

# The Role of TikTok in Shaping Generation Z's Slang: Semantic Change and Language Use in Digital Communication

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## ABSTRACT

This study was conducted because of the widespread use of slang among Generation Z children that they use to interact with each other. Slang is a type of informal, non-standard language that is used by certain social groups, particularly teenagers, for internal communication. It is intentionally designed to be unintelligible to those outside the group. Therefore, every community or even every generation has a slang language that is used and understood by their own group. This study aims to examine the slang of Generation Z youth which they use in the TikTok platform based on semantic meaning and context of use. The research approach used is to examine linguistic data in the form of the use of slang by Gen Z youth and interpret it. The source of research data is the result of collecting words from content and comments on the TikTok platform. The results of the study show that the use of slang by Generation Z youth mostly comes from foreign languages, such as 'slay', 'hits different', 'clingy', 'delulu', 'flexing', that experience shortening, acronyms, reversals, and shifts in semantic meaning based on the context of the words used. Stephen Krashen's theory is also used in this paper to analyze the acquisition of slang used by Generation Z youth. The significance of social media platforms like TikTok as influential sites of language evolution and informal linguistic education, where youth not only consume but actively shape language trends. the study also illustrates how slang serves as a marker of identity, group belonging, and social cohesion among Generation Z, reflecting broader cultural shifts in emotional expression, social relationships, and communication styles.

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## INTRODUCTION

Social media is a digital platform that provides facilities for conducting social activities. The first generation, often called generation Z, grew up entirely with social media. Generation Z is a digital generation that grew up in the midst of rapid technological advances, with social media as a consumption of daily life (Reinikainen et al., 2020). As technology develops, there are many changes that will occur, one of which is language change. This is influenced by many factors, such as social interaction, technology, and lifestyle. For example, new words can be created by technological advances and innovations (Stahl & Literat, 2022). Continuous communication within and outside the country can also cause language change. These language changes that continue to develop from generation to generation create a distinctive slang language that is often used by generation Z or gen Z.

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Slang is a type of non-standard language used by a community in daily conversation. This non-standard language is usually only understood by the community because it contains confidentiality (Saputra et al., 2023). Therefore, slang is often used by a community that understands its use and is limited to communication between members who understand the language.

The term Gen Z slang on social media is a linguistic phenomenon that developed rapidly in the generation born in the 1990s to early 2010. Thus, Teng and Joo (2023) find that Gen Z slang is said to have emerged as a response to the speed of contemporary communication, which is more visual, faster, and more informal. Gen Z slang is often found on digital platforms, one of which is Tik Tok, where communication is short and creative (Stahl & Literat, 2022).

The use of slang actually changes the meaning of a word from its original meaning. Slang terms are used in the Gen Z environment not because they learn them, but because they understand the terms because of the intimacy of communication between them both on social media and in the real world (Marzuki & Mustapha, 2023; Yusuf et al., 2023; Rahmah & Khasanah, 2023). This kind of situation can be called language acquisition. An example of this acquisition method does seem easier in language acquisition, because without us being able to absorb the language directly without learning it.

The existing literature on Generation Z slang usage on TikTok reveals several areas where the present study contributes uniquely. While prior research has explored the structural aspects of Generation Z's linguistic innovations on TikTok (Ugoala, 2024), the frequency and contexts of slang use (Marzuki & Mustapha, 2024), sociolinguistic typologies of slang (Siagian et al., 2024), and the cultural dynamics of cyber slang (Nurhayati & Putri, 2024), there remains limited focus on the semantic changes underpinning slang evolution and the natural acquisition processes involved. Most previous studies emphasize descriptive or quantitative analyses of slang forms and usage patterns, with less attention to the cognitive and linguistic mechanisms by which Generation Z acquires and adapts slang in informal digital environments. Furthermore, while some research touches on the social functions of slang, comprehensive interpretation through established language acquisition theories, such as Krashen's input and affective filter hypotheses, is notably absent (1985). This study addresses these gaps by integrating semantic analysis with a theoretical framework that explains how slang is acquired naturally through digital interaction, thereby enriching the understanding of language change in the context of social media.

