

SHIFTS IN MEANING AND SLANG USAGE ON SOCIAL MEDIA: A SEMANTIC-PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS OF GENERATION Z SPEECH

Muhammad Natsir¹, Dimas Abdul Ramadan²

mnatsir0@gmail.com¹, dimasabdoel3@gmail.com²

Universitas Negeri Medan

ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze shifts in meaning and the usage of slang in Generation Z's social media communication from semantic and pragmatic perspectives. A qualitative descriptive method was employed, utilizing data on slang usage from various social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and X. Data collection involved observation, note-taking, and documentation, while analysis entailed comparing conventional meanings with those emerging in digital communication contexts and identifying the pragmatic functions of the slang. The findings reveal that Generation Z slang undergoes various forms of semantic shift, including broadening, narrowing, nuance changes, as well as shifts based on metaphor and association. Pragmatically, slang is used to express emotions, build solidarity, signal group identity, create humor, and convey judgments or attitudes. Context plays a crucial role in determining the meaning of slang, as its usage is highly dependent on the situation and communicative intent. Thus, the use of slang on social media reflects both linguistic creativity and the dynamics of language change within Generation Z's digital communication.

Keywords: Slang, Semantic Shift, Semantics, Pragmatics, Generation Z, Social Media.

INTRODUCTION

Language is a primary medium through which humans convey ideas, feelings, identities, and specific intentions during communication. As a dynamic system, language constantly evolves alongside changes in society, culture, technology, and patterns of social interaction. These changes manifest in the emergence of new vocabulary, alterations in word forms and linguistic functions, and shifts in the meanings of words or expressions. In recent years, the advancement of digital technology has accelerated this process, particularly through the use of social media as a space for daily communication. Social media no longer serves merely as a platform for exchanging information; it has also become a space where linguistic creativity, social identities, and the communication styles of specific groups take shape.

One linguistic phenomenon rapidly evolving in digital communication is the use of slang. Fundamentally, slang is a form of informal language employed by specific social groups; it can serve as a marker of closeness, solidarity, or identity, as well as a means of distinguishing between different groups of language users. In the realm of social media, slang evolves at a rapid pace because users can create, modify, and disseminate terms in a very short time. This speed of dissemination allows a word that originally held a specific meaning to evolve into a form with a new meaning when used within the context of digital communication. Research on Generation Z slang on TikTok reveals that the slang employed consists not only of new words but also encompasses abbreviations, acronyms, wordplay, and other creative forms used to foster a relaxed communication atmosphere and establish a sense of closeness with the audience (Syafaah & Haryanto 2024).

This phenomenon becomes particularly intriguing when linked to shifts in meaning. Semantically, a word does not always retain the same meaning throughout its usage; meanings can undergo expansion, narrowing, elevation or degradation of connotation, changes in association, or other forms of transformation. In the context of social media slang, meaning shifts frequently occur when a word is employed outside its lexical or

conventional definition. Consequently, understanding slang requires looking beyond dictionary definitions to consider how the word is actually used by speakers in specific communicative situations. Recent research on Generation Z slang on TikTok has identified various forms of semantic change, including generalization, specialization, amelioration, pejoration, and association. These findings demonstrate that the evolution of slang on social media is a systematic linguistic phenomenon closely tied to the dynamics of digital communication (Syafaah & Haryanto 2024).

Social media communication differs in nature from face-to-face interaction; it tends to be brief, rapid, and multimodal, while relying heavily on context. Specific words or expressions can take on different meanings depending on the speaker, the intended audience, the communicative situation, the topic of conversation, and the responses of other users. Consequently, the study of slang cannot be limited to semantics alone but must also incorporate pragmatics. While semantics focuses on the inherent meaning of linguistic elements, pragmatics examines how meaning is understood based on the context of use. In social media communication, these two perspectives are interconnected, as a slang term can undergo a shift in meaning while simultaneously acquiring specific communicative functions based on its context.

For instance, terms such as toxic, flexing, healing, relate, cringe, slay, delulu, or cooked illustrate the distinction between lexical meaning and the meaning that emerges in communicative practice. A term originating in English may undergo adjustments when adopted into Indonesian; indeed, its meaning can shift depending on the context and the community using it. Research on Generation Z slang indicates that these terms can undergo semantic changes through processes such as metaphor, semantic extension, semantic narrowing, amelioration, and pejoration. Such changes are not driven solely by linguistic evolution but are also influenced by cultural factors, technology, expressive needs, and the social context of usage (Sitohang & Ristin, 2025).

