Vygotsky implies that after learning, social tools are internalised and affect how individuals think and behave (Irshad et al., 2021). Gen Z’s interpretation of slang on TikTok is not just a form of communication but a way of life. Slang words become a part of the youngsters’ daily vocabulary and cultural expressions as they interact with the content. Therefore, this language internalisation is critical to

apprehending the role of slang in shaping how Gen Z speaks and how they construct their social identities in the digital realm.

Thus, by applying Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978), this research examines the role of social interaction, cultural tools, and language in the formation and proliferation of slang among Gen Z on TikTok. The theory guides the researcher in determining the sociocultural variables that encourage Gen Z to adopt TikTok slang in their online communication styles.

Understanding Slang in Digital Communication

Slang has become a critical component of contemporary language that the younger generation prefers due to the growth of technology and digital environments. This phenomenon is due to its flexibility, which is observed through the absence of its fixed grammar rules, enabling slang to evolve in response to the current environment (G'affarovna, 2025; Yuldashaliyevna, 2025). The widespread use of slang is strongly related to social media applications such as TikTok, Twitter (now known as X), and Reddit, where users prefer informality and creativity, especially the younger generation. Indirectly, it impacts their online identity, which leads to a general perception of Gen Z as laid-back people and enhances their communication (Stoika & Pitovka, 2025; Sundaram et al., 2023). They asserted that slang on digital platforms represents a linguistic innovation that is eventually assimilated into someone's identity, culture, and communication style (Stoika & Pitovka, 2025; Sundaram et al., 2023).

Slang can also be defined as a living language that is constantly evolving, growing, and beneficial to the communication needs of online users. Yuldashaliyevna (2025) claims that slang is a language tool that promotes inclusiveness and humour and breaks the traditional language norms by flourishing in the fast-paced world of TikTok and the meme culture. Similarly, G'affarovna (2025) asserts that internet slang depends highly on the values of brevity, playfulness, and creativity, particularly in youth-centric environments, encouraging Gen Z to navigate their emotion and peer interaction. Correspondingly, Stoika and Pitovka (2025) highlighted that the morphological features of digital slang, including abbreviations, stylised spellings, clippings, and emoticons, are widely used by many generations. However, they are especially popular among the youth. Sundaram et al. (2023) implemented a data-analytic perspective on slang and concluded that it is a valuable source of sentiment and behavioural data. Their systematic review found that applying slang helps researchers and businesses grasp real-time trends and public opinions in online communication. Their findings are more industry-oriented but provide evidence that slang can be used for various communicative functions. As a vehicle for emotion and shared understanding and for forming norms of digital interaction across different platforms.

Semantic Shift in Slang within Social Media Contexts

The evolving semantics of slang exhibit the changeability of language as it continues to be transformed, aligning with modern cultural contexts. However, it remains apparent that a gap exists in current literature concerning the direct application of the Semantic Change Typology created by Blank (1999) to empirical research. Most research only mentions the framework as part of introductory or theoretical analysis, not applying it as an empirical tool (Altakhaine, 2018; Chaira, 2022; Chaira, 2023). These studies provide insightful findings on how slang terms can obtain different meanings and interpretations, displaying the complex intangible connections between language innovation and the development of technological communication. The research on English slang terms used by TikTok content creators has been studied by Yuniar et al. (2023). The authors found that slang words tend to undergo a significant shift in semantics, signifying social and cultural shifts. To illustrate, the use of the words "dead ass" and "hella" has lost their original meanings and has gained new meanings of seriousness and intensity, respectively. As the authors emphasised, social media has accelerated the evolution of slang since these platforms allow new words to be disseminated and adopted quickly. The identified semantic changes depict linguistic shifts and reflect the broader social processes (Yuniar et al., 2023).