The novelty of this research lies in its combined approach to examining Generation Z slang on TikTok through both semantic meaning and language acquisition theory. Unlike previous studies that primarily list slang forms or investigate usage frequencies and social motivations, this study uniquely interprets slang evolution as a dynamic process shaped by semantic shifts – such as shortening, acronyms, reversals, and contextual meaning changes – and the naturalistic acquisition of slang vocabulary without formal instruction. The application of Krashen's theory offers a fresh perspective by framing social media platforms as informal classrooms where comprehensible input and low affective filters facilitate effortless language learning. Additionally, this study highlights the predominance of foreign-origin slang terms adapted by Generation Z and explores how these terms function as markers of identity and social cohesion within their digital communities. This theoretical and semantic focus provides deeper insights into the cognitive and social dimensions of slang, distinguishing the study from earlier descriptive or sociolinguistic investigations.

In this article, the analysis of slang use is based on Stephen Krashen's theory of language acquisition. This theory is used as a framework to understand how Generation Z learns and uses slang on social media, focusing on how language input affects the acquisition of new vocabulary. Krashen's theory will be the main foundation in this analysis and will be elaborated upon in more depth in the discussion section.

## METHOD

The research method employed in this study is qualitative descriptive research, which is particularly suited to exploring and describing linguistic phenomena such as slang usage and semantic changes among Generation Z on the TikTok platform. This approach allows the researcher to provide a detailed and systematic description of slang words, expressions, and their evolving meanings within the social media context, emphasizing the naturalistic and contextual nature of language use (Ugoala, 2024; Yusuf et al., 2023; Rahmah & Khasanah, 2023).

Data collection was conducted through observation techniques, specifically by monitoring and recording slang terms found in TikTok video content and user comments. This process involved systematically searching for relevant linguistic data on the platform, capturing authentic examples of slang as used by Generation Z in their digital interactions. The data consisted of words, sentences, and expressions that reflect the informal, non-standard language characteristic of this demographic.

Following data collection, the analysis phase focused on describing the meanings of the collected slang terms and identifying semantic changes – shifts in meaning from the original or traditional sense to new, contextually driven interpretations. This involved interpreting the slang within its social and communicative context to understand how Generation Z repurposes language creatively to express identity, emotions, and social relationships. The analysis also considered linguistic processes such as shortening, acronym formation, reversals, and semantic shifts that characterize the slang vocabulary. The research stages can be summarized as follows:

- Data Search: Observing and collecting slang terms from TikTok videos and comments.
- Data Description: Detailing the meanings and usage contexts of the slang terms.
- Data Analysis: Interpreting semantic changes and the sociolinguistic functions of slang.
- Conclusion Drawing: Synthesizing findings to explain how slang evolves and is acquired naturally by Generation Z through social media interactions.

This qualitative descriptive method enables a comprehensive understanding of the dynamic and evolving nature of slang within digital youth culture, highlighting how exposure to social media content facilitates natural language acquisition and semantic innovation without formal instruction (Hamm & Hoeting, 2023). The study's method also aligns with theoretical perspectives on language acquisition that emphasize the role of comprehensible input and affective factors in informal learning environments.

## FINDING AND DISCUSSION

### Findings

#### The Slang Language Acquisition in TikTok

In this discussion, Stephen Krashen's theories are used to analyze how Generation Z learns and uses slang on social media. One of the main theories used is the Input Hypothesis, which emphasizes that language acquisition occurs when a person is exposed to input that is slightly more complex than their current language ability, known as 'i+1.'

'We acquire language in only one way: when we understand messages, or obtain "comprehensible input". If the input is understood and there is enough of it, the necessary grammar is automatically provided. (Higgs & Krashen, 1982, p. 21). This suggests that language acquisition takes place automatically when individuals are exposed to understandable input. Therefore, the slang acquired by Generation Z on social media serves as a form of input that helps them enrich their informal language skills.

