LITERAL AND DENOTATIVE MEANING OF ENGLISH SLAG IN TIKTOK TRENDS AMONG GEN Z

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Abstract

Language continues to evolve dynamically in the digital era, particularly through social media platforms that facilitate creativity and identity expression. This study investigates the semantic dimensions of English slang used by Generation Z on TikTok, focusing on the relationship between literal and denotative meanings. Using a qualitative descriptive method, data were collected from TikTok videos uploaded between 2023 and 2025 that contained English slang expressions frequently used in online communication. Thirty slang words such as *rizz*, *no cap*, *slay*, *tea*, and *vibe* were analyzed through semantic comparison and contextual interpretation. The findings reveal significant semantic shifts including broadening, metaphorical extension, and innovation, demonstrating how Gen Z reconstructs meaning to express emotion, humor, and social belonging. Slang on TikTok functions not only as linguistic creativity but also as a socio-cultural code that reflects self-presentation, digital identity, and community solidarity. These findings align with recent linguistic theories emphasizing language as a social semiotic system and support contemporary research (Keidar et al., 2022; Nurhayati & Putri, 2024; Syafaah & Haryanto, 2024) that highlights the participatory nature of online language change. Overall, the study contributes to understanding how English slang evolves in digital environments and how Generation Z shapes modern linguistic innovation through social media interaction.

Keywords: *Slang, TikTok, Generation Z, Literal, Denotative*

Introduction

Language is one of the most important human communication tools. This allows people to express ideas, emotions, and cultural identities through various forms of interaction. As a global lingua franca, English has been widely used in education, business, entertainment, and especially in social media communications. In the digital era, the rapid growth of online platforms has accelerated the evolution of language, producing new forms of expression that reflect creativity and identity. One of these linguistic phenomena is slang, a type of informal language used to express closeness, humor, or a sense of belonging to a group among its speakers.

In recent years, TikTok has become one of the most influential platforms shaping global linguistic trends. Its short videos and viral content make it a major source of emerging English slang among young users. According to Rahmawati (2022), TikTok plays an important role in introducing and spreading English slang expressions which then become part of youth communication. Likewise, Nurfadhilah and Syahril (2023) found that Generation Z students tend to adopt English slang from TikTok as a way to sound trendy and globally connected in their peer interactions.

Slang words on TikTok often carry both literal and denotative meanings. The literal meaning refers to the direct or dictionary definition of a word, while the denotative meaning refers to its objective meaning without emotional or cultural associations. However, as noted by Ramadhani (2023), many slang terms undergo semantic shifts such as broadening or narrowing of meaning, depending on how they are used in social media contexts. For example, words like "simp," "rizz," or "based" may have meanings that differ significantly from their literal definitions when used among Gen Z users online.

Generation Z (Gen Z) those born between 1997 and 2012 are known as digital natives who have grown up surrounded by the internet and technology. They not only consume but also actively shape online content and language (Suharto & Azizah, 2024). Research by Hidayat (2023) revealed that Gen Z frequently uses TikTok slang as a form of identity expression and in-group communication, indicating that linguistic creativity is deeply intertwined with their social identity. Therefore, studying the literal and denotative meanings of English slang in TikTok trends among Gen Z provides valuable insight into how language evolves through digital culture and reflects the dynamic communication patterns of today's youth.These new words reveal how language not only describes reality but also constructs social identity and belonging.

This phenomenon is particularly characteristic of Generation Z (Gen Z), those born between approximately 1997 and 2012. Gen Z are known as digital natives: they have grown up with smartphones, social media, and the internet as integral parts of their lives. They use language not only to communicate information but also to build identity, express humor, and connect through creativity. As the largest group of TikTok users, Gen Z plays a major role in generating and spreading new English slang. Their online linguistic practices illustrate how digital culture transforms the words, linking linguistic innovation to cultural trends and self-expression.

