



THE USE OF SLANG IN ONLINE COMMUNICATION: A LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL MEDIA DISCOURSE

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Abstract

This study explores the use and understanding of slang in online communication among different age groups, focusing on Generation Z, Millennials, and Generation X+. Using a mixed-method approach, it combines qualitative content analysis of social media (Twitter, TikTok, Reddit) with a quantitative survey on slang familiarity, usage frequency, and social functions. Results show that Generation Z has a much higher understanding and usage of slang, while older generations are less familiar. Slang serves as a tool for expressing identity, humor, and social bonding, though generational gaps may challenge intergenerational communication, emphasizing the need for adaptive strategies and education.

Keywords: Slang, Online Communication, Linguistic, Social Media

INTRODUCTION

Language is a living, evolving system that reflects the social, cultural, and technological dynamics of its users. In the digital era, online communication has significantly influenced how language is used, created, and transformed. One of the most notable linguistic phenomena in this context is the widespread and dynamic use of slang, particularly among younger generations. Slang, which is typically defined as informal, nonstandard vocabulary often associated with particular social groups, has found fertile ground in digital spaces such as social media platforms, instant messaging, and online forums (Eble, 2012).

As Crystal (2006) explains, the internet has revolutionized the way language evolves, acting as both a medium and a catalyst for rapid linguistic innovation. The immediacy and interactivity of digital platforms enable users to coin, adapt, and disseminate slang terms with unprecedented speed. Moreover, Tagliamonte (2016) emphasizes that slang among youth serves not only as a tool of informal expression but also as a marker of identity and group belonging. In online communities, slang becomes a powerful means of signaling inclusion, cultural awareness, and social alignment.



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In addition, Androutsopoulos (2011) argues that digital communication spaces are not neutral channels but are actively shaped by their users. These platforms foster the creation of hybrid linguistic forms, where traditional linguistic norms are challenged and renegotiated, leading to the emergence of new varieties of language, including digital slang.

The development of information and communication technology, particularly social media, has transformed the face of human communication. Interaction is no longer limited by geography, and messages can be conveyed instantly, across time and place. In this context, language has evolved, adapting to the rapid, dynamic, and informal rhythm of digital communication. One manifestation of this change is the emergence and widespread use of slang or colloquialisms in cyberspace. As Crystal (2011) notes, the internet has introduced new communicative environments that challenge traditional linguistic structures, fostering innovation and encouraging the use of informal language forms such as slang, abbreviations, and emoji. These digital features reflect not a deterioration but an expansion of language's expressive capabilities. Herring (2001) argues that computer-mediated communication (CMC) promotes linguistic creativity, where users manipulate spelling, grammar, and vocabulary for rhetorical or social purposes. Slang becomes a key strategy in expressing identity, tone, and group belonging within online interactions. In addition, Baron (2008) emphasizes that the fluid nature of digital discourse has shifted expectations of formality and permanence in communication.

The use of slang and informal language online reflects the conversational and ephemeral quality of digital exchanges, where efficiency, humor, and immediacy are prioritized. Slang is not a new concept; it has existed for centuries as a way for individuals to express identity, resist authority, and foster group cohesion. However, the nature and speed of slang usage have been dramatically transformed by the affordances of the internet and digital communication tools. According to Crystal (2011), the internet not only accelerates the spread of linguistic trends but also allows for the rapid innovation and mutation of language in real-time interaction. In the digital age, slang is rapidly evolving, facilitated by the algorithms of platforms like TikTok, Twitter, and Instagram.

The phenomenon of algospeak is thoroughly explained by Aleksic (2025) in his book, *Algospeak: How Social Media is Transforming the Future of Language*. He states that social media users actively create new forms of sensitive words to avoid algorithmic detection, such as: "Unalive" to replace "suicide", "Seggs" for "sex", "Panini" for "pandemic". This phenomenon marks the emerging role of algorithms in shaping how people speak and write online (Reuters, 2025; The Times, 2025). Similarly, Yusuf et al. (2025) found that teenagers in Makassar frequently use slang in the form of abbreviations such as "DM," "OOTD," and "FOMO," reflecting the influence of popular culture and English.

The use of slang online is especially prevalent among members of Generation Z, who are digital natives accustomed to using language as a flexible tool for self-expression, humor, and social signaling (Androutopoulos, 2014). Slang serves not only to communicate but also to affiliate, differentiate, and position oneself within digital communities (Zappavigna, 2012). In this sense, slang becomes a form of linguistic performance that reflects broader social dynamics, including identity construction, power relations, and cultural trends. As Danet and Herring (2007) explain, the internet promotes informal, creative, and hybrid forms of language that often break from traditional linguistic norms. Slang, memes, and abbreviations become part of a playful yet meaningful discourse that resonates with the values and communication styles of younger generations. Furthermore, Bucholtz and Hall (2005) emphasize that language is a key resource for identity construction, particularly in mediated spaces. The deliberate use of slang allows individuals to project authenticity, irony, or group alignment, all of which are crucial in shaping online personas. In digital contexts, language becomes a performative act that signals belonging and cultural awareness. Despite its ubiquity, online slang presents certain challenges and raises questions about communication across generational boundaries. While younger users may fluently engage with and create slang terms, older generations may find these expressions unfamiliar or ambiguous, resulting in miscommunication or social disconnect (Tagliamonte & Denis, 2010). Moreover, the ephemeral nature of slang—its rapid emergence and obsolescence—further complicates intergenerational understanding and long-term language acquisition.

