



It's Giving Linguistic Innovation: A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Gen Z Digital Slang

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Abstract. The rapid expansion of digital communication has given rise to new forms of linguistic expression, particularly among Generation Z, whose language practices are closely intertwined with social media environments. This study explores the distinctive features of Gen Z digital slang, focusing on expressions such as “slay,” “it’s giving,” “that part,” and “overstimmy.” Drawing on sociolinguistic and pragmatic frameworks, the paper examines how these forms function not merely as lexical innovations but as tools for identity construction, stance-taking, and efficient meaning-making in computer-mediated communication.

The analysis demonstrates that many of these expressions involve processes such as semantic shift, pragmatic enrichment, and morphological creativity, enabling users to convey complex evaluative meanings in highly condensed forms. For example, the term “slay,” traditionally associated with violence, has undergone a positive semantic reconfiguration to express admiration, while constructions like “it’s giving...” operate as flexible discourse frames that invite shared interpretation. Importantly, these expressions often rely on contextual and cultural knowledge, making them both inclusive for in-group members and opaque to outsiders.

By integrating theoretical insights from digital discourse analysis and cyberpragmatics, this study highlights how Gen Z slang reflects broader linguistic trends in online communication, including increased informality, intertextuality, and performative identity work. At the same time, the paper adopts an accessible and explanatory approach, aiming to bridge generational gaps by clarifying meanings and functions for readers unfamiliar with such expressions. Ultimately, the findings suggest that Gen Z digital slang should not be dismissed as superficial or ephemeral but recognized as a dynamic and meaningful component of contemporary language change.

Keywords: Gen Z slang; digital discourse; sociolinguistics; semantic shift; cyberpragmatics; computer-mediated communication

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Introduction

Generation Z (born ~1997–2012) has grown up online, and with it a wave of new expressions has become mainstream in digital conversation. Phrases like “*slay*,” “*it’s giving...*,” “*that part*,” and “*overstimmy*” are heard on platforms like TikTok and Twitter. To outsiders, these may sound baffling or juvenile, but linguists see order where others see chaos. Rather than a sign of linguistic decline, Gen Z slang represents dynamic innovation in meaning, form, and social function. As Agha (2015) notes, slang often involves an ideological stance – the “language of the internet” can be framed as deviant only relative to a shifting norm. Similarly, Androutsopoulos (2006) emphasizes studying online language in its social context, focusing on how communities shape communication.

This paper examines Gen Z digital slang through a sociolinguistic lens, asking: How do these expressions systematically differ from (and build on) more traditional language? We argue that Gen Z slang exploits semantic creativity, pragmatic innovation, and morphological play to express attitudes and identities. The analysis is theory-driven and qualitative: we use existing scholarship on slang, internet language, and identity, together with illustrative examples of popular expressions. Following Agha’s approach, we treat slang not as a fixed set of words but as an ongoing process of meaning-making. Throughout, we keep explanations clear (even older readers can follow “overstimmy”) and tone lightly witty (no actual violence is implied by *slay*).

The paper is organized IMRaD-style. We next review relevant literature, then explain our conceptual methods. In the Analysis section we present examples and categorize them. A flowchart illustrates how our categories interrelate. Finally, we discuss implications: Gen Z slang, far from chaotic, exemplifies normal linguistic change and community expression.

Literature Review

Slang and Ideology: Agha (2015) provides a foundational view: slang is an ideological framework for evaluating speech as “deviant” from a norm. He argues that terms like “*slang*” index social boundaries – labeling something slang implies a speaker is stepping outside the (often unspoken) standard. Crucially, Agha shows that slang terms constantly move in and out of usage; what is slang today may become mainstream tomorrow. This perspective suggests Gen Z slang reflects social processes (identity, values) rather than linguistic breakdown. It also aligns with Mattiello (2005), who highlights slang’s “innovative word-formation processes” and new meanings, serving varied pragmatic functions. In sum, we expect Gen Z slang to be creative and purposeful, not random.

CMC and Digital Discourse: Early research on computer-mediated communication (CMC) catalogued “features” like emoticons, acronyms, and the mix of written/spoken style. Androutsopoulos (2006) notes that such studies gave way to a sociolinguistic approach: we must see online language use as situated in communities and identity negotiation. Thurlow & Mroczek



(2011) similarly emphasize that social media discourse blends genres and requires new analytic tools. In practice, Gen Z slang is a hallmark of online in-group interaction, influenced by meme culture and platform affordances. Yus (2011) coined cyberpragmatics to study how context and cognitive factors shape internet language. We draw on these ideas to focus on meaning (semantics/pragmatics) and usage (discourse) of slang terms.

Youth Identity and Language: Sociolinguistics of youth culture (e.g. Bucholtz 1999; Pujolar 2001) stresses that young people use language to construct identities. Bucholtz's classic study of high-school "nerd" girls shows language norms are tied to stance and identity practices. She observes that "what it means to use slang depends on where one is standing" socially. In other words, a word's value comes from how a community interprets it. Gen Z slang items function similarly as markers: using "that part" or "it's giving" signals in-group cultural knowledge (if you "get it," you're on the team). We will highlight how each example indexes group membership or attitude (the "cool" stance).