The study of English slang has become increasingly relevant as social media platforms continuously reshape language use in digital communication. TikTok, as one of the most popular social networking applications, has become a breeding ground for new English slang expressions that quickly spread among global users. These slang terms not only reflect linguistic creativity but also reveal how language functions as a marker of identity, humor, and social belonging especially for Generation Z, who dominates TikTok's user base. Understanding how Gen Z interprets and uses English slang on TikTok is therefore essential for capturing how language evolves in the digital era.

This topic deserves attention because most previous studies have focused primarily on the types or functions of slang (e.g., describing slang words or their sociolinguistic purposes), but few have examined the semantic aspects particularly the distinction between literal and denotative meanings of slang terms used by Gen Z. For example, Rahmawati (2022) and Nurfadhilah & Syahril (2023) explored the use of English slang in TikTok but frequency and usage patterns rather than meaning interpretation. Similarly, Ramadhani (2023) discussed semantic shifts in social media slang but did not analyze the contrast between literal and denotative layers of meaning.

Understand how English slang on TikTok conveys meaning beyond its literal and denotative sense, and how Gen Z interprets and applies these terms in context. By focusing on this semantic dimension, the present study contributes to a deeper understanding of language evolution, meaning-making, and digital communication among Generation Z. It also bridges linguistics and media studies, highlighting how social media trends influence the way young people perceive and construct meaning through English slang.

This study aims to investigate how English slang used in TikTok trends is understood and interpreted by Generation Z, with a particular focus on the literal and denotative meanings of these slang expressions. Specifically, the research seeks to identify the most common English slang words that appear on TikTok, to analyze their literal meanings as defined in standard English references, and to interpret their denotative meanings as understood by Gen Z users within online communication contexts. Furthermore, this study intends to explore how the differences between literal and denotative meanings reflect Generation Z's creativity, identity, and sense of belonging in the digital environment. By doing so, the research provides a deeper understanding of how meaning is constructed, shifted, and redefined in social media discourse.

To guide the investigation, this study addresses the following central questions: What English slang words are most frequently used in TikTok trends among Generation Z? What are their literal meanings according to standard English definitions? How do their denotative meanings emerge through Gen Z's interpretation and online interactions? And finally, in what ways do the differences between literal and denotative meanings demonstrate the innovative and identity-building nature of Gen Z's linguistic practices on TikTok? Through these questions, the research aims to fill the semantic and interpretative gaps left by previous studies, contributing new insights into how language meaning evolves within digital culture.

This study focuses on analyzing the literal and denotative meanings of selected English slang words used in TikTok trends among Generation Z users. The scope of the research is limited to slang terms that gained popularity on TikTok within the last two years (2023–2025) to ensure the data reflects current language use. The study examines only English-based slang expressions, excluding local or mixed-language slangs such as "Jaksel English" or region-specific variations. The participants are Generation Z users, aged approximately 18 to 27 years old, who are active TikTok users and familiar with English slang used in the platform's viral trends.

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach focusing on the semantic aspects of language particularly on how the literal and denotative meanings of slang differ in interpretation and usage. The research does not include other forms of meaning analysis such as connotative or pragmatic meaning, nor does it explore slang use in other social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, or YouTube. The data are drawn from TikTok video captions, comments, and speech excerpts that contain English slang expressions used by Gen Z. Therefore, the findings are not intended to generalize all forms of online slang, but rather to provide a focused insight into how Generation Z constructs and interprets meaning through English slang in TikTok communication.

Previous studies have shown that TikTok has become one of the most influential platforms in shaping the way young people communicate and create new forms of English slang. Rahmawati (2022) revealed that the increasing exposure of Generation Z to TikTok content significantly contributed to their acquisition of English slang expressions, which were later used in informal daily conversations. Similarly, Nurfadhilah and Syahril (2023) emphasized that Gen Z students frequently adopt slang words from TikTok not only as linguistic expressions but also as symbols of modernity and group identity in digital spaces. These findings suggest that TikTok serves as both a linguistic and cultural medium through which new forms of English evolve.