From a pragmatic perspective, the use of slang serves functions that extend beyond the mere conveyance of information. Slang can be employed to signal familiarity, foster solidarity, express emotions, generate humor, convey sarcasm, shape group identity, and reflect the speaker's attitude toward a particular object or event. Research on Generation Z's use of slang on social media indicates that it is used, among other things, to greet friends or followers, initiate casual conversations, share impressions and feelings, and establish a sense of rapport with the audience (Syafaah & Haryanto 2024). Thus, the use of slang can be understood as a communication strategy that serves specific social and pragmatic functions.

Generation Z is a compelling subject of study, as this generation has grown up in an environment deeply integrated with digital technology and social media. Intensive interaction with various digital platforms exposes Generation Z to language from diverse communities, cultures, and linguistic backgrounds. The convergence of these varied linguistic sources fosters the emergence of creative and rapidly evolving linguistic forms. In a global context, the evolution of Generation Z slang demonstrates how social media platforms—such as TikTok, Instagram, X, and YouTube—enable specific terms to spread beyond geographical and social boundaries. Such shifts allow terms to migrate from specific communities to broader audiences, often undergoing changes in form or meaning along the way. Research on Generation Z language on TikTok further highlights the platform's role in shaping and disseminating slang usage among the younger generation (Gita, 2025).

The rapid pace of semantic change on social media is a key reason for conducting semantic-pragmatic studies on slang. In digital communication, a single term can carry

different meanings depending on the time or the community involved; indeed, a term's meaning can shift in tandem with emerging trends. Research into semantic change on social media indicates that the dynamic digital environment can accelerate meaning shifts, creating challenges in understanding the language used by digital communities (Loureiro, 2022). This demonstrates that linguistic meaning on social media is not static but is instead continuously negotiated by users through interaction and repeated usage.

Beyond shifts in meaning, slang is closely linked to social identity. The choice of specific words or terms can signal that a user shares knowledge and experiences with a particular community. Using trending terms can foster solidarity and build rapport with other users. Conversely, using slang out of context can lead to misunderstandings, as certain terms may only be understood by specific groups. Thus, slang is not merely an informal language variant but also an integral part of shaping identity and social connections within digital spaces. For Generation Z, slang serves as a means to demonstrate creativity, humor, and emotional expression, as well as to signal affiliation with specific digital communities (Sitohang & Ristin, 2025).

This phenomenon also demonstrates the close relationship between linguistic meaning and context. A word with a specific lexical meaning can take on a different interpretation depending on the utterance in which it is used. For instance, a word with a literal negative connotation might be used positively to express praise, or vice versa. In digital communication, such shifts are often reinforced by the use of emojis, punctuation, images, videos, memes, and the responses of other users. Therefore, analyzing Generation Z slang requires considering not only the form and meaning of the words but also the speaker's intent, the interlocutor, the conversational context, and the social functions associated with its use.

Previous research has highlighted the attention paid to the phenomena of slang and semantic shifts on social media. Studies on Generation Z slang on TikTok, for instance, have identified various forms of slang as well as the reasons for their use in digital communication (Syafaah & Haryanto 2024). Other research has specifically identified various types of semantic change in Generation Z slang, including generalization, specialization, amelioration, pejoration, and association (Mawarni & Markhamah, 2026). Furthermore, research on social media slang indicates that slang terms can undergo semantic shifts linked to users' communication needs, expressiveness, and cognitive associations (Arief et.al, 2026). Research on English terms within Generation Z slang on TikTok also reveals that contact with foreign languages is a key source of linguistic innovation among young users (Novita et.al, 2026).

Although extensive research has been conducted on Generation Z slang and semantic shifts, there remains scope to examine this phenomenon more comprehensively by simultaneously employing semantic and pragmatic approaches. A semantic analysis is necessary to identify the forms and types of meaning shifts involved, while a pragmatic analysis is required to explain how the slang is utilized within communicative contexts and the functions speakers aim to achieve. Integrating these two approaches offers a more holistic understanding of the slang phenomenon, as semantic shifts cannot be divorced from the ways speakers use language in social interactions.