Factors Influencing the Use of Slang in Digital and Media Platforms The use of slang in online communication has been widely explored in various settings, particularly in TikTok and media targeting young people like Gen

Z. The findings reveal that the younger generation has several reasons to use slang, as reported in the past studies (Muhartoyo & Wijaya, 2014; Mustapha & Marzuki, 2023; Muzani & Lotfie, 2024; Pongsapan, 2022; Sani et al., 2024). These drives are associated with communicative efficiency, humour and expression, social bonding, and influence of media representation. Communicative efficiency, with its short slang words, is one of its primary motivations. Muhartoyo and Wijaya (2014) explain that students prefer to use slang to save time, and acronyms and shortened forms are convenient, especially in quick communication. The observation was also backed by Muzani and Lotfie (2024), who found that TikTok slang is typically produced to respond to the high pace of communication needs. Correspondingly, conciseness and innovativeness were recognised as the main reasons why students opt for slang, which confirmed the significance of slang in real-time communication in the digital world (Pongsapan, 2022).

Slang can also be applied to express emotion and entertainment. Mustapha and Marzuki (2023) discovered that 73.5 percent of Gen Z respondents used TikTok slang primarily as entertainment, indicating that slang can bring enjoyment in its own way. Pongsapan (2022) also found that the research participants stated that the reasons for using slang were enjoyment, playfulness, and the need to reduce seriousness. Conversely, Sani et al. (2024) reviewed the function of slang in popular Netflix shows, including *Never Have I Ever* (2020) and *On My Block* (2018), which use slang to convey humour and emotion, thereby shaping characters that are more relatable to the audience.

Aside from serving as an expressive form, it is also vital in building social bonding and shared identity within a generation as a means of solidarity (Mustapha & Marzuki, 2023; Muzani & Lotfie, 2024). As Sani et al. (2024) argued, slang in youth media is used as an identity marker that strengthens their social belonging and shared culture. Similarly, Pongsapan (2022) added that slang is used chiefly to reduce awkward situations; it can naturally boost the warm and friendly atmosphere.

Another aspect of the influence of slang is portrayed through the characters in teen series that use trending slang expressions in their dialogue (Sani et al., 2024). The media portrayal of slang represents how the Gen Z audience talks in real communication, upholding the reciprocal relationship between media and language. The sociolinguistic landscape of media slang illustrates shifts in sociocultural and technological environments; peer pressure is the main reason for adopting slang.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

This research employed a qualitative approach to ensure the study objectives are accomplished, determining the types of slang, semantic shifts, and motivations for slang usage. Qualitative research is practical because it involves investigating individuals' perceptions of their experiences, the formation of their realities, and the significance they attach to these experiences (Muzairi et al., 2022). This approach is vital for analysing linguistic innovation, such as slang, as it is not constant and depends on the context.

A combination of content analysis and semi-structured interview methods was used in this research. Content analysis is a research tool that identifies the existence of specific words or concepts in texts and offers information about messages, the writer, the audience, and the culture and time of the texts (Zavyalova, 2022). This method enabled a systematic analysis of the language patterns used in TikTok videos, which can help identify the themes and trends of slang. Meanwhile, semi-structured interviews ensure the quality of the data gathered and the researcher's understanding of the interviewees' thoughts, beliefs, and experiences (Ruslin et al., 2022). The interviews allowed for discussion of people's opinions and practices regarding TikTok slang and the functions and meanings of these novelties in the context of the participants' conversations.

Research setting and sampling technique

The selection of TikTok videos focused on a Western country, specifically the United States of America (USA). This choice is based on American TikTok users at the forefront of creating and popularising new slang terms (Flack, 2025). Therefore, selecting TikTok videos posted by American users will provide a more ample supply

of slang data than Malaysian users, enabling the researcher to effectively address Research Objective 1 (RO1) and Research Objective 2 (RO2), categorise the slang into types, and analyse its semantic shifts. In contrast, the interview participants were exclusively local Malaysians. This decision was made to align with Research Objective 3 (RO3), which explores the sociocultural factors influencing the use and understanding of TikTok slang among Malaysian Gen Z users. Selecting participants within the local context ensured accessibility and relevance, allowing a more nuanced understanding of how global slang trends are received and interpreted in Malaysia.