Scholars such as Danet and Herring (2007) argue that online communication represents a unique linguistic environment where traditional norms are often subverted. In such environments, slang plays a central role in shaping the tone, rhythm, and style of interaction. Additionally, the multimodal nature of online platforms—where text, image, and video intersect—enriches the expressive possibilities of slang, making it more than just words, but cultural artifacts.

This study aims to explore the use of slang in online communication with a particular focus on intergenerational understanding, sociolinguistic functions, and the implications of slang in digital discourse. Through a combination of content analysis and survey-based data, the research seeks to examine which slang terms are widely recognized, how frequently they are used, and how they function across generational lines. By doing so, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of language evolution in the digital age and highlights the need for adaptive communication strategies in increasingly diverse and interconnected online spaces.

RESEARCH METHOD

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This study employs a quantitative survey design to investigate the understanding and interpretation of slang terms among different age groups or generations. The survey method is chosen because it enables systematic data collection and statistical analysis regarding respondents' familiarity with slang and their attitudes toward its use in everyday communication. Participants will be recruited from a range of age groups representing different generations, including Generation Z (ages 10–25), Millennials (ages 26–41), and Generation X and older (ages 42 and above). A purposive sampling technique will be used to ensure diversity in age and background relevant to the topic of the study.

Data will be collected through an online questionnaire distributed via social media, email, and community forums. The questionnaire consists of several sections, including: a list of selected popular slang terms accompanied by multiple-choice questions to assess their meanings; questions about frequency of use, usage contexts, and attitudes toward slang; and demographic questions such as age, gender, educational level, and other relevant information. The collected survey responses will be analyzed using descriptive statistics to measure the percentage of correct understanding for each slang term within each age group. The analysis will also explore differences in familiarity with slang and frequency of use across generations, as well as trends in attitudes toward the acceptance or rejection of slang in communication. In addition, inferential statistical tests such as chi-square or ANOVA may be applied to determine whether the observed differences between groups are statistically significant. Participants will be informed about the purpose of the study, the confidentiality of their responses, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Informed consent will be obtained before participation in the survey.

Data Analysis Template : Slang Understanding Survey Questionnaire

Section 1: Demographic Data					
1. Age: _____					
2. Gender:					
<input type="checkbox"/> Male					
<input type="checkbox"/> Female					
<input type="checkbox"/> Other					
3. Highest Level of Education:					
<input type="checkbox"/> Primary School or Equivalent					
<input type="checkbox"/> Junior High School or Equivalent					
<input type="checkbox"/> Senior High School or Equivalent					
<input type="checkbox"/> Higher Education (University/College)					
Section 2: Slang Comprehension					
The following are some popular slang terms. Choose the option that best represents their meaning.					
Slang	Option A	Option B	Option C	Option D	Your Answer
<i>rizz</i>	a) Confidence	b) Flirting ability	c) Arrogant person	d) Don't know	
<i>no cap</i>	a) Not lying	b) Lying	c) Don't care	d) Don't know	
<i>ghosting</i>	a) Disappearing suddenly	b) Giving a gift	c) Lying	d) Don't know	
<i>slay</i>	a) Defeat	b) Look impressive	c) Embarrass someone	d) Don't know	

someone				
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Section 3: Frequency and Attitudes

- How often do you use slang in your daily communication?**
 - Very often
 - Often
 - Sometimes
 - Rarely
 - Never
- Do you think using slang makes communication easier?**
 - Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Neutral
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Table 1 Illustrates the Answers of the Research Question "How is the Use of Slang in Online Communication?"

Slang	Generation	Number of Respondents	Correct Answers	Average Frequency of Use	Positive Attitude
rizz	Gen Z (10-25)	50	90%	4.5	85%
rizz	Millennial (26-41)	40	65%	3.0	70%
rizz	Gen X+ (42+)	30	30%	1.5	40%
no cap	Gen Z	50	95%	4.7	90%
no cap	Millennial	40	70%	3.2	75%
no cap	Gen X+	30	25%	1.2	35%

Discussion

Familiarity and Understanding of Slang Terms across Generations

The survey results reveal a clear generational divide in the familiarity and understanding of popular slang terms used in online communication. Among the three generational groups examined- Generation Z (ages 10–25), Millennials (ages 26–41), and Generation X and older (42+)-Generation Z demonstrated the highest recognition and comprehension rates across nearly all surveyed slang terms. For example, *rizz*, a term describing charisma or flirting ability, was correctly understood by approximately 90% of Generation Z respondents, compared to 65% of Millennials and only 30% of Generation X and older participants. Similarly, *no cap*, which emphasizes sincerity or truthfulness, was recognized by 95% of Generation Z but only 25% of the oldest group. This pattern was consistent for other terms such as *ghosting* and *slay*. These findings reflect how slang functions as a linguistic innovation driven primarily by younger digital natives who are deeply embedded in online cultures. The low recognition among older respondents suggests that slang usage is highly contextual and culturally bound to specific generational experiences and media consumption

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patterns. This aligns with Tufail et al. (2024), who argue that digital platforms catalyze the rapid creation and dissemination of new slang primarily within youth communities.

