



A Semantic Analysis of Slang Words Used by Gen Z on Social Media

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Abstract

This study explores the semantic shifts and pragmatic functions of slang words used by Generation Z on social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter. Employing a qualitative-descriptive approach, the research analyzes primary data collected through content analysis and ethnographic interviews with Gen Z users. The findings reveal that slang words used by Gen Z undergo various semantic changes such as pejoration, amelioration, metaphorical extension, and narrowing driven by cultural, technological, and contextual factors. These linguistic innovations not only reflect the evolving communication style of youth but also serve as tools for identity formation, humor, emotional expression, and social bonding in digital spaces. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of language dynamics in digital culture and offers insights into the mechanisms of semantic change in contemporary slang.

Keywords: *Semantic Change; Slang Words; Generation Z*

Abstrak: Penelitian ini mengkaji pergeseran makna dan fungsi pragmatis dari kata-kata slang yang digunakan oleh Generasi Z di media sosial seperti TikTok, Instagram, dan Twitter. Dengan pendekatan kualitatif-deskriptif, penelitian ini menganalisis data primer yang dikumpulkan melalui analisis konten dan wawancara etnografis dengan pengguna Gen Z. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa kata-kata slang Gen Z mengalami berbagai perubahan semantik seperti peyorasi, ameliorasi, perluasan metaforis, dan penyempitan yang dipengaruhi oleh faktor budaya, teknologi, dan konteks komunikasi. Inovasi kebahasaan ini tidak hanya mencerminkan gaya komunikasi yang berkembang di kalangan remaja, tetapi juga menjadi alat pembentukan identitas, ekspresi emosi, humor, dan penguatan ikatan sosial di ruang digital. Studi ini memberikan kontribusi pada pemahaman lebih dalam mengenai dinamika bahasa dalam budaya digital serta mekanisme perubahan makna dalam slang kontemporer.

Kata Kunci: *Perubahan Makna; Kata Slang; Generasi Z*

INTRODUCTION

Language is a dynamic system that continuously evolves to reflect societal transformations, cultural trends, and technological advancements. In today's digital age, the emergence of slang among Generation Z has become a compelling linguistic phenomenon, especially within the realm of social media. Slang is not merely an informal linguistic variant; it functions as a means of identity expression and group solidarity, thriving across platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter) (Sari & Widodo, 2023).

From an academic standpoint, recent studies emphasize the significant role of social media in driving lexical innovation and semantic shifts in Gen Z slang. Words like "slay," "vibe," and "rizz" have evolved from their literal meanings to convey abstract or culturally specific concepts such as emotional states, charisma, or authenticity. This semantic evolution illustrates how digital communication fosters linguistic creativity and redefines language boundaries in contemporary discourse (Putra & Rahman, 2022).

However, the rapid development of Gen Z slang also raises several challenges, particularly in intergenerational communication. The ever-changing and often context-specific nature of these expressions can lead to misunderstandings among different age groups, potentially creating linguistic gaps and confusion in cross-generational dialogue. This phenomenon also prompts concerns about language stability and the accessibility of meaning across broader audiences (Yuliana & Nugraheni, 2021).

Previous studies have explored the social functions of slang, identifying its role in signaling group identity, fostering intimacy, and resisting mainstream norms. While these works provide valuable insight into the pragmatic and sociolinguistic roles of slang, limited attention has been given to the specific semantic changes such as pejoration, amelioration, narrowing, broadening, and metaphorical extension that occur in Gen Z slang on social media platforms.