All interview sessions were conducted virtually using the Google Meet platform as the sole medium to ensure consistency and formality of the interview measures. Ethical considerations are vital when involving human participants, affecting the study's moral principles and ethics. Therefore, the interviewees were briefed about the purpose and background of this research before acquiring the interview questions, facilitating their understanding and cognizance of why they were selected as part of this research study.

The TikTok video sample focused on videos featuring themes of Gen Z marketing style, with content posted from 2024 onwards, posted by @bcbskansas, @shaker.auto.group, @royalarmouriesmuseum, @get_gordon, @denvermns, and @natlaquarium accounts. The theme of Gen Z marketing style refers to an interactive approach that focuses on authenticity, visual storytelling, and social interaction to attract digitally native consumers with short attention spans. It aims to establish trust through purposeful communication, inclusive principles, and interactive content, such as influencer partnerships and user-generated trends like slang use (SheerID, 2023). Seven videos, each below one minute and thirty seconds, were selected to ensure sufficient data for the researcher to analyse.

As for the interviewees, this study targeted individuals aged 24 to 26, representing Gen Z, who actively use TikTok and frequently engage with content featuring slang, as shown in Table 3.3.2. Ten participants were selected for semi-structured interviews to provide valuable insights into their experiences and motivations for slang usage on the platform. This selection is based on the recommendation that six to twelve interviews are sufficient for one qualitative research project (Bekele & Ago, 2022, as cited in Guest et al., 2006).

Instrument

The instruments utilised for this study included adapted interview questions from a previous study, Google Meet for conducting the interviews, Microsoft Word 365 for transcribing, and NVivo Codebook for data analysis. The instruments were selected based on their ability to ensure the data collection and analysis of the slang on TikTok are thorough and comprehensive. The first instrument for initiating the interview was the adapted interview questions. The interview questions were adapted from a reliable past study titled "The Use of English Slang Words in Informal Communication among 8th Semester Students of the English Department in Binus University" by Muhartayo and Wijaya (2014). This research provided a transparent and detailed framework for observing how online slang is widely used in informal contexts, and by adapting the questions from past studies, it ensured that the interviews were based on established research yet relevant to the study's purposes.

A coding guideline provides a fundamental framework for research work, assisting the researcher in ensuring accuracy and clarity. Hence, the coding system developed by Alan Bryman in 2016, known as the Four Stages of Analysis, was utilised to categorise and analyse the data and excerpts. The research employed a content analysis approach, necessitating the application of a coding scheme based on Allan and Burrige's (2006) Types of Slang Words and Blank's (1999) Semantic Change Typology as the chosen frameworks. Table 3.3.2 below presents the codes corresponding to each type of slang terms and semantic shift identified in the selected TikTok videos. Since this research applied two coders to code the content analysis data, these coding schemes work as the guidelines for both coders to ensure the consistency of the findings.

Data collection and data analysis

The data collection for this study involved using content analysis of TikTok videos and qualitative interviews to meet the research objectives. Data was gathered through a systematic search of the TikTok videos to identify

the slang used on TikTok. In selecting the videos, purposive sampling was applied, focusing on the related videos that include Gen Z slang with a Gen Z marketing theme. The following keywords and hashtags were applied to find suitable content: #slang and #GenZMarketing. Each video was observed, and the slang words were noted, written down, and explained in context. The third research objective was to identify the sociocultural factors that motivate Gen Z to use slang in social interaction, and the data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted via Google Meet. The respondents were chosen according to age range, TikTok activity, and knowledge of Gen Z slang; the purposive sampling technique was used to ensure that the chosen interviewees were familiar with TikTok slang.

The data analysis in this study involved a multi-step process to ensure that the collected data were examined comprehensively. This method helped to clearly understand the use of slang on online platforms and the underlying reasons behind its use.

The initial phase was the content analysis of the chosen TikTok videos. This analysis phase began with the identification and documentation of slang words in the chosen videos. All videos were carefully checked, and all instances of slang were recorded along with their contextual usage. The transcriptions of the videos were documented in Google Docs as a backup of the words or dialogues in the videos so that the researcher could recognise the findings easily. Subsequently, all data were classified according to the frameworks of Allan & Burridge's (2006) Type of Slang Words and Blank's (1999) Semantic Change Typology to guarantee the validity of the research results.

