

## **The Linguistics of Slang: Understanding Gen Z's Digital Language on TikTok**

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### **Abstract**

This study investigates the use of slang by Generation Z on the social media platform TikTok, focusing on the Indonesian context. As digital communication becomes increasingly integrated into daily life, slang emerges as a linguistic tool for identity expression, creativity, and group affiliation. The research employs a qualitative-descriptive approach supported by observation, document analysis, and interviews with Gen Z TikTok users. A total of 32 slang terms were identified and analyzed based on their forms, functions, and sociocultural implications. The findings reveal that TikTok slang is not only influenced by global digital trends but also localized through code-mixing with Bahasa Indonesia. Slang functions as a medium for humor, critique, solidarity, and participation in viral content, reflecting the dynamic linguistic practices of digital youth. This study contributes to digital sociolinguistics by highlighting how audiovisual platforms like TikTok shape the evolution of language in informal online spaces.

### **Key words**

Digital Linguistics, Generation Z, Slang, Sociolinguistics, TikTok

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## **Introduction**

The developments in digital technology have had a major impact on various aspects of human life, including in terms of language use. One of the most visible impacts is the emergence of new forms of language that develop in digital spaces, especially social media. Generation Z, as a group that grew up with the internet and mobile technology, are active user of various digital platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and especially TikTok. The TikTok platform is currently one of the most popular social media platforms among young people due to its fast, visual, and interactive nature. More than just entertainment, TikTok has become a creative space where users not only upload videos but also create new trends, cultures, and forms of communication, including in terms of the use of informal language or slang (Syarif et al., 2023).

The digital slang used on TikTok is often transient, trend-following and rapidly changing. Nonetheless, these forms of language have deep social meaning. Slang not only functions as a means of communication but also as a symbol of group identity, a way of showing familiarity, and a form of resistance to standard or conventional language. Maharani et al. (2023) explained that in digital communities such as TikTok, the use of slang can show social affiliation and togetherness, especially among users who are the same age and cultural background. In addition, Jabeen & Nawaz (2025) noted that the development of digital slang is often influenced by meme culture, viral trends, and the speed of content dissemination in audiovisual-based platforms such as TikTok.

In Indonesia, this phenomenon is also strong. Young people, especially Gen Z, use a combination of Indonesian, English, and even local languages to express themselves more flexibly and creatively. This practice reflects the dynamics of their identities as part of the local culture as well as part of the global digital community. Dewi (2025) emphasizes that the digital identity of Indonesian teenagers is not only formed from the visuals and content they upload, but also from the language choices they use in interacting. In other words, language is an important element in the formation of digital personas.

While the use of slang on social media has often been the object of study, most of these studies have been conducted in Western contexts, often focusing on platforms such as Twitter or Instagram (Syarif et al., 2023). TikTok as a platform that combines elements of video, audio, text, and gestures, offers a different and interesting context for further research. On the other hand, research on the use of slang by Indonesian teenagers on TikTok is still extremely limited. In fact, this phenomenon has great potential to show how language changes in the digital era, especially in the context of Indonesian culture.

Based on this gap, this study aims to analyze the characteristics of Generation Z's use of slang on TikTok, as well as the factors that influence the formation and spread of slang among young people. Furthermore, this study will also look at how the use of slang on TikTok can play a role in shaping the social and cultural identity of its users. By using a sociolinguistic approach and qualitative analysis, this study is expected to contribute to the field of digital linguistics, as well as provide new insights for educators, researchers,

and social media practitioners who are interested in the phenomenon of language change in the digital era.

### **Literature Review**

Digital platforms have significantly changed the way young people play and create new languages. Studies on computer-mediated communication show that highly interactive audiovisual applications encourage rapid language evolution by favoring concise and novel expressions (Larson, 2013). TikTok, with its short-form videos and personalized “For You” feed, allows new slang to spread quickly-sometimes within hours-making it a great place to observe how slang evolves over time (Nurhayati & Putri, 2024).