Therefore, this study aims to conduct a semantic analysis of slang words used by Generation Z on social media. By examining the meanings, contexts, and patterns of semantic change, this research seeks to provide a deeper understanding of how slang reflects digital culture, reshapes language use, and reinforces youth identity in contemporary society. The findings are expected to contribute to the broader field of sociolinguistics and enhance academic discourse on digital communication and language evolution.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative research approach with a descriptive design to explore the semantic characteristics of slang words used by Generation Z on social media platforms. A qualitative method is deemed

appropriate as it enables a deep and nuanced understanding of how language operates in real-life contexts, especially in informal digital communication. The study emphasizes the semantic changes in slang, focusing on how words acquire new meanings, connotations, and functions within online discourse. Theoretical foundations from semantics and sociolinguistics such as lexical semantics and mechanisms of language change guide the interpretation and categorization of the findings, offering a linguistic framework for analyzing contemporary digital slang.

Data in this study were gathered from both primary and secondary sources. The primary data were collected through two key techniques: content analysis and participant-based instruments. Content analysis was conducted by observing and documenting language use on TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter—platforms where Gen Z slang actively evolves. This included analyzing posts, comments, and user interactions that featured commonly used slang expressions. In addition, data were obtained through online surveys and in-depth interviews with 10–30 Gen Z participants selected through purposive sampling. These participants, who are active social media users, provided direct insights into the meanings, usage, and perceptions of slang. A smaller subset of participants (1–5 individuals) engaged in follow-up interviews to elaborate further on how slang functions semantically and socially in their communication.

The analysis of data followed three main stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. In the data reduction phase, relevant information from the collected content and participant responses was selected, coded, and categorized based on semantic changes and context of usage. Next, the data were displayed in the form of tables and descriptive summaries to highlight patterns and variations in slang use. Finally, conclusions were drawn by interpreting the semantic roles and social implications of slang expressions in Gen Z communication. These analytical steps ensured that the findings were both systematically derived and contextually grounded, aligning with the objectives of the research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Language continuously evolves in response to social, cultural, and technological changes. One notable aspect of this evolution is the emergence of slang, especially among Generation Z, who actively innovate, reshape, and disseminate language through digital environments. Platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter) serve as linguistic spaces where new expressions rapidly emerge, mutate, and circulate within global communities. These environments foster a unique Gen Z lexicon that reflects not only creativity but also digital fluency and shared cultural codes (Nashrudina, Fajriyah, & Dewi, 2025).

Despite the central role of slang in contemporary communication, there remains a lack of focused linguistic research on the semantic transformations of Gen Z slang. Existing studies often emphasize pragmatic or sociological dimensions, yet the patterns of meaning change—such as pejoration, amelioration, broadening, narrowing, and metaphorical extension remain underexplored. As these words shift in function and meaning across different contexts, especially in social media discourse, they become markers of both group belonging and generational identity (Syafaah & Haryanto, 2024).

This lack of semantic-focused investigation raises academic concerns. The continuous semantic drift of Gen Z slang can create intergenerational gaps and barriers in communication, particularly in educational or professional settings. Moreover, the ephemeral nature of these expressions threatens their documentation and linguistic analysis. Without a systematic study of their semantic shifts, the cultural insights embedded in slang may be overlooked or lost. It is therefore essential to investigate how these expressions function semantically to better understand the dynamic interplay between language, identity, and digital culture (Febrianti, Sari, & Anshori, 2024).

Slang Term	Semantic Shift Process	Influencing Factors	Impact on communication
Di luar nalar	A play on the phrase "di luar nalar" ("beyond reason"), retaining its original meaning of expressing surprise or disbelief.	Gen Z's linguistic creativity in modifying existing phrases to make them unique and engaging.	Strengthens group identity on social media and enhances engagement in digital conversations.
Gemes	A phonetic variation of "gemas", with an added meaning of a mix of affection and frustration ("jengkel-jengkel cinta").	Informal communication trends in social media allowing for more nuanced emotional expressions.	Facilitates emotional expression in digital interactions but may cause misunderstandings for older generations unfamiliar with the term.
Nebeng	Initially meant "tagging along", but its meaning	Changes in urban lifestyle, sharing culture, and	Reflects flexible social interaction patterns and