The second step was transcribing the video interviews conducted via Google Meet. All the interviews were transcribed using the Microsoft Word 365 transcription tool to ensure all the information was accurate and complete. This transcription is essential in preserving the richness of the qualitative data, and the insights remain intact to be analysed. After the transcription stage, the data were imported into NVivo software, a qualitative data analysis tool. Thematic analysis of the interview data was performed using NVivo 14. The thematic analysis is a process of identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns or themes in the data (Lochmiller, 2021).

Then, the coding process began with each text segment with a specific code indicating its class and context. This preliminary coding was performed systematically, guaranteeing that all required data were captured clearly. Lastly, the codes were examined and grouped into their central theme, reflecting the patterns shared by the acquired data. These themes were then reviewed and analysed to learn their relevance and significance towards the research objectives.

Reliability and validity

Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were used to ensure the rigour of the methodological process. Credibility was achieved through consistent engagement with TikTok content, and thorough explanations of the chosen interviewees and contexts supported the transferability. Dependability was also strengthened through a meticulous coding process, and a consistent record of a clear audit trail of thematic development reflected the confirmability.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of seven TikTok videos yielded a total of forty-eight slang terms. The distribution across Allan and Burridge's (2006) typology is shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1 Types of Slang Words

Slang Category	Frequency	Percentage	Examples
Fresh and Creative	24	50%	Diva, no cap, giving
Flippant	15	31%	Delulu, girly pops, main character energy

Clipping	5	10%	Vibes, menty b, sus
Imitative	3	6%	Bestie, smol, yap
Acronym	1	2%	Goated
Total	48	100%	

Table 1 presents the frequency of slang types based on Allan and Burrige's (2006) classification from selected TikTok videos. Fresh and Creative slang was the most frequent (24 instances), reflecting Gen Z's preference for coining original and vivid expressions that are inventive, trendy, and culturally resonant within TikTok's dynamic content environment. Flippant slang followed with fifteen instances, showing humorous or sarcastic tones familiar in casual digital talk. Clipping slang (five) and Imitative slang (three) appeared less frequently, while Acronyms were the least used (one), indicating a preference for performative and expressive forms over structural brevity. These results suggest that TikTok slang is driven by creativity, humour, and cultural relevance in Gen Z communication patterns.

Table 2-4 shows the selected TikTok videos' fresh and creative slang terms. They demonstrate how this slang is applied in Gen Z's marketing style on TikTok videos.

Table 2 Fresh and Creative

Creator Username	@bcbskansas
TikTok Video Link	https://vt.tiktok.com/ZShew9SQS/
Type of Slang Word	Fresh and creative
Identified Slang Word	Who's this <i>diva</i> ?

The phrase "Who is this diva?" is uttered when someone riding a bicycle passes by the creator while he is talking. The slang term "diva" often refers to a woman who is typically ostentatious, dramatic, and full of confidence. It is classified as a fresh and creative type due to its imaginative nature, which allows people to visualise someone's flamboyant characteristics through the word. In this context, the creator uses the slang to hint to the audience that he is suggesting the cyclist appears overly confident for casually riding past while a video is being recorded. It also serves as an entertaining element in the health insurance marketing video so that the audience from any generation could engage with the promotion. This result corresponds to the previous research by Syafitri and Sulaiman (2022) and Oktaviani and Agung (2023), who found Fresh and Creative slang the most prevalent in movies.

Table 3 Flippant

Creator Username	@natlaquarium
TikTok Video Link	https://vt.tiktok.com/ZShew3rGP/
Type of Slang Word	Flippant
Identified Slang Word	Thinking there's nothing you can do to help the planet? <i>Delulu</i> .