In addition to the input hypothesis, Krashen's theory also involves the affective filter hypothesis, which identifies the role of emotional factors in the language acquisition process. According to Krashen, 'The affective filter hypothesis captures the relationship between affective variables and the process of second language acquisition. those whose attitudes are not optimal for second language acquisition will have a high affective filter' (Higgs & Krashen, 1982, p. 31). This means that a person's attitudes and emotions, such as motivation, confidence, and anxiety, can affect their ability to absorb a new language.

In the context of Generation Z on social media, these platforms often create a comfortable and relaxed environment where users feel freer to experiment with language. This allows them to have a low affective filter, which in turn makes it easier for them to accept and use new slang. When they see their peers using certain terms or expressions, their curiosity and desire to engage in social interaction encourage them to adopt the slang.

Overall, the combination of the input hypothesis and affective filter hypothesis explains how Generation Z learns and adopts slang on social media. Their experience with comprehensible input through various content on social media platforms not only enriches their vocabulary but also shapes the way they informally communicate. Through this understanding, we can see how language is constantly evolving in dynamic social contexts and how new generations adapt to these changes.

According to research, 33% of Gen Z use their cell phones for more than 6 hours every day and use social media more frequently than previous generations. Even the survey shows that Gen Z in Indonesia spends 8.5 hours every day (Kim et al., 2020). This is related to the emergence and development of slang on social media, where slang has become an important part of daily communication on digital platforms such as TikTok. With the time they spend on these platforms, Gen Z has a big influence in shaping language trends. They often use abbreviated words because they communicate in a short period of time on social media; this allows slang to emerge, which then becomes widespread through the use of mobile phones and digital interactions among their generation.

The slang used by Gen Z is usually short and expressive, often containing references to global trends or pop culture. Gen Z slang is rapidly changing and evolving due to the fact that information spreads quickly on social media. New terms or words can appear within days and spread virally across various digital platforms. Since trends are constantly changing, today's popular terms may no longer be relevant in a few months. For example, a term like "Bae," which used to be used to refer to a term of endearment for a girlfriend or

loved one, is now being overtaken by other words like “boo,” which are used with the same meaning.

The use of abbreviations in Generation Z interactions has become an interesting phenomenon. In a fast-paced and information-heavy world, abbreviations allow users to convey concepts or emotions more concisely. Abbreviations such as “BRB” (Be Right Back) express the meaning that a person will pause from an online conversation and will be back soon. It’s a simple, shorthand way to avoid the misconception that they won’t be responding anytime soon.

Stephen Krashen's analysis is used in this paper because most of Gen Z get and use these slang terms from their subconscious, or it can also be called this method is a method of "taking" language naturally by trying to understand the meaning of the message conveyed in the process when we communicate with our environment either on social media or in real life (Higgs & Krashen, 1982). Basically, Generation Z does not learn these slang languages, but they become accustomed to and understand the language they use among themselves because of the intense communication that makes them inevitably accept and understand the language. This language acquisition comes more from acquisition than learning, because speakers do not learn these languages but unconsciously use them in terms of communication to interact.

There are many types of slang used by Generation Z to communicate with each other; some will be discussed as follows. One example is Cap. In semantic terms, a cap is a hat, an object that covers or protects the head; its shape is like a head covering with a duck's mouth (there is a wide part in the front) to protect it from the heat. However, the cap in Generation Z slang is interpreted as something else, namely, which means lies or lying. So, if someone says "no cap," it means that he is emphasizing that he is honest and can be trusted in his words. Sometimes also the cap that has a real meaning with the cap used for slang still has a connection because sometimes generation Z uses the emoji cap as hat to emphasize lies. So, when communicating and then they use the hat emoji at the end of the sentence, it means that he is just lying.

The next generation Z term used as slang is salty. Salty has the semantic meaning of salty; this word is usually used to describe food or dishes that have a salty taste. However, the word salty in the term Gen Z has another meaning, namely to describe someone who is too sensitive, defensive, or angry, especially when responding to criticism or belittling assumptions. This term refers to someone who is angry, sarcastic, or bitter, which is often said in an irritated or frustrated tone. In other situations, sometimes the word salty is also used as a joke between friends.