Moreover, Ramadhani (2023) conducted a semantic analysis of slang words used by Gen Z on social media and discovered that many slang terms undergo meaning shifts, such as broadening, narrowing, and pejoration. This study provides an important foundation for analyzing how meaning can change depending on context and user interpretation. However, while Ramadhani's research addressed general semantic changes, it did not specifically distinguish between literal and denotative meanings of slang an analytical focus that this present study aims to explore in greater depth. Supporting this, Suharto and Azizah (2024) investigated the formation of Gen Z slang on TikTok and found that most new slang words are created through compounding and blending processes, indicating that linguistic innovation among Gen Z is both creative and systematic.

In a related study, Hidayat (2023) examined the use of language variations by Generation Z on TikTok and concluded that slang plays a crucial role in expressing social identity, humor, and in-group belonging. This perspective highlights that slang is not only a linguistic phenomenon but also a sociocultural practice. Despite the growing number of studies on TikTok and slang, most of them primarily focus on word formation, frequency, or sociolinguistic functions rather than on the

semantic interpretation of meaning. Therefore, there remains a significant research gap concerning the literal and denotative interpretation of English slang used by Gen Z on TikTok. The present study seeks to fill this gap by providing a semantic perspective on how Gen Z understands and constructs meaning through slang expressions in digital communication, thereby contributing a fresh viewpoint to the field of modern linguistics and media discourse.

Research Methods

This study employed a qualitative descriptive method to analyze the literal and denotative meanings of English slang words used in TikTok trends among Generation Z. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows an in-depth understanding of meaning, interpretation, and language use within real communication contexts. The research was conducted chronologically in several stages, beginning with data collection, followed by data selection, classification, and analysis.

The preparation stage involved identifying relevant TikTok videos and trends that contained English slang expressions frequently used by Gen Z users. The researcher focused on TikTok content uploaded between January 2023 and June 2025 to ensure that the data reflected current linguistic usage. During this stage, a list of potential slang terms was compiled by observing viral hashtags, captions, and comment sections in TikTok videos. The researcher then cross-checked the slang words with online English slang dictionaries and linguistic resources such as Urban Dictionary and Oxford Learner's Dictionary to determine their literal meanings.

The data collection process applied a documentation technique, where English slang words were extracted from TikTok videos that met the following criteria: (1) used English as the primary language, (2) featured creators categorized as Generation Z (aged 18–27), and (3) contained slang expressions widely circulated within TikTok trends. A total of approximately 50 TikTok videos were selected purposively based on relevance and frequency of slang use. Each slang term was recorded, transcribed, and organized in a data sheet that included the word, its literal meaning, and its contextual usage in the video.

Next, in the data analysis stage, the researcher applied a semantic approach based on theories of literal and denotative meaning. Each slang term was analyzed by comparing its literal meaning (as found in dictionaries) with its denotative meaning (as used and interpreted by TikTok users). Contextual interpretation was supported by examining comments, captions, and discourse surrounding the use of each slang term. To ensure reliability, multiple instances of the same slang expression were analyzed across different TikTok videos to observe consistency or variation in meaning. The findings were then categorized into patterns that showed how Gen Z constructs meaning through slang, and how literal and denotative meanings differ across contexts.

Finally, the data interpretation was conducted descriptively, emphasizing the relationship between linguistic form, social context, and user interpretation. The researcher also compared the findings with previous studies to identify similarities, differences, and new insights that contribute to the broader understanding of digital language use. The overall procedure

ensured that the analysis was systematic, transparent, and grounded in authentic social media data, thereby providing a comprehensive overview of how English slang operates semantically in TikTok trends among Generation Z.