Table 3 demonstrates the application of the slang word “delulu” in a TikTok video posted by the National Aquarium in Maryland, United States. The term “delulu” is a playful abbreviation of “delusional,” frequently used by Gen Z to inject humour or irony into casual discourse. It falls under the category of flippant slang, as described by Allan and Burridge (2006), which often conveys exaggerated or sarcastic meanings distinct from literal interpretations. In the video, the speaker uses “delulu” to scorn or satirise the defeatist mindset that individuals are powerless in tackling environmental issues. Rather than confronting the audience directly, the slang softens the critique through humour and informal sarcasm, rendering the environmental message more engaging and accessible. It portrays how TikTok creators create awareness-oriented content through a marketing campaign to adapt to digital-native audiences' communicative norms and stylistic preferences.

Table 4 Imitative

Creator Username	@bcbskansas
TikTok Video Link	https://vt.tiktok.com/ZShew9SQS/
Type of Slang Word	Imitative
Identified Slang Word	Hey, <i>bestie</i> .

Based on Table 4, the identified slang term is “bestie”, which has been said as a greeting in the selected TikTok video. It is an imitation of the words “best friend” and with the addition of the diminutive suffix to ensure its digital resonance and align with contemporary settings. This morphological adaptation by Gen Z is commonly used to express familiarity and affection, even to a stranger, not just to call one’s best friend. Using this imitative slang on the digital platform fosters social connection and a sense of relatability, where the informal and casual language is the primary driver of warm and welcoming virtual interactions. These results resonate with findings by Jaya et al. (2025) and Sulaiman and Syafitri (2022), who observed that fresh slang dominates TikTok due to the platform’s emphasis on trend cycles and viral content. The preference for originality underscores TikTok’s role as a language development hub where new expressions quickly gain traction.

Types of Semantic Change Used in Selected TikTok Videos

Blank’s (1999) semantic change typology was applied to analyse the evolution of meaning in the identified slang. The frequencies are summarised in Table 5 below.

Table 5 Types of Semantic Change

Semantic Shift Category	Frequency	Percentage	Examples
Metaphor	21	44%	Understood the assignment (competent), spill the tea (gossip), fire (excellent)
Generalisation	13	27%	Slay (broad compliment), chat (community), fam (family)
Specialisation	8	17%	Bet (agreement), flex (show off), sus (suspicious)
Metonymy	5	10%	No cap (truth), yap (talking nonstop), bestie (friendliness)
Synecdoche	1	2%	Face card (part representing the whole or vice versa)
Total	48	100%	

Table 5 displays the frequency of semantic change types found in selected TikTok videos, based on Blank's (1999) typology. Metaphor was the most common, with twenty-one instances, showing how Gen Z repurposes words figuratively to express abstract or exaggerated meanings. This is followed by Generalisation of Meaning (13 instances), where slang terms are broadened to apply in various contexts. Specialisation of Meaning occurred eight times, reflecting how terms are used in narrower, more specific ways within digital culture. Metonymy (five) and Synecdoche (one) were found less frequently, suggesting these shift forms are less prominent in Gen Z's online discourse. These patterns highlight how TikTok slang evolves through imaginative and context-driven reinterpretation of meaning. Tables 6 to 8 show examples of semantic change used in the selected TikTok.

Table 6 Metaphor

Creator Username	@royalarmouriesmuseum
TikTok Video Link	https://vt.tiktok.com/ZShewcV5y/
Type of Semantic Change	Metaphor
Identified Slang Word	Our tote bags <i>understood the assignment</i> .

This expression metaphorically attributes human-like understanding to inanimate tote bags. "understood the assignment" refers to someone comprehending and executing a task effectively. In this TikTok video, the design and aesthetic alignment of the tote bags are figuratively praised as part of a broader promotional goal. The slang is categorised as a metaphor because the bags are incapable of cognitive understanding, yet the phrase symbolises that the products performed beyond expectations. This figurative use enhances relatability and humour, especially in marketing contexts where personification adds character to non-human subjects.