The word *slay*, as seen in one of the TikTok comments at Figure 1, is a popular slang term among Generation Z. Traditionally, *slay* meant to kill, synonymous with terms like "murder," "assassinate," or "destroy." However, among Gen Z, it has undergone a significant semantic shift. The word now conveys admiration and praise, often used to compliment someone for doing something exceptionally well or looking extraordinary. For instance, "She’s really slaying wearing that dress" means the person is wearing the dress in a way that looks stunning or stylish.

This change reflects Gen Z's creativity in repurposing language to suit their cultural dynamics and values. Social media platforms, especially TikTok, have played a central role in popularizing *slay*, spreading it through trends and viral content. The evolution of this term



highlights the fluidity of language and demonstrates how younger generations reshape meanings to align with their identities and forms of self-expression.



Figure 1 example of the using of "slay" in TikTok  
Source: Tiktok

Another popular Generation Z slang word is *simp* that can be seen at Figure 2. Traditionally, the word *simp* in the dictionary refers to someone considered stupid or foolish. This original meaning typically describes a lack of intelligence or an unwise person. However, in Gen Z slang, *simp* has taken on an entirely different connotation. It now refers to someone who goes above and beyond for someone they like, often displaying excessive sympathy, devotion, or attention. This behavior is usually directed at someone who does not reciprocate their feelings, with the *simp* seeking affection or romantic validation. For instance, someone might be labeled a *simp* for constantly doing favors or making sacrifices for a crush who remains indifferent.

The term *simp* gained popularity through social media platforms such as TikTok, Twitter, and memes, where it is often used humorously or critically to call out perceived acts of unnecessary devotion. Despite its lighthearted use in some contexts, it also carries undertones of critique, highlighting the perceived imbalance in relationships or interactions. The rise of this term reflects how Gen Z uses slang not only to describe behavior but also to challenge and comment on social norms, particularly around relationships and gender dynamics. This semantic shift demonstrates the dynamic nature of language and how cultural trends influence the evolution of meanings.

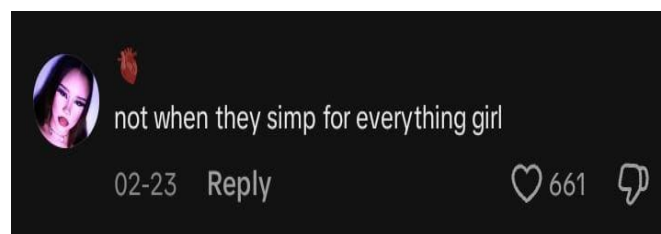


Figure 2 example of the using of "simp" in TikTok  
Source: Tiktok

The next Generation Z term used as slang is *cringe*. Traditionally, the word *cringe* means to physically recoil or flinch in response to fear, embarrassment, or discomfort. It often describes a reaction to something unpleasant or awkward. However, in Gen Z slang, *cringe* has taken on a broader, more informal meaning. It is used to describe something or someone

that is awkward, embarrassing, or trying too hard to be cool, often causing second-hand embarrassment.

This term is frequently used in online contexts, especially on platforms like TikTok and Twitter, to criticize content, behavior, or trends perceived as outdated, overly dramatic, or socially awkward. For example, a poorly executed dance video or an overly sentimental social media post might be labeled as "so cringe." Additionally, in some contexts, *cringe* is used humorously among friends to poke fun at each other in a lighthearted way, reinforcing its role as a versatile and context-dependent term in Gen Z's evolving lexicon.

There are many more types of terms that today's Generation Z uses to communicate, including 'hits different,' 'clingy,' 'delulu,' 'flexing,' and many more. These slang terms often reflect the creativity and expressiveness of the younger generation, who adapt quickly to changing cultural trends and social contexts. Most of these terms are used in specific situations and have semantic meanings that can vary depending on the context. Generation Z uses them primarily for interaction with each other, creating a sense of shared identity and group belonging.