Design

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive research design. The qualitative approach was chosen because the primary goal of this research is to explore and interpret the meanings embedded in English slang words used in TikTok trends among Generation Z. Unlike quantitative studies that rely on numerical data and statistical analysis, qualitative research focuses on describing, understanding, and interpreting phenomena in their natural settings. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative descriptive research is appropriate for studies that aim to provide a detailed account of language use and meaning as it naturally occurs in social contexts. Therefore, this design enables the researcher to investigate how meaning both literal and denotative is constructed and understood by users within digital communication environments.

The research design emphasizes semantic interpretation through textual and contextual analysis of English slang found in TikTok content. The study does not manipulate variables but rather observes and describes naturally occurring language phenomena. The two primary variables in this research are (1) English slang expressions used on TikTok (as the linguistic variable) and (2) Generation Z users' interpretation of these slang words (as the interpretative variable). The focus lies on identifying the relationship between the literal meanings of slang based on dictionary definitions and their denotative

meanings on how Gen Z users apply and understand these expressions in TikTok trends.

The qualitative descriptive design also allows flexibility in analyzing linguistic data that cannot be quantified but can be deeply described through semantic and contextual examination. The study aims to produce a comprehensive picture of how Gen Z constructs meaning and identity through English slang on TikTok, providing valuable insights into the dynamics of language change in digital communication.

This subsection contains author(s)'s statements regarding the design of the research selected from one of three approaches in conducting a research, i.e. qualitative, quantitative, or mixed research. Each approach offers various research designs for various research designs. For example, in quantitative study, there are pre-experimental, true-experimental, and quasi-experimental research designs. Meanwhile, qualitative and mixed methods offer other designs. This subsection should be part of section about method. Hence, it also provides brief description of variables of the study.

Participants

The subjects of this study are Generation Z TikTok users who actively use and understand English slang expressions in their daily online communication. In qualitative research, subjects are selected not based on quantity but on their relevance and ability to provide rich and meaningful data. Therefore, this study used a purposive sampling technique, which allows the researcher to intentionally select participants who meet specific criteria relevant to the research objectives. The parameters for selecting the subjects

include: (1) belonging to Generation Z, aged between 18 and 27 years old; (2) being active TikTok users with at least six months of consistent activity on the platform; (3) frequently exposed to or using English slang in TikTok trends; and (4) demonstrating an understanding of the meanings and contexts of the slang words they encounter.

A total of 20–30 participants were involved as informants in this study. They were selected through direct observation and online communication, such as via TikTok comments or messaging, to ensure they matched the criteria. The participants were not divided into formal groups, as the focus of this qualitative study was on gathering individual insights and interpretations rather than comparing group data. However, each participant provided perspectives that contributed to identifying patterns and consistencies in how English slang was used and understood among Generation Z TikTok users. The researcher ensured confidentiality and obtained consent from all participants before collecting or analyzing any data.

This selection strategy allowed the researcher to gather authentic linguistic data and interpretations that reflect the natural way in which Gen Z users engage with English slang on TikTok. As such, the research subjects served as both data sources and interpreters of meaning, supporting the study's aim to describe and analyze the literal and denotative meanings of slang expressions in digital communication.

Instrument

In this qualitative study, the data served as the primary instrument for data collection, supported by several tools to ensure systematic and valid data gathering.

As explained by Kuckartz and Rädiker (2021), in qualitative research, A central role is played by planning, observing, recording, and interpreting data while reflexivity and analytical consistency are maintained.To support the work, this study employed three main instruments: an observation checklist, a documentation sheet, and a semantic analysis table.

The observation checklist was designed to identify TikTok videos containing English slang expressions that were trending among Generation Z users. The documentation sheet was used to record essential information such as the slang term, TikTok username, date of upload, number of likes or views, and comments reflecting users' interpretations. Meanwhile, the semantic analysis table, adapted from the meaning classification framework of Evans (2022), provided structured columns for (1) the literal meaning (dictionary-based definition), (2) the denotative meaning (contextual use within TikTok videos), and (3) the interpreted meaning by Gen Z users.