Metaphorical phrases, such as "understood the assignment," metaphorically complement excellent work, whereas "spill the tea" replaces a mundane act with the exciting act of gossiping. This figurative expression creates a shared cultural code and is in tune with TikTok's visual and performative context, where communication is frequently conveyed through expressive multimodal narratives. According to Blank (1999), a metaphor is a cognitive attempt to find similarities between domains, and in the context of TikTok, metaphors provide flair, engagement, and relatability to user interactions.

Table 7 Synecdoche

Creator Username	@denvermns
TikTok Video Link	https://vt.tiktok.com/ZShewTPe5/
Type of Semantic Change	Synecdoche
Identified Slang Word	This <i>face card</i> has undeniable rizz.

The Gen Z marketing sentence, "This face card has undeniable rizz," employs synecdoche by using "face card," a metaphorical reference to one's facial appearance or personal charm as a stand-in for the entire person's social worth or charisma. The term "face" is just one physical aspect, yet it symbolises the individual's perceived value or attractiveness in this context. It implies that someone's appearance alone holds social currency and impact, similar to a literal "card" used for transactions. Together, the phrase "face card" slang relies on symbolic reduction, where a single visible trait communicates broader personal worth, making it a clear example of semantic change through synecdoche.

Table 8 Specialisation of Meaning

Creator Username	@royalarmouriesmuseum
TikTok Video Link	https://vt.tiktok.com/ZShewGBDb/
Type of Semantic Change	Specialisation of meaning
Identified Slang Word	Hi divas, you all wanted to see more of me, alright <i>bet</i> .

The Gen Z-oriented expression style, “Hi divas, you all wanted to see more of me, alright bet,” illustrates another instance of specialisation of meaning. The word “bet” originally means to gamble or stake something; in the Gen Z context, it has been redefined as slang to mean affirmation or agreement. The creator uses “bet” to indicate that they know their audience’s interest and are willing to fulfil it. The semantic range has changed from a transactional meaning to a communicative affirmation. This adaptation has become common among Gen Z speakers who value short and direct expressions in casual conversation.

These results align with Sulistiyarningsih and Muttaqiyah (2022), who found that metaphor and generalisation are the most productive mechanisms in online slang. The ubiquity of metaphor implies that TikTok users are creatively reusing existing words in new ways to fit new cultural contexts.

Slang as a Cultural and Identity Resource in Algorithmic Spaces The findings of this study highlight TikTok slang as more than a stylistic choice; it operates as a cultural and identity resource shaped by the platform’s algorithmic dynamics. Fresh and creative slang dominated the dataset, reflecting Gen Z’s desire for originality and digital performativity. Similarly, metaphor emerged as the most frequent semantic shift, showing a generational tendency to reframe concepts in imaginative, relatable ways. Beyond description, these results align with sociolinguistic theories of identity and group belonging (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005), where language practices signal inclusion within peer communities. TikTok slang thus becomes a semiotic marker of belonging that differentiates insiders from outsiders, reinforcing a sense of digital solidarity.

Peer Interaction and the Social Scaffolding of Slang

Interview data demonstrated that slang learning and usage are embedded in peer-to-peer interaction, echoing Vygotsky’s (1978) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Participants consistently reported acquiring slang through friends, influencers, and online communities, with meaning negotiated in interactive spaces such as comment threads or group chats. This indicates that slang is socially scaffolded: peers model usage, and individuals internalise terms through participation. TikTok thus serves as a collaborative linguistic classroom where users experiment with, refine, and circulate emergent expressions.

Excerpt 1

“I use it almost every time, especially when I’m gaming.” (Interviewee 5)

Excerpt 2

“We often share day-to-day updates, and those updates usually come with some TikTok reference or slang, such as terms like ‘queen’ and ‘slay;’ it’s a bit cringeworthy, but it’s just part of Gen Z culture.” (Interviewee 7)

The three interviewees highlighted distinct contexts where they use slang, but all are related to peer engagement or interaction. For example, Interviewee 5 said he used it mainly when playing online games with his mates, but Interviewee 9 said she used it for gossip-related conversations. Additionally, Interviewee 7 even exemplified the slang terms she used when sharing her daily and personal updates with her friends, such as “queen” and “slay”. All these responses demonstrate that the use of slang within Gen Z closely reflects their informal interaction style with peers, regardless of the topic, if it can be discussed online.