In Indonesia, recent research highlights this scope for linguistic creativity. Jaya et al. (2025), for example, documented over 60 slang terms used by teenagers in Jakarta. Their findings showed a strong preference for abbreviations such as IYKYK and FR, which aligns with the fast-paced nature of TikTok content. Marzuki & Mustapha (2023) presented a structural typology of mispronunciations, word cuts, abbreviations, and interjections that became the basis of many subsequent studies.

In addition, Diobi & Nashruddin (2023) highlighted how students apply communication strategies, both verbal and nonverbal, to maintain interaction and meaning in English language classrooms. Although the context differs from social media, their findings emphasize the importance of strategic language use to sustain engagement, a feature that parallels how Gen Z users creatively manage communication through slang on digital platforms.

The structural description is unable to explain why certain forms become popular. Sociocultural research links slang used to identity work and community markers. Virtual ethnography research by Kusyairi et al. (2024) found that adolescents' language styles shifted from formal Indonesian to English-dominated slang to signify familiarity with peers and technological sophistication. Similar findings emerged in Nashrudina et al. (2025) who analyzed how phrases such as “delulu” or “main-character energy” became “in the know” membership badges that differentiated Gen Z from older users and commercial influencers.

The creative blending of English and Bahasa Indonesia, called “Indoglish” is a recurring theme. Alya et al. (2024) showed that code-mixed utterances (“delulu banget kamu”) portray a sense of multicultural presentness while maintaining local cultural influences. Putra et al. (2024) found that such mixed signs are three times more likely to appear in humor or self-mocking videos than in informational content, corroborating their role in attitude-making and social bonding.

Furthermore, Efendi et al. (2024) discussed how integrating poetic and aesthetic elements into English language teaching enhances students' linguistic sensitivity and creativity. This supports the notion that creative expression, including humor, rhythm,

and linguistic play, contributes to the evolution of digital slang, where aesthetic appreciation becomes part of youth identity construction online.

In addition to personal identity, TikTok slang illustrates more complex sociolinguistic processes. Syafa'ah & Haryanto (2023) outline pragmatic functions ranging from defusing disputes to hinting at irony, Domu et al. (2024) observe that "society slang" (e.g., spilling tea) spread indirectly into school conversations within a few weeks. While some researchers fear language degradation, others see this trend as a site for lexical enrichment and youth character building (Fadil Akbar & Hariyanto, 2024; Zulkhaeriyah et al., 2023)

Finally, researchers linked TikTok's recommendation engine to the rate of semantic change. Keidar et al. (2022) analyzed model frequency spikes for tokens such as rizz and gyatt, showing that algorithmic improvements shorten the lifespan of a term, but extend its initial range. Such improvements support (Ganie, 2023) who found that sentiment analysis models trained with "standard" Indonesian rapidly lose accuracy when exposed to emerging slang.

These studies show that TikTok slang in Indonesia (1) has a diverse structure, (2) is socially strategic, and (3) has algorithmic acceleration. However, there are not many studies that integrate these three dimensions in a single analysis, and most only focus on urban samples. This study aims to address this gap by combining observational data with user interviews to connect form, function, and diffusion within a broader sociocultural lens.

## **Research Method**

This study uses a qualitative-descriptive approach to analyze the characteristics and sociocultural functions of slang used by Gen Z Indonesians on the TikTok app. The analysis is conducted through the lens of sociocultural linguistics, which focuses on the interaction between language, identity, and digital usage on media platforms.

Data was collected using three main methods. First, observations were made by analyzing TikTok video content, including captions, comment sections, and audio overlays, to identify frequently used slang expressions. Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted with TikTok users from Gen Z to dig deeper into their perceptions, interpretations and motivations behind the use of slang. Third, literature analysis was used to review relevant literature and previous research, providing contextual grounding and theoretical support for the findings.