Before the main data collection began, a pilot study was conducted using five sample TikTok videos to evaluate the effectiveness and clarity of the instruments. The results showed that the initial checklist required minor adjustments, particularly the addition of a column for visual context cues including emojis, gestures, and captions which often influence the meaning of slang expressions on TikTok. These improvements ensured that both linguistic and multimodal aspects of communication were effectively captured.

The data collection process was carried out in three chronological steps. First, identified trending TikTok videos featuring English slang used by Gen Z within the last six months. Second, each

video was documented and categorized using the observation and documentation instruments. Finally, analyzed the linguistic data by comparing the literal and denotative words recorded in the semantic analysis table. All procedures were completed to maintain accuracy, credibility, and interpretive depth throughout the study.

Data Collection (Cambria, 12 pt, bold, italicized, sentence case)

Describes the process of collecting and evaluating information or data to achieve the research goals or find answers to research problems.

Data analysis

In this qualitative study, data analysis was conducted using Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's (2023) interactive model of qualitative data analysis, which consists of three main stages: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. This model was chosen because it allows the researcher to continuously interact with the data while organizing, categorizing, and interpreting patterns of meaning emerging from the collected linguistic materials.

In the data condensation stage, the researcher selected, simplified, and focused only on relevant data obtained from TikTok videos containing English slang expressions used by Generation Z. Non-relevant content, such as videos without linguistic value or non-English slang, was excluded. Each selected slang expression was then transcribed and categorized according to its literal meaning (as found in dictionaries) and its denotative meaning (as used in the TikTok context).

Next, in the data display stage, the condensed data were organized into a semantic analysis table adapted from the meaning classification framework of Evans (2022). This table provided structured columns for (1) the literal meaning (dictionary-based definition), (2) the denotative meaning (contextual use within TikTok videos), and (3) the interpreted meaning by Gen Z users. The table also includes notes about multimodal cues such as tone, emoji use, or video captions, which often contribute to the construction of meaning. This structured approach helps the researcher visualize relationships between meanings, observe contextual nuances, and identify users' interpretations regularly.

Finally, in the conclusion drawing and verification stage, the researcher interpreted the data by analyzing how the literal, denotative, and interpreted meanings are interrelated and how these reflect linguistic creativity, identity, and cultural belonging among Gen Z TikTok users.

Results and Discussion

Present the results based on your research question/research objective consecutively and discuss afterwards. If you have more than one research question/research objective, write in the sub-sub section.

Results

The results revealed that while each slang term retains a literal meaning traceable in dictionaries, its denotative (contextual) meaning in TikTok discourse has undergone significant semantic shifts influenced by creativity, humor, and social identity expression.

From selected TikTok videos featuring Generation Z creators, a total of 30 slang

words were identified and analyzed. These slang terms frequently appeared in video captions, dialogues, and comment sections, showing that slang serves as both a communicative and performative tool among Gen Z TikTok users.

A significant portion of slang expressions demonstrates a process of *semantic broadening*, where literal meanings are extended to encompass new evaluative or emotional meanings. Words such as *"fire"*, *"lit"*, and *"slay"* exemplify this expansion. For instance, *"fire"*, which literally denotes combustion, has developed a positive evaluative sense meaning "excellent" or "impressive," as seen in sentences like *"That song is fire!"* Similarly, *"lit"*, originally meaning "set on fire," now connotes "exciting," "energetic," or "amazing." These semantic extensions correspond to the process of lexical innovation described by Fromkin, Rodman, and Hyams (2018), where social contexts reshape linguistic meaning. This trend of expansion also supports Keidar, Opedal, and Sachan (2022), who argue that slang evolves through frequency-based semantic drift — a mechanism by which words acquire new shades of meaning through repeated informal use. The emotional resonance embedded in these expanded meanings reflects Gen Z's preference for expressive, affective communication in digital environments.