Thus, the study titled “Shifts in Meaning and the Use of Slang in Social Media: A Semantic-Pragmatic Analysis of Generation Z Discourse” is crucial for understanding the linguistic dynamics evolving within digital communication. This research aims to identify the forms of slang used by Generation Z on social media, analyze the types of meaning shifts

present in such slang, and examine the pragmatic functions and intentions that emerge based on the context of use. The study is expected to contribute to the advancement of semantic and pragmatic research—particularly regarding language change in the digital era—while also providing insight into Generation Z’s linguistic creativity in shaping and using language for communication, self-expression, and the formation of social identity.

Furthermore, this study aims to demonstrate that the emergence of slang and shifts in meaning are not merely deviations from standard language. Rather, these phenomena are part of the dynamic nature of language, evolving in response to the needs of its users. Slang serves as an indicator of social and cultural change while reflecting how the younger generation adapts to the digital communication landscape. Consequently, understanding slang requires a broader linguistic perspective—viewing it as a form of linguistic creativity and innovation shaped by social, technological, and cultural contexts, as well as the communicative needs of speakers.

RESEARCH METHODS

1. Research Approach and Type

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach with a semantic-pragmatic perspective. A qualitative approach was selected because the research focuses on identifying, describing, and interpreting the phenomena of meaning shifts and slang usage in the social media discourse of Generation Z. The research data are not analyzed through statistical calculations but rather based on linguistic forms, changes or expansions in meaning, contexts of use, and communicative functions emerging within digital interactions.

A semantic perspective is employed to analyze the lexical meaning of a slang form and compare it with the meaning that evolves through actual usage on social media. Meanwhile, a pragmatic perspective is used to understand meanings that emerge from the context of the utterance, relationships between users, communicative goals, conversational situations, and the implicatures accompanying the use of slang. Thus, a semantic-pragmatic analysis enables the study to view slang not merely as a form of informal language, but also as a phenomenon of semantic change influenced by social and communicative contexts.

2. Data Sources and Research Data

The research data consists of written utterances found on social media platforms widely used by Generation Z—such as TikTok, Instagram, X, and comment sections on other digital platforms. These platforms were selected based on their characteristics as interactive spaces that enable users to rapidly produce, disseminate, and modify linguistic forms.

The data comprises words, phrases, or slang expressions used in social media interactions that demonstrate a divergence between their original or conventional meanings and the meanings employed within the context of Generation Z communication. The data also encompasses the linguistic and situational contexts accompanying the use of such slang.

Examples of slang terms that may serve as objects of analysis include spill, flexing, healing, red flag, gas, valid, receh, cringe, bestie, and bucin, as well as other slang forms identified during the data collection process. These terms are not automatically assumed to have undergone a semantic shift; a determination regarding such a shift is made only after comparing their conventional meanings with the meanings that emerge within the context of actual usage.

3. Data collection technique

Data collection was carried out using observation, documentation, and the "listen-and-record" technique. Observations focused on language usage within the content and interactions of Generation Z users on the social media platforms serving as data sources. The analysis centered on the use of slang words or expressions characterized by specific semantic changes—such as alteration, expansion, narrowing, specialization, or shifting of meaning.

The documentation technique involved collecting relevant utterances in the form of screenshots or digital records. The collected data were then logged into a research data table, detailing the slang form, the utterance itself, the context, the platform, the conventional meaning, the meaning within the social media context, and the pragmatic function.

Subsequently, the "listen-and-record" technique was employed to identify slang forms appearing in digital interactions. The researcher observed language usage without directly participating in the interactions and recorded the linguistic forms that met the research criteria.

To ensure data accuracy, the study includes only those utterances that provide sufficient context for interpretation. Data lacking adequate context—such as spam, advertisements, or slang usage unrelated to the research focus—are excluded from the analysis corpus.

4. Data Selection Techniques

Data were selected using the purposive sampling technique—specifically, the selection of data based on specific criteria aligned with the research objectives. The criteria applied are as follows.

- Data in the form of words, phrases or expressions that can be categorized as slang or informal language typical of digital interactions.
- Data found in the speech of social media users is relevant to the communication characteristics of Generation Z.
- Slang forms have a conventional meaning or previous meaning that can be compared with the meaning that appears in actual use.
- The utterance has sufficient context to allow pragmatic analysis.
- The data shows indications of change, expansion, narrowing, specialization, or shift in function and meaning.
- Data is not simply typos, technical abbreviations, or special terms unrelated to the slang phenomenon under study.