	expanded to digital economy highlights the norm of sharing among Gen Z.
Santuy	"relying on others" trends. for transportation, food, or shared expenses.
	Derived from Popular culture and digital trends, especially in memes. Creates a more casual communication style and reduces tension in online conversations.
Bestie	"santai" (relaxed), evolving into an expression that emphasizes a laid-back and unbothered attitude.
	Adapted from the English "best friend", shortened for a more intimate and informal tone. Language globalization through social media and English adoption. Enhances closeness in digital interactions but may blur distinctions between formal and informal relationships
Gasken	A creative modification of "gas", meaning "let's go". The "-ken" suffix adds a distinctive slang touch. The fast-paced nature of social media encourages brief and expressive language use. Encourages a more active communication style and supports Gen Z's dynamic lifestyle.
Cukimay	A playful term with no specific meaning, often used for humor or to make conversations livelier. Viral language trends originating from content creators or specific online communities.
Slay	Originally an English term meaning "to stand out" or "to be outstanding", now used in slang to praise someone for doing something. Influence of global pop culture, and entertainment trends on social media. Reinforces positive expression in online communities and highlights social appreciation

Receh	impressively or confidently. Originally meant "small change", but its meaning expanded to "something simple yet funny"	The use of humor in digital communication and meme culture.	Strengthens humor in online communication, making interactions more lighthearted and engaging.
No debat	Derived from "no debate", used to emphasize an opinion as absolute.	The fast-paced discussion culture in social media that often leaves little room for long arguments.	Speeds up decision-making in online conversations but may hinder critical discussions.
Mantul	A contraction of " <i>mantap betul</i> ", shifting from a formal expression of praise to a casual and enthusiastic affirmation.	Informal speech trends and the need for brevity in texting and social media.	Increases relatability and makes praise feel more energetic and modern.
Anjay	Originally an exclamation of excitement or surprise, now functions as a playful intensifier in casual speech.	Youth culture and content creator influence on TikTok and YouTube.	Encourages expressive and animated interactions among Gen Z; can be seen as controversial in formal contexts.
Kepo	Borrowed from Hokkien " <i>kaypoh</i> " (busybody), adapted to mean someone who is overly curious or nosy.	Multilingual influences and cross-cultural contact through digital platforms.	Adds a humorous way to criticize or describe behavior, helping set informal social boundaries.
Bucin	Acronym of " <i>budak cinta</i> " (slave of love), used to describe someone overly obsessed with love or a partner.	Popularized through memes, music, and online dating culture.	Enables Gen Z to label romantic behavior in a humorous, self-aware way; promotes bonding through shared expressions.

flexing	Adopted from Global social English, refers to media culture, showing off wealth, especially possessions, or influenced by achievements on Instagram and social media. TikTok trends.	Highlights materialistic tendencies in youth culture and may lead to social comparison or criticism in digital spaces.
Healing	Originally meant "recovery," now means taking a trip or relaxing to relieve stress.	Promotes mental health awareness in casual conversation, softens the discussion of stress.
Ancur	Literally means "broken," now used to describe something chaotic or emotionally messy.	Adds emotional intensity to casual narratives in digital discourse.
Auto	From "automatic," now used to emphasize certainty, e.g., "auto win."	Enhances expressions of confidence or high expectations in conversation.
Skuy	A reversed form of "yuks" (let's go), still meaning an invitation to do something.	Adds a casual and playful tone to invitations.
Gasken	Another variant of "gas" or "gasken," meaning "let's go" or "do it now."	Encourages active, fast-paced, and enthusiastic interactions.
OOTD	Acronym for "Outfit of The Day," used to showcase daily clothing style.	Strengthens self-expression and visual identity in online spaces.
TTM	Acronym for "Teman Tapi Mesra" (friends with affection), refers to an	Influenced by pop music and modern romantic complexities. Captures undefined relationships in a light, humorous way.