Another salient pattern is *meaning shift*, where words undergo a complete change from their original, dictionary-based sense to a new, context-specific interpretation. Examples include *"ghost"*, *"tea"*, and *"shade."* The term *"ghost,"* literally referring to a spirit of the dead, is now used to mean "to cut off communication suddenly," while *"tea"* (a type of beverage) now represents "gossip"

or "juicy information." Similarly, *"shade"*, denoting an area sheltered from light, signifies "a subtle insult or criticism."

This type of semantic change can be explained through metonymy and metaphor, as discussed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). Words shift their meanings when physical or concrete concepts are mapped onto abstract social experiences. This finding also supports Savitri and Dewi (2023), who observed that Indonesian netizens frequently use imitative slang expressions through similar metonymic shifts, indicating a cross-cultural pattern of semantic creativity in digital slang.

The third category reflects *meaning innovation*, where entirely new lexical items or expressions are created or borrowed and redefined within the TikTok community. Terms such as *"rizz,"* *"simp,"* *"bet,"* and *"periodt"* illustrate this process. The slang *"rizz"*, derived from "charisma," has evolved to mean "the ability to attract or flirt successfully," while *"simp"* refers to "someone who shows excessive affection or admiration," diverging significantly from its literal root "simple person."

Innovative expressions like *"periodt"* and *"no cap"* demonstrate how digital users creatively manipulate orthography and phonetics to express emphasis, assertiveness, and authenticity. This aligns with findings by Syafaah and Haryanto (2024), who highlight that TikTok slang involves not only semantic change but also phonological and morphological play that reinforces group identity. These innovations signify the participatory and playful linguistic culture of TikTok, where new meanings are collaboratively constructed through shared discourse and repetition.

Slang Word	Literal Meaning (Dictionary-Based)	Denotative Meaning (TikTok Context)	Example Usage on TikTok
Rizz	Derived from 'charisma'; the ability to attract others.	Flirting skills or ability to attract romantic attention.	He's got mad rizz!
No Cap	Without a hat.	Truthfulness or sincerity; not lying.	That movie was awesome, no cap!
Slay	To kill or destroy violently.	Performing excellently or looking amazing.	You slayed that outfit!
Bet	A wager or agreement.	Expression of agreement or acceptance.	You'll come tonight? — Bet.
Sus	Short for 'suspicious'.	Questionable or untrustworthy behavior.	He's acting sus after the test.
Mood	A temporary emotional state or feeling.	Relatable situation or emotion.	That sleepy cat is a mood.
Flex	To bend or contract muscles.	To show off or brag.	He's flexing his new phone again.
Cringe	To recoil in embarrassment.	Awkward or embarrassing behavior.	That dance was so cringe!
Ghost	A spirit of a dead person.	To suddenly cut off communication.	She ghosted me after our date.
Vibe	Feeling or atmosphere of a place.	Emotional energy or style.	This café has good vibes.
Lit	Set on fire.	Exciting, fun, or amazing.	That concert was lit!
Fire	Combustion or flame.	Something excellent or impressive.	That new song is fire!
Savage	Fierce or wild person.	Someone bold or unapologetic.	She clapped back — that was savage!
GOAT	A farm animal (goat).	Greatest Of All Time.	LeBron is the GOAT.
Bop	A light hit or blow.	A catchy song.	That track is such a bop!
Drip	A drop of liquid.	Stylish clothing or accessories.	Check his outfit, total drip!
Cap	A hat or cover.	A lie or exaggeration.	That's cap, you didn't do that!
Lowkey	Secretly or quietly.	Subtle or not wanting attention.	I lowkey like that song.
Highkey	Openly or loudly.	Strongly or obviously.	I highkey love this trend!
Yeet	To throw something with force.	An exclamation of excitement.	Yeet! I did it!
Salty	Containing salt.	Annoyed or upset.	He's salty because he lost.
Boujee	Derived from bourgeoisie.	Luxurious or high-class lifestyle.	She's living that boujee life.