The use of these criteria aims to ensure that the data analyzed is truly relevant to the research problem, rather than being based merely on the popularity of a term on social media.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Research result

An analysis of slang usage in Generation Z's social media communication reveals that the evolution of digital language not only generates new vocabulary but also drives shifts in the meanings and functions of words. The slang employed by Generation Z may originate from Indonesian, regional languages, or foreign languages—or take the form of acronyms, abbreviations, and creative coinages—that subsequently acquire new meanings through repeated use within digital communities.

These findings align with research by Sholikhah and Supadi, which indicates that the use of slang by Gen Z on social media is closely linked to the evolution of communication

technology and gives rise to constantly evolving linguistic forms. The study also highlights context as a crucial factor in understanding the significance and nuances of slang usage (Yayang & Supadi, 2025).

In this study, the phenomenon of semantic shifts in slang can be categorized into several trends: semantic expansion, semantic narrowing or specialization, changes in semantic value, and shifts based on the context of use. Beyond semantic changes, slang also serves pragmatic functions, such as expressing emotion, fostering rapport, signaling group identity, creating humor, conveying evaluations, and reinforcing the intent of an utterance.

These findings align with research by Affandi and Asrini, which specifically examined innovative diction in Gen Z slang on the social media platform X. That study found that Gen Z slang not only undergoes innovation in word formation but also experiences contextual semantic shifts and fulfills various communicative functions, including the emotive, conative, referential, and poetic functions (Maulana & Asrini, 2026).

B. The Shifting Meaning of Slang in Generation Z Speech

1. Expansion of Meaning

Semantic expansion occurs when a word that previously had a specific scope of reference comes to be used with a broader range of meanings. In digital communication, this process can arise through metaphorical or associative usage, or simply through the established habits of a user community.

One example suitable for analysis is the word "healing." Conventionally, "healing" refers to the process of recovery or recuperation. However, in the context of social media usage among the younger generation, the word is frequently employed to describe activities perceived as providing pleasure, tranquility, or an escape from daily routines—such as traveling, dining at specific venues, going on vacation, or engaging in favorite pastimes.

For instance: "Heading to the beach this weekend for some much-needed downtime."

In this context, the term "healing" does not merely signify recovery in the medical sense. Its meaning has expanded to encompass activities perceived as capable of restoring psychological well-being or providing emotional refreshment.

This phenomenon demonstrates that a shift in meaning does not always result in a definition entirely detached from the original; the new meaning retains an associative link to the previous one. From a pragmatic perspective, this interpretation becomes clearer as readers understand "healing" based on the accompanying situations and activities.

Thus, the social media context plays a crucial role in shaping the interpretation of slang. This aligns with research indicating that comprehending slang requires considering the relationship between its conventional meaning and the extended meanings that emerge within specific contexts of use (Zhewei, et.al, 2022).

2. Semantic Shift through Metaphor

Shifts in meaning can also arise through metaphorical usage. A word that initially refers to a specific object or situation may come to describe a different condition that shares similar characteristics.

For instance, the English word "spill"—which literally refers to the act of causing a liquid to flow over the edge of a container—is frequently used in Indonesian social media communication in phrases such as:

"Spill the name of the restaurant!"

In this context, "spill" does not mean "to pour out" or "to cause to overflow"; rather, it signifies sharing information or revealing something previously unknown to the person being addressed.

This shift demonstrates a relationship between linguistic forms and the social contexts in which language is used. Social media users adopt foreign words and subsequently develop new functions that suit their communication needs.

This phenomenon illustrates that slang is both productive and flexible. Research on slang also indicates that informal forms can undergo an expansion of usage by linking slang meanings to conventional meanings through context (Zhewei, et.al, 2022).

3. Changes in Value or Nuance of Meaning

In addition to changes in the scope of meaning, slang can also undergo shifts in value or nuance. A word may acquire a connotation that is more positive, more negative, or simply different from its previous usage.

Research by Marantika et al. on lexical meaning shifts on the social media platform X found that certain words undergo semantic changes such as amelioration, pejoration, and metonymy. The study demonstrates that metaphorical usage on social media can cause words to cease referring directly to their literal meanings (Eka dkk, 2025).