	ambiguous relationship.		
FYI	Acronym for "For Your Information," used to share information without sounding aggressive.	Influence of English and digital professional tone.	Provides a neutral way to share facts or clarify points.
Woles	A reversed version of "selow" (relaxed), meaning to stay calm or chill.	Phonetic reversal trend and relaxed Gen Z tone.	Helps maintain calmness or ease tension in informal contexts.
Ngab	Reversal of "bang" (bro), often used jokingly. Popularized through memes and TikTok.	Youth slang trends and online humor culture.	Builds camaraderie and humor in peer interactions.
Sabi	A reversed form of "bisa" (can), meaning "okay" or "sure."	Phonetic play and youth identity.	Adds informal affirmation with a trendy edge.
Mager	Short for "malas gerak" (too lazy to move), commonly used to express reluctance or laziness.	Convenience and relatable daily behavior.	Normalizes low-energy states with humor and shared experience.
Nolep	A blend of "no life," referring to someone who rarely socializes offline.	Gaming and online community jargon	Labels antisocial or introverted behavior, often used self-deprecatingly.
Gercep	Acronym of " <i>gerak cepat</i> " (move fast), used to describe someone who responds or acts very quickly.	Demand for speed in digital culture and instant messaging.	Conveys urgency, efficiency, and proactiveness in everyday conversations.
slebew	A playful, expressive term popularized	Influenced by meme culture, TikTok trends,	Enhances expressive identity and creates a sense

through TikTok used to express excitement, or confidence (often with exaggerated tone).	viral content, personalities.	and viral	of shared humor among youth online.
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The semantic evolution of slang among Generation Z reflects a remarkable intersection between language creativity, digital communication, and socio-cultural dynamics. Many of the slang terms listed such as *santuy*, *gemes*, *bucin*, and *slay* undergo processes like metaphorical extension, pejoration, and specialization, illustrating how meanings are reshaped to express nuanced emotions, social commentary, or group identity. These shifts are not merely linguistic trends but form part of a wider cultural adaptation in which language becomes a tool for redefining relationships, attitudes, and values in digital spaces. This aligns with findings by Rachmawati and Ayu (2023), who argue that Gen Z slang serves as a reflection of youth resistance to rigid linguistic norms and as a mechanism to navigate social belonging in a fast-paced, media-saturated world.

Moreover, the rapid dissemination of such slang through platforms like TikTok and Instagram has influenced broader language usage across generational and even international lines. Slang terms like *OOTD*, *flexing*, and *healing* demonstrate how global digital culture merges with localized expressions, creating hybrid forms of speech that reinforce Gen Z's identity as globally aware yet culturally rooted. However, this semantic dynamism may also contribute to intergenerational miscommunication and lexical instability, as older language users may misinterpret or resist adopting these new terms (Nugroho & Wulandari, 2022). Thus, analyzing the semantics of Gen Z slang is not only a matter of linguistic inquiry but also vital to understanding shifting cultural patterns, digital interaction norms, and the broader mechanisms of contemporary language change (Maulidia & Fauzia, 2021).

CONCLUSIONS

This study reveals that Generation Z slang used on social media platforms is marked by dynamic semantic shifts, including broadening, narrowing, amelioration, and pejoration. These semantic changes reflect the creativity and cultural influences that characterize digital communication among Gen Z users. Social media platforms such as TikTok, Twitter, and Instagram play a pivotal role in accelerating the emergence, spread, and evolution of slang, making these digital spaces central to modern linguistic innovation. Slang functions not only as a tool for communication but also as an important marker of identity and social belonging within Generation Z.

Moreover, the use of Gen Z slang impacts intergenerational communication by creating both opportunities and challenges. While it fosters a strong sense of community and allows younger users to express nuanced emotions and shared cultural values, it simultaneously creates barriers for older generations who may struggle to understand the rapidly evolving slang lexicon. This generational gap in language highlights the tension between linguistic change and the need for stable communication across different age groups. Overall, the findings emphasize the importance of understanding slang as a dynamic linguistic phenomenon that both shapes and is shaped by social and technological contexts.

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