Snack	A small portion of food.	An attractive person.	He looks like a snack.
Stan	A person's name (from Eminem's song).	An overly enthusiastic fan.	I totally stan that singer!
Extra	Additional or more than needed.	Over the top or dramatic.	She's so extra about her outfit.
Shade	An area away from sunlight.	A subtle insult or criticism.	She threw shade at her ex.
Tea	A drink made from leaves.	Gossip or juicy information.	Spill the tea, what happened?
Periodt	A punctuation mark (period).	Used to emphasize a statement's finality.	That's the truth, periodt!
Simp	Simple person.	Someone who shows excessive affection or attention.	He's simping over his crush.
Main Character	The leading role in a story.	Someone who acts confidently and uniquely.	She's giving main character energy!

Tabel I.
slang words

Denotatively, these slang terms express **identity, emotion, and social belonging** rather than literal description. For example:

"Rizz" denotes *charisma* but functions to express *social attractiveness* and *confidence*.

"Simp" denotes *simplicity* but refers to *someone overly affectionate or submissive*.

"GOAT" (literally "a goat") has become a cultural symbol meaning *"the greatest of all time."*

This shift demonstrates that **Gen Z constructs shared meaning through social reinterpretation,** turning literal terms into symbolic markers of attitude and value.

Some slang terms such as *"slay," "rizz," "no cap," "vibe," "fire,"* and *"tea"* were the most frequently encountered across videos. Their recurrence indicates their **stability as part of TikTok's micro-linguistic system,** where repetition and imitation play a major role in meaning reinforcement.

Although meanings were generally consistent across different TikTok creators, minor **contextual variations** occurred. For instance:

"Lowkey" sometimes meant *secretly* or *slightly*, depending on tone.

"Extra" could express either admiration (*"She's so extra!"* = *impressive*) or criticism (*overly dramatic*), depending on context and delivery.

This variation confirms that **context and tone heavily influence semantic interpretation** in digital communication.

The final category highlights how TikTok slang reflects the construction of **digital identity and cultural belonging** among Generation Z users. Expressions like *"main character"*, *"boujee"*, and *"extra"* convey not just meaning but also personal branding, lifestyle, and attitude. Users employ these terms to present themselves as confident, stylish, and self-aware traits celebrated in the digital era. This aligns with Goffman's (1959) *theory of self-presentation*, which views language as a tool for performance and identity negotiation.

Recent studies (Nurhayati & Putri, 2024) further suggest that Generation Z's use of slang on TikTok represents a form of *cybercultural self-expression*, where linguistic creativity is intertwined with aesthetic trends, humor, and digital

storytelling. In this sense, slang becomes more than a linguistic phenomenon it is a sociocultural practice that encapsulates the values, humor, and worldview of a generation shaped by technology and constant connectivity.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that the evolution of English slang on TikTok demonstrates how Generation Z continuously reshapes language to express identity, social belonging, and emotional authenticity in digital environments. The contrast between literal and denotative meanings shows that slang is no longer merely a linguistic deviation but a creative socio-cultural code. This aligns with recent studies highlighting that slang on social media functions as a form of self-representation and social bonding among digital natives (Marzuki & Mustapha, 2023; Nurhayati & Putri, 2024).

The transformation of meaning observed in words such as *"rizz," "cap," "slay,"* and *"vibe"* reflects a broader semantic innovation process. For example, *"rizz"* derived from "charisma" extends beyond personal charm to signify performative flirtation or digital confidence. This supports Keidar, Opedal, and Sachan's (2022) "Slangvolution" model, which argues that online slang evolves through rapid frequency dynamics and semantic change driven by community reinforcement. Similarly, Savitri and Dewi (2023) found that Indonesian netizens engage in imitative slang creation, showing that semantic shifts occur across global social media cultures, not limited to English-speaking contexts.