In the context of Gen Z slang, this shift in nuance is evident when a word with a specific lexical meaning is used to evaluate a person or a situation. This implies that the meaning of slang is determined not only by lexical definitions but also by the speaker's attitude toward the subject matter.

This reinforces the view that slang analysis requires integrating semantics with pragmatics. Semantic analysis helps explain the changing relationship between form and meaning, whereas pragmatic analysis elucidates the attitudes, intentions, and contexts underlying the use of such forms.

C. The Pragmatic Function of Slang Usage

1. Slang as a Marker of Familiarity

One of the primary functions of slang in Generation Z communication is to create an informal atmosphere and signal closeness between the speaker and the person they are addressing. Terms such as “bestie,” “cuy,” “bro,” “guys,” or other informal forms of address can be used to indicate a closer social connection.

For example: “Bestie, you have to see this!”

The word “bestie” serves not merely as a form of address; its usage constructs an intimate interpersonal relationship. In certain contexts, it does not necessarily imply that the speaker and the listener are actual close friends; rather, the term can function as a pragmatic strategy to create an impression of familiarity. Thus, slang acts as a tool for social bonding—a means of establishing and maintaining social relationships.

2. Slang as a Marker of Group Identity

The use of slang is also linked to social identity. Generation Z employs specific vocabulary—understood by members of particular digital communities—to signal shared experiences, digital culture, or communication environments.

Research on slang and Generation Z identity indicates that the use of slang on social media relates not only to linguistic variation but also to the expression of the users' identities (Nurul, 2024).

Thus, the use of slang can serve as a marker of social membership. Individuals familiar with specific terms can more easily follow conversations within certain digital communities, whereas those unfamiliar with them may struggle to grasp the intended meaning. This phenomenon demonstrates that the meaning of slang is dynamic and heavily dependent on the community that uses it.

3. Slang as an Expression of Emotion

Slang is also used to convey feelings in a more spontaneous and expressive manner. Specific words or phrases can be employed to express admiration, surprise, disappointment, amusement, anger, or happiness.

For example: “Crazy, that outfit is so cool!”

In this utterance, the word "crazy" is not used to provide a diagnosis or describe someone's mental state. Instead, it serves as a marker of emotional intensity and conveys the speaker's admiration.

From a pragmatic perspective, this meaning is derived from the context and the speaker's intent. Consequently, a literal interpretation can lead to a misunderstanding. These findings align with research by Affandi and Asrini, which identified that Gen Z slang on social media serves an emotive function as one of its communicative roles (Maulana & Hari, 2026).

4. Slang as a Vehicle for Humor

Social media also enables the use of slang to create humorous effects. Users' creativity—manifested in altering words, coining abbreviations, employing puns, or using words in unconventional contexts—generates humor during interactions.

The use of slang for humor demonstrates that digital language serves purposes beyond mere information exchange; it is also used to create entertaining communication experiences. In this regard, context is a crucial factor. A word might be perceived as funny in one context yet fail to elicit humor in another. Thus, the pragmatic function of slang is situational.

D. The Relationship Between Meaning Shift and Context

The discussion indicates that shifts in slang meaning cannot be separated from the context of use. A slang term can carry different meanings depending on the situation, community, or communicative purpose in which it is used.

For instance, in general usage, the word “gas” may refer to a substance in a gaseous state. However, in informal communication, the expression:

“Gas berangkat sekarang!”

It is more accurately interpreted as an invitation or agreement to take immediate action.

Semantically, there is a distinction between the lexical meaning and the meaning conveyed in actual speech. Pragmatically, the use of “gas” demonstrates a conative function—specifically, urging the interlocutor to perform an action.

Therefore, analyzing slang requires more than just examining the lexical definitions of words. Researchers must consider the context, the speaker's intent, the social relationship between the participants, and the expected response. This aligns with research on Gen Z slang, which found that shifts in slang meaning emerge contextually and are linked to communicative functions (Affandi & Hari, 2026).

E. Social Media as a Driving Factor for Language Change

Social media creates an environment highly conducive to the evolution of slang, as it enables linguistic forms to spread rapidly. A term initially used by a small group can gain popularity after appearing in videos, comments, memes, or viral content.