Based on these methods, a total of 32 slang expressions were collected. The data were analyzed in terms of frequency of use and communicative context within TikTok, function and intent such as emotional expression, identity performance, or trend engagement, as well as code-mixing tendencies between English, Indonesian, and regional dialects. Interview responses were cross-referenced with observed data to support interpretation and ensure that the findings reflect real-life language use among Indonesian Gen Z TikTok users.

## Findings

Researchers have found 32 slangs taken from interviewing sources who actively use TikTok social media, and some data taken from TikTok comments and videos. The following are the results of the slang analysis obtained:

**Table 1. Slang Terms Used by Generation Z on TikTok**

No	Slang Term	Source	Meaning
1	Ghosting	TikTok Video	Stopping communication
2	IYKYK	TikTok Video	If you know, you know
3	POV	TikTok Video	Point of view
4	TBH	TikTok Comments	To be honest
5	FR	TikTok Video	For real
6	OOT	TikTok Comments	Out of topic
7	IKR	Interview	I know, right
8	Slay	TikTok Video	To perform exceptionally well; very good or impressive
9	Sheesh	TikTok Video	To express surprise, amazement, annoyance, or disappointment
10	CMIW	TikTok Comments	Correct me if I'm wrong
11	Delulu	Interview	Delusional
12	Red Flag	TikTok Video	A warning sign or danger signal
13	Spill the Tea	TikTok Video	Gossip or share news
14	FYI	Interview	For your information
15	IRL	Interview	In real life
16	Noob	Interview	A new or inexperienced person (newbie)
17	ILY	Interview	I love you
18	LMAO	TikTok Comments	Laughing my ass off
19	JK	TikTok Comments	Just kidding
20	XOXO	Interview	Hugs and kisses
21	BRB	Interview	Be right back
22	GG	TikTok Comments	Good game
23	AFAIK	Interview	As far as I know
24	ZZZ	Interview	Sleeping or boredom
25	GJ	TikTok Comments	Good job
26	GL	Interview	Good luck
27	TTYN	Interview	Talk to you never
28	OMG	Interview	Oh my God
29	PAP	Interview	Post a picture
30	Split Bill	TikTok Comments	Dividing the total cost evenly
31	Green Flag	TikTok Comments	Positive traits or behaviors indicating a healthy situation
32	Toxic Relationship	TikTok Video	Unhealthy dynamics involving control, manipulation, or emotional harm

The findings reveal a rich repertoire of contemporary slang terms used by participants across three main interactional sources: TikTok videos, TikTok comment sections, and

interview data. A total of 32 slang expressions were identified, indicating the high density and diversity of informal lexical items circulating in digital and spoken interactions. These terms largely consist of abbreviations (e.g., *TBH*, *IKR*, *FYI*, *AFAIK*), acronyms (e.g., *LMAO*, *OMG*, *BRB*), clipped forms (e.g., *delulu*), and multi-word expressions (e.g., *spill the tea*, *red flag*, *toxic relationship*), reflecting typical patterns of linguistic economy and creativity in online discourse.

In terms of sources, TikTok videos and comment sections emerge as the dominant sites of slang usage, suggesting that short-form video platforms play a central role in disseminating and normalizing contemporary slang among young users. Slang items such as *ghosting*, *POV*, *slay*, *sheesh*, and *red flag* frequently appear in video content, where they function to frame narratives, express evaluation, and construct shared cultural meanings. Meanwhile, the comment sections contribute highly interactive forms such as *TBH*, *LMAO*, *JK*, *GG*, and *GJ*, which serve primarily interpersonal and phatic functions, including expressing agreement, humor, encouragement, and emotional stance.

The interview data reveal a slightly different pattern, dominated by abbreviations used in conversational management and interpersonal bonding, such as *IKR*, *FYI*, *IRL*, *ILY*, *BRB*, and *AFAIK*. These forms indicate that slang is not limited to public digital प्रदर्शन but is also integrated into spoken interaction, where it facilitates efficiency, informality, and social alignment between speakers.

