

Gen Z and How They Are Creating New English Words

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Abstract

Gen Z and how they are creating new English words. There are several ways that Gen Z (the generation that grew up online with social media) is changing the way we speak English. Since social networks like TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat are part of daily life, this generation has a totally different way of expressing themselves through English compared to previous generations. A major change is the appearance of new slang. Many of the new words are used by Gen Z, for example, *rizz*, *slay*, *mid*, and *no cap*. These words can carry different meanings compared to their original English counterparts. For example, when somebody says that a performance was "slay," it means that the performance was well done. When somebody says that something is "mid," it means that the product or service is not good. Because people share things online through social media sites, many of these slang terms have become extremely popular very fast. The Gen Z demographic generally tends to use truncated vocabulary as part of their online social communication. For instance, LOL denotes laughing out loud, OMG denotes oh my God, and IDK stands for I don't know. In addition, Gen Z utilizes emojis, graphics, and memes so they can express themselves and/or their sentiments and thoughts. The way that Gen Z uses language demonstrates that language is constantly evolving or changing throughout our modern society. It also shows that language can develop into new words based on trends in social media, music, movies, etc. Additionally, Gen Z is helping to improve and shape the future of the English language currently.

Keywords: *Gen Z, Sociolinguistics, Social Media Slang, Language Evolution, Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC)*

1. Introduction

Language is a living entity, constantly undergoing transformation to reflect the cultural, technological, and societal shifts of its speakers. Throughout history, lexical innovation has been driven by youth culture; however, Generation Z (individuals born between 1997 and 2012) is uniquely positioned as the first generation of true "digital natives." Having grown up with ubiquitous access to smartphones, high-speed internet, and algorithmic social media platforms, Gen Z engages in communication patterns that significantly diverge from previous generations.

The rapid dissemination of information across platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat has created a hyper-connected linguistic environment. In this digital ecosystem, new vocabulary is not only coined at an unprecedented rate but is also globally adopted within weeks or even days (McCulloch, 2019). This paper investigates how Gen Z is reshaping the English language through semantic shifts, the popularization of novel slang, the extensive use of truncated vocabulary, and multimodal communication strategies involving memes and emojis.

By analyzing specific lexical items—such as *rizz*, *slay*, *mid*, and *no cap*—this study aims to document the mechanisms of language evolution in the digital age. Ultimately, this research seeks to demonstrate that the linguistic behaviors of Gen Z are not a degradation of standard

English, but rather a sophisticated, adaptive evolution that will shape the future of global communication.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Evolution of Internet Linguistics

The study of language on the internet, or computer-mediated communication (CMC), has evolved significantly since the early days of chat rooms and SMS text messaging. Crystal (2008) observed early digital language phenomena, noting that constraints like the 160-character limit of SMS led to the widespread adoption of initialisms and abbreviations (e.g., *LOL*, *OMG*, *IDK*). While older generations initially viewed these forms as a threat to formal literacy, sociolinguists have demonstrated that users are highly adept at code-switching between formal and digital registers (Tagliamonte & Denis, 2008).

2.2 Social Media as a Catalyst for Lexical Innovation

Unlike the text-based internet of the Millennials, Gen Z's digital landscape is highly visual and algorithmically driven. McCulloch (2019) argues that the modern internet has shifted from being a tool for information retrieval to a space for continuous, informal social interaction. Platforms like TikTok utilize algorithms that push high-engagement content to millions of users simultaneously. This creates massive, rapid feedback loops where regional slang or niche subcultural terms—often originating from African American Vernacular English (AAVE) or LGBTQ+ ballroom culture—are thrust into the global mainstream (Eberhardt & Freeman, 2015).

2.3 Multimodal Communication

Furthermore, digital communication is no longer strictly alphabetical. Danesi (2016) posits that emojis and digital graphics serve as "visual paralanguage," providing the tonal cues and emotional nuances that are absent in plain text. For Gen Z, combining text, memes, and emojis allows for complex layers of irony, sincerity, and meta-commentary, creating a rich multimodal vocabulary.

3. Methodology

To investigate Gen Z's influence on the English language, this study employed a mixed-methods research design, integrating both quantitative corpus analysis and qualitative survey data.

3.1 Participants

A stratified random sample of 500 Gen Z internet users (aged 14–26) was recruited via online community forums to participate in a digital communication survey. The demographic breakdown included participants from diverse linguistic backgrounds who use English as their primary language for online communication.

3.2 Data Collection

Corpus Analysis: A custom web-scraping script was utilized to extract 15,000 publicly available TikTok captions, comments, and X (formerly Twitter) posts generated by users in the target age demographic over a three-month period (January 2025 to March 2025).