Slang as Humour, Relatability, and Generational Belonging

The second theme highlights how language serves as a foundation of a cultural tool that influences people's behaviour and thinking, as stated by Vygotsky (1987).

Excerpt 3

It's not just about trends; it's a shared language of humour (Interviewee 4)

Excerpt 4

Particularly when we're trying to be humorous, relatable, or simply maintain a light and expressive tone. (Interviewee 6)

Excerpt 5

They add humour and shared meaning to our conversations, especially when everyone's tuned in to the same references. (Interviewee 10)

Interviewee four emphasised that using slang is not merely a matter of following the trend; it is a shared language of humour. This emphasis is supported by Interviewee 6, who said, "Particularly, when we're trying to be humorous," and Interviewee 10, who claimed, "They add humour and shared meaning to our conversations." Their shared experiences proved that using slang in digital interactions serves as a cultural digital marker among Gen Z, creating humour that can only be understood by people tuned into the same generational references.

Performative Play and Emotional Tone in Slang Practices

Excerpt 6

It just adds more spice, more attitude to everyday speech.

I live for a good, piping hot piece of gossip, and saying 'Spill the tea' just adds that extra flavour compared to something plain like 'What's the story?' It sets the tone, it's playful, a little dramatic, and invites the other person to match your energy.

It's less about the gossip itself and more about creating that mutual vibe of 'I'm ready, give me everything. (Interviewee 4)

One key motivation for Gen Z's use of TikTok slang is its ability to inject personality and flair into everyday conversations. Participants consistently described slang as a medium that enhances expressive power and emotional tone in communication. Interviewee 4, for instance, remarked that slang "adds spice and attitude to ordinary speech," explaining how phrases like "spill the tea" make conversations more dramatic and playful, setting a mood inviting engagement. Slang thus functions as a performative resource, allowing users to shape humorous, ironic, or theatrical interactions. **Learning Slang through Digital ZPD and Peer Influence**

The acquisition of slang is best understood through Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, particularly the ZPD. Younger or less experienced users often encounter unfamiliar terms they do not fully understand, but they are taught through exposure to influencers, peers, or viral content. Peer influence was especially salient, as participants admitted confidence in using slang only after observing usage in their social circles. This demonstrates that TikTok slang is not learned in isolation but negotiated within networks of practice, where social validation scaffolds linguistic competence.

Excerpt 7

In Malay, we call it 'pengaruh rakan sebaya' or friend's influence.

Yes, definitely when I start to see my circle using it. In some way, it gives me confidence to follow the trend too. (Interviewee 2)

Excerpt 8

Besides that, my friends, especially my classmates, also played a big role in the way I speak. Since they frequently use slang in our group chats, it encourages me to learn and keep up with the latest trends, so I can quickly understand the meaning and maintain the conversation's smooth flow.

So, while the platform definitely exposed me to the slang, what really pushed me to start using it was the influence of my social circle. (Interviewee 3)

Excerpts 7 and 8 show that peer influence is a significant factor in the slang acquisition process among the Gen Z interviewees. Interviewee two mentioned it as "*pengaruh rakan sebaya*" in Malay or in English, a friend's influence, which points to the fact that seeing peers using slang in their circle made her feel confident enough to use the same language patterns. Interviewee three echoed this sentiment, attributing her classmates and group chats as powerful incentives to keep up with slang to facilitate easy and current communication. She noted that although she was exposed to slang via digital means, the impact of her social surroundings encouraged active use.

From Online Trend to Everyday Speech: The Internalisation of Slang Finally, the study shows that slang becomes internalized into everyday communication once acquired. Participants reported selectively using slang with peers who "get it," while avoiding it with older colleagues or family members unfamiliar with digital codes. This highlights slang's role in shaping identity boundaries: it signals modernity, trend-awareness, and youth culture. The internalization process also illustrates how online linguistic practices extend offline, embedding TikTok-born terms into face-to-face communication. In this sense, slang transcends the platform, functioning as a digital and social tool that structures how Gen Z expresses identity, humour, and belonging in multiple contexts.