Semantically, the identified slang terms cluster around several functional domains:

1. Interaction management (e.g., *BRB*, *TTYN*, *IRL*),
2. Evaluation and stance-taking (e.g., *slay*, *sheesh*, *red flag*, *green flag*),
3. Interpersonal closeness and affect (e.g., *ILY*, *XOXO*, *IKR*), and
4. Humor and playfulness (e.g., *LMAO*, *JK*, *ZZZ*).

Notably, the presence of evaluative expressions such as *toxic relationship*, *red flag*, and *green flag* indicates that slang is increasingly used not only for casual interaction but also for articulating social judgment and moral positioning in digital discourse.

Overall, these findings demonstrate that slang in this dataset functions as a key linguistic resource for expressing identity, managing interaction, and constructing shared meanings across digital and spoken contexts. The distribution across platforms further suggests that TikTok operates as a major catalyst for the diffusion of contemporary slang into everyday communication.

## Discussion

### 1. Types of Slang

This research identified three types of slang used on TikTok by Gen Z in Indonesia: acronyms/abbreviations, transliterated English words, and socially constructed

expressions. Acronyms such as ILY, FR, and TBH show TikTok's practical and short communication style. (McCulloch, 2019) observed that online language evolves to match the dynamics of the platform, thus tending to favor short and expressive abbreviations. Similarly, Tagliamonte (2016) explains that teenagers prefer slang that provides a short code, usually using very concise linguistic forms.

Reused English words like *slay*, *ghosting*, or *delulu* show semantic changes that index ironic or exaggerated meaning. (Eberhardt & Freeman, 2015) argue that slang often involves the creative recontextualization of dominant language, allowing marginalized youth identities to take on new meanings. This process, in TikTok, is aligned with elements of language use and social trends.

## 2. Functions of Slang in Gen Z Communication

Slang on TikTok serves multiple communicative purposes, it is often used to express emotion, create humor that resonates with shared cultural knowledge, and strengthen social bonds. Through repetitive use and shared understanding, slang becomes a tool for building familiarity among users, even among strangers. This creates a kind of digital intimacy that is fast, relatable, and often playful. Terms such as "LMAO" or "sheesh" are used to convey their feelings in a casual yet memorable way. These expressions lead to emotional engagement and engaging interaction with the content.

In addition, slang plays a role in providing a sense of group identity. Expressions like "Delulu" or "main character energy" reflect how users align themselves with current trends and specific TikTok subcultures. According to Tagliamonte (2016), slang serves as a key element in the construction of peer identity, acting as a linguistic signal that helps distinguish group membership and social belonging.

## 3. Code-Mixing and Identity Performance

Phrases such as "*delulu banget kamu*" or "*spill the tea dong*" illustrate the casual and creative combination of English and Indonesian commonly found in TikTok. This form of code mixing reflects more than just linguistic convenience, it signals cultural adaptability and digital fluency. For Gen Z users in Indonesia, switching between languages in a single sentence feels natural, especially when engaging with content that blends global pop culture and local humor. The way global phrases like "slay" or "delulu" are localized shows how Indonesian users actively reshape international digital culture to fit their sociolinguistic context (Lumintang & Rahmawati, 2023). Slang on TikTok is about more than just having fun. It serves multiple purposes-injecting humor, critiquing social norms, strengthening friendships, and positioning oneself in global and local culture.

In light of these findings, TikTok can be seen not just as a trend-driven app. But as a space where digital literacy, identity negotiation, and sociolinguistic creativity converge. Understanding how Gen Z engages with slang on this platform also sheds light on broader patterns of communication in a rapidly changing media landscape. TikTok's algorithms and interactive features play a major role in the rapid spread and evolution of

these expressions. Its audiovisual format invites users to creatively mix and adapt slang, making language on the platform more performative and context-based. One prominent feature is the frequent code-mixing between English and Indonesian, which adds richness to expressions and reflects the bilingual digital fluency of Gen Z (Adhi & Masykuroh, 2025).