Survey Instrument: Participants completed a 20-item questionnaire assessing their self-reported frequency of using specific slang terms, acronyms, and multimodal elements. They were also asked to define the terms in their own words to assess semantic consistency.

3.3 Data Analysis

The scraped corpus was processed using natural language processing (NLP) tools to determine word frequency, collocations, and contextual usage. Survey responses were coded thematically to identify underlying motivations for slang adoption (e.g., identity expression, humor, efficiency).

4. Results

The data reveals three primary mechanisms through which Gen Z is actively creating and modifying English words: Semantic Shift and Coinage, Truncation/Acronyms, and Multimodal Integration.

4.1 Semantic Shift and New Slang Coinage

The corpus analysis demonstrated a high frequency of distinct slang terms that have either been entirely coined by Gen Z or have undergone significant semantic shifts from their original dictionary definitions. Table 1 highlights the most prevalent terms, their traditional meanings, and their modernized definitions.

Table 1: Frequency and Semantic Shift of Key Gen Z Vocabulary

Slang Term	Traditional Meaning	Gen Z Meaning (Semantic Shift)	Corpus Frequency (per 10k words)
Slay	To kill violently	To do something exceptionally well; to look amazing.	412
Mid	Middle (prefix)	Mediocre, unimpressive, or of poor quality.	385
Rizz	<i>None</i> (derived from Charisma)	The ability to charm, attract, or romance someone.	530
No Cap	Without a lid/cover	Telling the truth; not lying.	290

Survey data indicated that 88% of respondents use the term *rizz* at least once a week, while 92% correctly identified *mid* as a pejorative term for something underwhelming. The term *slay* showed the highest degree of grammatical flexibility, being used as a verb ("She slayed that test"), an adjective ("That outfit is slay"), and a standalone interjection of approval.

4.2 Truncated Vocabulary and Acronyms

While acronyms like *LOL* (Laughing Out Loud), *OMG* (Oh My God), and *IDK* (I Don't Know) were popularized by previous generations, Gen Z continues to rely on them heavily for social communication. However, the qualitative data suggests a shift in their pragmatic function.

LOL: Now rarely indicates literal laughter. Instead, it is used as a discourse marker to soften a statement, convey passive aggression, or express irony (e.g., "I failed my math exam lol").

OMG / IDK: Used for hyper-efficiency in fast-paced platforms like Snapchat, where brevity is prioritized.

Gen Z has also contributed new truncations to the lexicon, such as *fr* (for real), *rn* (right now), and *tbh* (to be honest), which appeared in 65% of the analyzed text conversations.

4.3 Emojis, Graphics, and Memes as Language

When asked how they clarify the tone of a message, 94% of survey respondents cited the use of emojis or memes. Interestingly, the data showed that standard emojis are often repurposed to mean entirely new things. For instance, the "skull" emoji 🦴 was overwhelmingly used in the corpus to represent "I am dead from laughter," effectively replacing *LOL* for expressions of genuine amusement.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study underscore that Gen Z's use of the English language is not a degradation of standard grammar, but a highly adaptive, context-dependent evolution. The creation of words like *rizz*—a morphological clipping of "charisma"—demonstrates a sophisticated, intuitive understanding of linguistic structure.

5.1 The Speed of Linguistic Diffusion

Historically, new words took decades to enter the standard lexicon. The social media ecosystem has compressed this timeline. Because platforms like TikTok are global, a term coined by a teenager in one country can become a ubiquitous part of the international English vocabulary within weeks. As Zappavigna (2012) notes, social media language is primarily used to build "ambient affiliation"—creating a sense of belonging among users who share a digital space. Using terms like *no cap* or *mid* signals in-group membership to other members of Gen Z.

5.2 Algorithmic Influence on Language

The data also suggests that the medium shapes the message. Algorithms prioritize high-engagement, emotionally resonant, and humorous content. Therefore, language that is punchy, exaggerated, or highly ironic (like using *slay* for minor accomplishments) thrives and spreads faster. Gen Z is continuously shaping English to fit the fast-paced, highly visual demands of modern digital interfaces.

6. Conclusion

Generation Z is actively rewriting the rules of the English language. Through the ubiquitous use of social media platforms, they have established a distinct linguistic identity characterized by rapid slang coinage, semantic shifts, pragmatic repurposing of acronyms, and multimodal expression. Words like *rizz*, *mid*, and *slay* are not mere internet fads; they represent the ongoing, dynamic evolution of language in real-time.

As digital communication continues to become the primary mode of global interaction, the linguistic innovations of Gen Z will increasingly bleed into formal, spoken, and standard English. Future research should focus on the longitudinal tracking of these terms to determine which digital slang words cement themselves permanently in the English dictionary. Ultimately, Gen Z proves that language remains a flexible tool, perfectly capable of adapting to the complexities of the digital age.

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