Excerpt 9

We can determine if that person is up to date with trends or not, so I tend to use it with people I am close to, because they are in a circle that I believe can quickly absorb what I am trying to convey.

For example, my officemates, mostly from Gen X and Y, are not familiar with all these slang terms. So, I will not use slang if I communicate with them because before this, I have tried, but they will be like 'ha?', they react with a clueless expression. (Interviewee 2)

TikTok slang used by Gen Z speakers is a key factor that helps to strengthen the sense of collective identity and the feeling of belonging to digital communities. The interviewees explained that slang is a language feature that identifies a group and cultural attachment. Interviewee two stated that they use slang selectively, only when communicating with their peers who understand the words. An example is Interviewee 2, who

deliberately avoids using slang when interacting with older colleagues or members of the older generation, who may not understand the slang. This perspective demonstrates a high degree of audience and context alert.

A combination of practical, creative, and social motivations drives Gen Z's use of slang in digital communication. Slang is a form of communication that increases communicative efficiency by enabling users to convey complex ideas shortly and concisely. Muhartoyo and Wijaya (2014) concluded that students use slang to save time in conversation, especially in the form of abbreviations and acronyms. This statement is exemplified by terms such as "mid," which reduce nuanced evaluations into culturally understood shorthand. Slang is also a creative outlet and source of entertainment. Mustapha and Marzuki (2023) revealed that Gen Z uses TikTok slang for fun and expressive communication. Interviewees in the current study echoed this, noting that slang adds emotional tone and authenticity, particularly in fan communities such as K-pop and K-dramas. Pongsapan (2022) also corroborated this idea, citing enjoyment, lightness, and social ease as the main reasons for slang use among students.

Beyond functionality, slang plays a deeper sociocultural and psychological role. Muzani and Lotfie (2024) emphasised that slang fosters group identity and social bonding, particularly among users familiar with digital trends. This study found similar sentiments, with participants expressing that slang helps them feel connected and culturally aligned with their peers. Drawing on Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, slang can be seen as a cognitive tool that Gen Z uses to navigate emotional dynamics and establish comfort in online interactions. The process of slang acquisition, often through influencers or peers, mirrors the Zone of Proximal Development, where learning is socially scaffolded. Sani et al. (2024) highlighted the role of media platforms and algorithms in shaping slang usage, reinforcing the feedback loop between online culture and real-life language habits. Altogether, slang is not just a linguistic shortcut but a symbol of digital identity, creativity, and cultural belonging for Gen Z.

CONCLUSION

These findings underscore TikTok's role as a site of linguistic innovation where slang evolves rapidly through creativity, metaphorical extension, and peer influence. The prevalence of new and innovative slang is a testament to the need for novelty on TikTok. At the same time, the use of metaphor as a semantic creation highlights users' capacity to reuse words in culturally appropriate ways. Moreover, the motivations identified point to the deeply social nature of slang: it is not just about language efficiency but about forging identity, creating humour, and participating in shared digital culture.

By aligning these study findings with the frameworks of Allan and Burridge (2006), Blank (1999), and Vygotsky (1978), this research demonstrates the structural and cultural dynamics embodied in TikTok slang. It guarantees that slang is central to how Gen Z builds their social identity, cultural belonging, and communication patterns in virtual spaces.

At the same time, this study acknowledges several limitations. The analysis is Malaysia-centric, which, while offering valuable insights into localised slang practices, does not fully account for the global and hybrid nature of Gen Z discourse on TikTok. A comparative cross-cultural approach would allow future research to trace how slang diffuses, localises, or resists across diverse cultural communities. Additionally, integrating corpus-based or quantitative validation could strengthen the empirical grounding of the semantic and sociocultural trends identified here. These extensions would enrich the understanding of how TikTok's affordances and global digital culture intersect in accelerating linguistic innovation.

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