Interestingly, despite not formally studying these terms, they can easily understand and use them. This phenomenon is largely due to their immersion in an environment rich in these expressions, whether through social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram or online gaming communities. Through exposure in everyday interactions, they acquire these slang terms naturally, a process that is in line with Stephen Krashen's theory of language acquisition. Informal and context-based learning environments promote understanding and the ability to dynamically adapt language use, which contributes to the evolution of language among this generation.

The final example is the slang term *cringe*, which has undergone a change in meaning over time. It is now used to describe a more abstract emotional response. This emotional response usually describes indirect embarrassment or discomfort caused by awkward or socially unacceptable behavior. This shows the evolution that language is volatile, words change according to cultural and technological changes. In today's usage, the term *cringe* has become important in Generation Z's vocabulary especially on TikTok. It is used as an adjective as well as a noun such as "that video was so cringe" and "this made me cringe. with its versatility, people can easily express their disagreement or discomfort often in a humorous or sarcastic way. Once again Generation Z likes short and easy to understand communication, which is the reason behind this change.

TikTok as a trend-driven platform and short-form video content, plays an important role in the spread of slang such as *cringe*. Using an algorithmically customized feed, the platform provides its users with an infinite stream of cultural references and linguistic innovations. When influencers or viral content creators frequently use slang terms, they often capture the attention of viewers to the point where many recognize and use them. For example, a custom on TikTok might be to use the word *cringe* to describe an awkward social situation. The term is normalized and reinforced in digital discourse because of this usage. TikTok also encourages participatory culture, which allows terms like *cringe* to exist and evolve as its users change the slang according to their subculture or personal identity.

When the meaning of a word changes due to cultural or social factors, it is called semantic change. Today, *cringe* often carries a negative connotation, describing something awkward, outdated or socially inappropriate. For example, videos on TikTok that mimic outdated internet humor might be labeled *cringe* to highlight their lack of relevance.

The last example is the term *clingy* used to describe physical attachment, which is often used metaphorically for interpersonal relationships. as in Friends or partners who require a lot of attention may be called *clingy*. TikTok users often use the term *clingy* to describe playful intimacy or affection in close relationships. The shift from a negative meaning to an almost celebratory acknowledgment of emotional connection is demonstrated by phrases like “clingy but in a cute way” and hashtags like #clingyboyfriend. In addition, the nature of interaction on TikTok encourages the active use of slang. Users combine videos, duet and comment, creating a feedback loop where meaning is reinforced and nuances are scrutinized. This interactive theme aligns with Krashen's concept that natural communication helps people learn languages, and demonstrates how platforms like TikTok serve as informal classrooms for modern slang.

In addition, *clingy* is a term often used to describe complex social relationships. For example, when someone refers to themselves as *clingy* when joking or self-deprecating, it can prevent others from criticizing them and make them seem more approachable. On the other hand, calling others *clingy* is usually done in a humorous tone to exaggerate the person's behavior. The term *clingy* can have many meanings and help regulate social relationships, as this usage shows.

Gen Z's changing perspective on emotional dependency is also demonstrated by their positive interpretation of the word *clingy*. Gen Z often sees vulnerability as something normal and healthy in human interactions, in contrast to previous generations who may have seen it as something bad. TikTok videos that depict *clingy* behavior in a humorous or affectionate way demonstrate this cultural shift, showing how the term has been re-contextualized to fit contemporary values, underscoring the innovative and flexible nature of Gen Z communication. Not only has this generation created a new language by accepting and redefining words like *clingy*, but it also demonstrates a shift in society's view of relationships and emotional expression.