Previous research on Gen Z slang indicates that advancements in communication technology are linked to the emergence and development of new linguistic variations (Yayang & Supadi, 2025).

Other research also indicates that social media plays a role in the formation and spread of slang among the generation growing up in a digital environment.

This rapid spread causes the process of language change to occur relatively quickly.

A slang term can gain popularity in a short time, undergo a shift in meaning, and subsequently see a decline in usage as new terms emerge. Thus, social media serves not merely as a venue for language use but also as a space for the production, reproduction, modification, and dissemination of new meanings.

F. Synthesis of Findings with Previous Research

Compared to previous studies, this research shares the perspective of viewing slang as a dynamic linguistic phenomenon on social media. Sholikhah and Supadi's study emphasizes the semantic aspects of Gen Z slang usage, whereas the study by Hijrah et al. links shifts in slang meaning to the expression of identity on social media (Yayang & Supadi, 2025).

The research by Affandi and Asrini bears the closest resemblance to the present study, as it simultaneously addresses Gen Z slang, semantic shifts, and pragmatic functions. Their findings indicate that slang innovation is not limited to the creation of linguistic forms but also involves changes in meaning and communicative function (Affandi & Hari 2026).

Meanwhile, research by Marantika et al. reinforces the aspect of semantic change by demonstrating that language use on social media can result in shifts such as amelioration, pejoration, and metonymy (Eka dkk, 2025).

Thus, this study integrates semantics and pragmatics. Semantics is employed to explain the relationship between conventional meaning and evolving meaning, whereas pragmatics is used to explain how context, communicative goals, social identity, and interpersonal relationships influence the interpretation of slang.

Table 1. Slang and Meaning Shift Data

No	Slang	utterance	Original/Conventional Meaning	New Meaning in Social Media	Types of Meaning Shifts	Pragmatic Function	Previous References
1	Healing	I need some downtime after the exams.	Healing/recovery	Activities to refresh oneself or reduce stress	Extension of meaning	Expressive	Sholikhah & Supadi; Maharani dkk.
2	Spill	Share some recommendations for good places to eat around here!	Shed	Sharing information	Metaphorical shift	Conative	Affandi & Asrini
3	Gas	If you're ready, let's	Gas as a substance	Come on, let's move	Shift in association	Conative	Affandi & Asrini

		go!		forward— or take action right away.			
4	Flexing	He's flexing his new stuff again.	Flexing/mo ving	Showing off something one owns	Metaphoric al shift	Evaluative	Penelitian slang media sosial
5	red flag	Likes to put other people down is a red flag	A red flag as a signal	Traits or behaviors considered red flags in a relationship .	Metaphoric al shift	Evaluative	Penelitian bahasa digital

Research findings indicate that the use of slang by Generation Z cannot be viewed merely as a form of "incorrect language" or a deviation from standard language. Slang is a form of linguistic variation that demonstrates creativity, flexibility, and the ability of language users to adapt their communication to their social environments.

However, the use of slang is also contextual. A slang term may be effective in conversations among friends or on social media, yet it is not necessarily appropriate for formal situations such as academic writing, official correspondence, or professional communication.

Therefore, the phenomenon of slang is best understood as part of the dynamics of language change. Generation Z does not merely utilize existing vocabulary; they also create, modify, and assign new meanings to linguistic forms to suit the needs of digital communication.

Overall, this study demonstrates that shifts in meaning and the use of slang are interconnected processes. Changes in meaning allow a word to acquire a new function, while users' pragmatic needs can drive the emergence of new interpretations and usages. Social media subsequently accelerates this process through the intensity of interaction, the dissemination of information, and the formation of digital communities.

CONCLUSION

The use of slang by Generation Z on social media reflects semantic changes driven by developments in technology, culture, and social interaction. These shifts encompass the expansion or narrowing of meaning, changes in value or nuance, and shifts based on association or metaphor.

Pragmatically, slang serves to express emotions, foster solidarity, signal group identity, generate humor, and convey specific judgments or attitudes. The communication context plays a crucial role in determining the meaning of slang, as a single linguistic form can carry different meanings depending on the situation in which it is used.

Thus, the evolution of meaning and usage regarding Generation Z slang is part of the dynamic nature of language development in the digital age. A combined semantic and pragmatic approach is essential to understanding the meaning and function of slang within social media communication.

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