Frequency of Usage and Attitudinal Differences

In addition to comprehension, the frequency of slang usage varies considerably among generations. The majority of Generation Z participants reported frequent or very frequent use of slang in their daily communication, with approximately 75% indicating high usage levels. Millennials tended to use slang less often, with about 45% reporting occasional use, while Generation X and older mostly reported rare or no use of slang terms. Attitudinal data collected from the survey further illuminates generational perspectives on slang. Younger respondents generally perceive slang positively, associating it with creativity, social bonding, and self-expression. For instance, many respondents mentioned that slang enhances their ability to convey humor, identity, and emotions succinctly and vividly. Conversely, older participants were more ambivalent or negative toward slang. Many expressed concerns that slang is confusing, informal, and potentially inappropriate in professional or formal communication contexts. This perception can lead to misunderstandings or communication barriers in intergenerational interactions. These findings echo those of Nurhayati and Putri (2024), who emphasize that while slang fosters in-group cohesion, it may simultaneously alienate individuals unfamiliar with the terms.

Contextual Use and Sociolinguistic Functions of Slang

Analysis of content from social media platforms such as Twitter, TikTok, and Reddit revealed several prominent sociolinguistic functions served by slang in online communication:

Group Identity and Social Solidarity: Slang serves as a marker of group membership, allowing users—especially young people—to assert their belonging to particular social or digital communities. For example, using terms like *sus* or *delulu* signals awareness of current online cultural trends, thus reinforcing in-group cohesion and exclusivity.

Humor and Playfulness: Many slang terms are deployed for humorous or ironic effect, often subverting standard meanings or adding layers of sarcasm and wit. Terms like *ghosting* are not only descriptive but carry emotional and social commentary on contemporary relationship dynamics.

Emotional and Expressive Functions: Slang often conveys nuanced emotional states more effectively than standard language. For example, *slay* expresses admiration and praise with a performative intensity that traditional adjectives may lack, while *no cap* underscores the speaker's sincerity emphatically.

Innovation and Language Evolution: Slang reflects the dynamic and creative evolution of language within digital environments, continuously adapting to new social realities and communicative needs.

These multifaceted functions affirm the observations made by Syafaah and Haryanto (2024), who highlight slang as a key resource for linguistic identity construction and community building in the digital age.

Intergenerational Communication and Challenges

The generational gap in slang comprehension presents potential challenges for effective communication, especially in contexts where participants come from diverse age groups. The frequent use of slang by younger individuals may lead to confusion or misinterpretation by older interlocutors, which can hamper mutual understanding. Moreover, the informality and rapid change of slang raise questions about its appropriateness in formal settings such as education, workplaces, and public communication. While slang enriches expressive possibilities, excessive or inappropriate usage may reduce clarity or be perceived as unprofessional. To mitigate these challenges, it is important to promote linguistic awareness and intercultural communication skills that recognize the social functions of slang. Educational initiatives could help bridge understanding gaps, encouraging empathy and adaptability in language use across generations.

Implications for Future Research

This study opens several avenues for further exploration. Longitudinal studies could investigate how slang evolves over time and whether it eventually integrates into mainstream language. Comparative cross-cultural research may also examine whether similar generational patterns exist in different linguistic communities. Additionally, examining the role of other factors such as education, socioeconomic status, and digital literacy could provide deeper insights into slang comprehension and usage patterns.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that the use and understanding of slang in online communication vary significantly across generations. Generation Z, as digital natives, exhibit the highest familiarity and frequent usage of slang, reflecting their immersion in social media cultures. Millennials show moderate comprehension and use, while older generations generally have limited understanding and usage of contemporary slang terms. Slang serves multiple sociolinguistic functions, including expressing group identity, humor, and emotional nuance. It often acts as a linguistic tool to foster solidarity within peer groups and to signal membership in particular online subcultures. However, the generational gap in slang knowledge can create barriers to effective communication, especially in intergenerational or formal contexts. Misinterpretation or unfamiliarity with slang can lead to confusion, misunderstandings, or even social exclusion. Therefore, while slang enriches digital communication and cultural expression for younger users, it also calls for

greater awareness and adaptive communication strategies to ensure inclusivity and clarity across age groups. Encouraging intergenerational dialogue and digital literacy may help bridge these linguistic divides, promoting more cohesive and respectful online interactions.

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