## Discussion

The results of this study reveal that Generation Z's slang usage on TikTok is predominantly characterized by lexical borrowing from foreign languages, semantic shifts, and morphological processes such as shortening, acronyms, and reversals. These findings were largely expected given the dynamic and fast-evolving nature of digital communication platforms. The semantic changes observed—for instance, the transformation of words like “slay” from its original meaning of “to kill” to a term of admiration, or “simp” evolving from a derogatory label to one describing excessive devotion—underscore the creative linguistic adaptations that Generation Z employs to express identity and social nuances. The prominent role of TikTok as a trend-driven platform with a participatory culture facilitates rapid dissemination and normalization of such slang, aligning with Krashen's Input Hypothesis and Affective Filter Hypothesis (1985), which explain how comprehensible input in a low-anxiety environment promotes natural language acquisition. An unexpected but insightful pattern was the positive recontextualization of terms like “clingy,” which traditionally carried negative connotations but have been reframed by Generation Z to signal affectionate intimacy, reflecting broader cultural shifts in emotional expression and interpersonal relationships.

Comparing these results with previous studies further validates and enriches the understanding of Generation Z slang practices. Ugoala (2024) similarly highlights the



emergence of new linguistic structures on TikTok, emphasizing neologisms, acronyms, and semantic innovation, which corroborates the present study's observations about the linguistic creativity of Generation Z. Marzuki and Mustapha (2024) found that social media is the primary source of slang acquisition and that TikTok slang is frequently used in informal contexts such as school and work, supporting the notion that digital platforms serve as informal learning environments. The sociolinguistic categorization of slang by Siagian et al. (2024), which identifies society slang as the most dominant type, aligns with the current study's findings that slang functions as a social marker and tool for group cohesion. Nurhayati and Putri's (2024) virtual ethnographic approach further complements this research by demonstrating how slang on TikTok forms a cyberculture that influences real-world communication habits, reinforcing the idea that digital slang acquisition extends beyond virtual spaces. Meanwhile, Melissa et al. (2024) provide a generational comparison that contextualizes the distinctiveness of Gen Z's text-based and meme-influenced slang, highlighting how technological environments shape linguistic trends.

From these findings, a broader deduction can be made regarding the role of social media as a critical arena for language evolution and informal linguistic education. TikTok and similar platforms function as naturalistic "classrooms" where Generation Z is exposed to rich, comprehensible linguistic input in engaging, low-pressure contexts, facilitating the subconscious acquisition of slang. This suggests that language acquisition theories traditionally applied to second language learning can be effectively extended to understanding how informal vernaculars develop in digital native communities. Practically, educators and language researchers should acknowledge the legitimacy and pedagogical potential of social media slang as a reflection of contemporary language use and as a resource for engaging youth in language learning. Additionally, the study highlights the importance of recognizing slang as a marker of identity and social belonging, which has implications for intercultural communication and social integration in increasingly digital societies.

In summary, a general finding arising from this research is that the naturalistic acquisition of slang through digital media exposure will continue to accelerate language change, leading to increasingly fluid and context-dependent linguistic forms among younger generations. Future research could investigate how these evolving slang terms influence formal language registers or cross-generational communication. Furthermore, longitudinal studies could explore the persistence or obsolescence of digital slang as social media platforms and youth cultures evolve. This study thus contributes to a growing understanding of language as a living, adaptive system shaped by technological, social, and cultural forces in the digital age.

## CONCLUSION

This article explores how Generation Z learns and uses slang on social media through the lens of Stephen Krashen's theory of language acquisition. The combination of the input hypothesis and the affective filter hypothesis explains how Gen Z acquires new slang terms without formal learning but rather through natural exposure and interaction on digital platforms. Social media serves as the main source of comprehensible input for Gen Z, where slang is constantly evolving and spreading rapidly. The relaxed and informal environment of these platforms lowers their affective filters, allowing them to easily adopt new terms and expressions. Generation Z's frequent use of social media, combined with rapid technological advancements, has accelerated language change and the development of unique slang. These terms often reflect current trends, pop culture, and global interactions, giving rise to short

and expressive forms of language. As Gen Z spends a lot of time on social media, they are not only passive consumers but also active participants in shaping modern language trends. This dynamic relationship between language and social media underscores the importance of understanding how language is acquired in contemporary digital spaces. By analyzing these changes through Krashen's framework, we gain insight into how slang is naturally absorbed by Generation Z, further demonstrating the constant evolution of language in the modern era.

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