Moreover, TikTok's multimodal platform combining video, sound, and caption enhances the performative power of slang. Terms such as *"main character"* and *"boujee"* allow users to construct aspirational identities, aligning that TikTok fosters "aesthetic self-branding" among Gen Z users (Nurhayati & Putri, 2024). The

recurrent use of these terms demonstrates that slang operates as both a linguistic and visual signifier, reinforcing Halliday's (1978) notion of language as a social semiotic system.

The data also reveal that TikTok slang undergoes **semantic broadening and metaphorical extension**. Words such as *"fire," "tea,"* and *"ghost"* no longer retain their literal sense but acquire new denotations representing excellence, gossip, and disengagement, respectively. This aligns with Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) theory of conceptual metaphor and recent semantic research confirming that online discourse accelerates figurative meaning expansion (Syafaah & Haryanto, 2024). Through this process, users collectively negotiate meaning, forming micro-communities that share common interpretive frameworks.

Importantly, the persistence and popularity of these slang expressions suggest **vernacular stability** within the Gen Z TikTok community, echoing Labov's (1972) sociolinguistic observation that group-specific language practices strengthen identity boundaries. However, unlike traditional spoken slang, TikTok slang spreads faster, transcending geography and culture. As Keidar et al. (2022) note, digital slang exhibits "viral semantics," where meanings mutate rapidly through algorithmic amplification.

The findings also support idea of *metasemantic play*, where digital slang becomes a form of linguistic entertainment and identity performance. Phrases like *"no cap," "lit,"* or *"slay"* are not only communicative but also performative signaling authenticity, humor, and trend awareness. This phenomenon highlights how TikTok functions as a "linguistic stage," enabling users to co-create meaning while maintaining social coherence through shared expressions.

Conclusion

Language remains one of the most vital tools of human communication, serving not only to convey ideas but also to express identity, creativity, and social belonging. The findings of this study confirm that the evolution of English slang on TikTok represents a significant linguistic phenomenon shaped by Generation Z's digital culture. Through qualitative semantic analysis, this research revealed that slang words frequently used by Gen Z on TikTok such as *rizz, no cap, slay, vibe, tea,* and *ghost* undergo noticeable semantic shifts between their literal and denotative meanings. These shifts demonstrate how young users reinterpret existing vocabulary to express emotions, humor, and identity in digital spaces.

The study also highlights that the meanings of slang terms are no longer fixed but fluid and context-dependent, reflecting TikTok's interactive and multimodal communication style. This supports the findings of Keidar, Opedal, and Sachan (2022) and Syafaah and Haryanto (2024), who argue that online slang evolves rapidly through user participation and frequency-based change. Similarly, the recurring use of slang in Gen Z discourse aligns with Marzuki and Mustapha (2023) and Nurhayati and Putri (2024), who note that TikTok slang functions as both linguistic creativity and self-expression within global digital youth culture.

Furthermore, this study confirms that TikTok slang serves not only as a form of entertainment but also as a socio-cultural marker through which Generation Z constructs a sense of community and identity. The relationship between literal and denotative meaning reveals that slang on TikTok operates as a form of symbolic communication a code that signals authenticity, relatability, and belonging. In this regard, the findings reinforce Halliday's (1978) notion of language as a social semiotic and Labov's (1972) idea that group-specific language strengthens social cohesion.

In conclusion, the study provides meaningful insight into how English slang continues to evolve through digital communication and how Generation Z actively contributes to this process by reshaping meaning in creative and contextually rich ways. The implications of this study extend to linguistics, media studies, and education, offering a better understanding of how digital platforms like TikTok influence modern language development. Future research may expand this work by examining cross-cultural variations or comparing semantic trends across other social media platforms, but the present study affirms that TikTok remains a central hub in the global evolution of English slang.

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