This practice is particularly evident in comment sections, video captions, and voiceovers, where the blending of English phrases with Indonesian syntax is a distinctive style. Rather than being perfunctory, this use of mixed language is a strategic choice that allows users to convey tone, attitude and identity in a concise and trendy way. It also gives users creative freedom: they can decide when they want to sound casual, ironic, dramatic, or witty, all through the words they choose to mix.

Research supports this code-mixing pattern as more than just a trend, it is a meaningful way to signal social relationships and personal style. Daulay et al. (2024) found that TikTok users often switch languages to express emotions, build relationships, highlight their cultural background, and enhance connections. Likewise, A. Dewi & Markhamah (2023) observed that bilingual expressions on TikTok serve as communication strategies and symbols of cultural identity. Through this mixing of languages, Gen Z users create a sense of belonging while navigating multiple layers of identity in online spaces.

#### 4. Platform Influence and Slang Diffusion

TikTok's app interface, particularly its For You Page algorithm, plays a major role in how slang spreads. The algorithm does not just suggest content, it reinforces exposure to specific expressions based on viewing behavior, likes, and comments. As a result, users may repeatedly encounter certain slang terms across different contexts and creators, which strengthens familiarity and adoption. This continuous reinforcement turns niche slang into mainstream trends in a short time span.

Recent research emphasizes how social media platforms amplify community-preferred linguistic features by increasing the frequency of exposure and adoption within online networks. According to Ugoala (2024), Generation Z's creative use of language on TikTok demonstrates the basic human ability to use language to communicate. This research identified features such as acronyms used as word forms in speech, word and image combinations, new word usage, unique words, and short structures, all of which contribute to new variations in English.

As Aditiawarman et al. (2025) note, regional and cultural influences play a significant role in how slang is adopted and adapted, especially when digital media such as podcasts and short-form videos are mediators. Kandiawan (2022) argues that code-switching and slang should not be seen as a linguistic setback, but rather as a sign of Gen Z's evolving communicative skills. Recognizing this can lead to more inclusive and relevant teaching practices that reflect current linguistic realities. As highlighted by Anggraeni et al. (2023), platforms like TikTok influence not only linguistic creativity but

also speech styles and politeness norms, especially among younger users, suggesting the need for more focused sociolinguistic attention in this area.

In addition, Androutsopoulos (2014) elaborates on the concept of mediatization, explaining the influence of media logic on the content and social-structural dynamics of language change over time. He discusses how sociolinguistic change transcends the perceived boundaries of language use and language ideology, focusing on the interaction of both in the process of change, including the role of mass media in the process of homogenization of language attitudes and the spread of language innovations in mediatized societies. Overall, the way Gen Z users interact with slang on TikTok reflects more than just online playfulness, it reveals how digital spaces foster new linguistic behaviors, identities, and communities. As social media continues to evolve, so too will how languages are created, shared, and adapted in virtual environments.

### **Conclusion**

The findings reveal that TikTok slang is not just a language used for joking around, but also serves as a powerful medium for expressing identity, building community, and keeping up with digital trends. The use of code-switching and slang by Generation Z on TikTok reflects a form of communication that is linguistically adaptive and creative. This phenomenon demonstrates Gen Z's ability to adapt to the global context while maintaining their local identity through the mixing of Indonesian and English in digital interactions. In sum, TikTok slang represents a dynamic and multi-layered linguistic phenomenon shaped by technology, global influences and local identities. As digital culture continues to evolve, researching how young people use language online offers valuable insights into how they navigate and shape meaning in a connected world.

Future research is encouraged to expand demographic coverage and incorporate quantitative approaches to complement the depth of qualitative insights. By comparing the use of slang across different regions and languages, researchers can gain a more nuanced understanding of how global and local forces interact in shaping digital language. For educators and linguists, exploring the emergence of digital slang offers valuable opportunities to bridge the communication gap between generations and enrich language education. This research also opens the door for further exploration of how digital platforms shape the way young people express themselves and form language-based communities.

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