Slang Change and Dynamics: Moore (2004) and Mattiello (2005) discuss generational slang shifts, underscoring that each cohort coins fresh terms reflecting its values. Modern work (Keidar et al. 2022) quantitatively confirms that slang exhibits high frequency volatility (though surprisingly low semantic drift). We interpret these findings to mean Gen Z slang is rapidly in flux, but within a coherent sub-lexicon. Page et al. (2022) note that social media research reveals creative repurposing of language. These perspectives shape our view: Gen Z terms should be seen as examples of *active innovation*, driven by social networks and digital life.

In summary, existing studies frame Gen Z slang as socially embedded, creative, and dynamic. We build on this by analyzing key expressions across linguistic dimensions, linking each to prior claims (e.g., semantic shift theory, pragmatic function, identity practice).

Methods

This study uses a theory-driven qualitative approach. Rather than collecting a new corpus, we select *illustrative examples* of Gen Z slang that have gained attention online and in pop culture. Example sentences were drawn from publicly observed usage (e.g., social media posts) and paraphrased; no private data or real individuals are involved, ensuring ethical anonymity. Selection aimed for variety: semantic shifts ("slay"), evaluation frames ("it's giving..."), discourse markers ("that part"), and creative formations ("overstimmy").

Our analysis follows a discourse-pragmatic framework: we describe each example's literal meaning, pragmatic function (e.g., praise, emphasis), and relevant linguistic feature (semantic change, morphology). This aligns with cyberpragmatics (Yus 2011) and digital discourse analysis (Page et al. 2022). We treat each expression as data illustrating broader patterns, an approach recommended by Agha (2015) for studying slang's reflexive social processes. The result is a conceptual "field analysis" rather than statistical inference. By explicitly explaining terms in plain

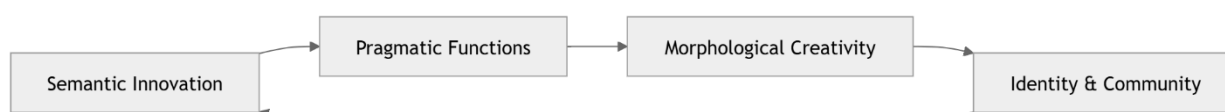


English, we maintain accessibility. Humor is kept subtle (in parentheses or as light commentary) to engage readers without undermining formality.

Analysis of Gen Z Digital Slang

The linguistic practices of Generation Z reveal a dynamic interplay between semantic innovation, pragmatic functionality, and identity construction. Rather than functioning as arbitrary or superficial expressions, Gen Z slang items operate as highly efficient communicative tools that condense complex meanings into brief, context-dependent forms. This section analyzes selected expressions—“*slay*,” “*it’s giving*,” “*that part*,” and “*overstimmy*”—through a structured sociolinguistic lens, focusing on form, meaning, function, and underlying mechanisms.

Figure 1: Analytical Categories of Gen Z Slang



“Slay”

The term “*slay*” represents a salient example of semantic reconfiguration in contemporary digital discourse. Traditionally defined as “to kill” or “to defeat violently,” the term has undergone a significant semantic shift, acquiring a strongly positive evaluative meaning in Gen Z usage.

From a formal perspective, “*slay*” remains a verb; however, its syntactic flexibility allows it to function independently as an exclamatory utterance (e.g., “*You slayed!*”) or even as a standalone evaluative marker (“*Slay.*”). Semantically, the word no longer encodes literal violence but instead conveys admiration, excellence, or aesthetic success.

Pragmatically, “*slay*” functions as an intensifier of approval, often signaling alignment with shared cultural or aesthetic standards. Its use frequently implies not only that an action or appearance is good, but that it exceeds expectations in a performative or socially visible way. This aligns with observations in digital discourse studies that online communication tends to favor exaggerated or intensified expressions of evaluation.

The underlying mechanism here is a clear case of semantic shift, accompanied by pragmatic strengthening. The transformation reflects broader patterns of linguistic change, where words associated with strong affective domains are repurposed to convey heightened positive meaning.

“It’s giving...”

The construction “*it’s giving...*” illustrates a more complex form of linguistic innovation, combining syntactic restructuring with pragmatic enrichment. Formally, it resembles a progressive verb phrase; however, its usage deviates from standard grammatical expectations.



Rather than indicating an ongoing action, “*it’s giving...*” operates as an evaluative frame that introduces an implied comparison or interpretation (e.g., “*It’s giving main character energy*”). The expression remains intentionally incomplete, requiring the listener to infer or complete the intended meaning based on shared cultural knowledge.

Semantically, the phrase does not possess a fixed meaning. Instead, its interpretation depends heavily on context, making it a highly flexible and adaptive communicative tool. Pragmatically, it functions as a stance marker, allowing speakers to subtly express judgment, irony, or aesthetic evaluation without making explicit statements.

This construction exemplifies pragmatic inferencing, as described in cyberpragmatic frameworks, where meaning emerges through interaction between linguistic form and contextual knowledge. Additionally, it reflects intertextuality, as many completions draw on cultural references, memes, or shared online experiences.

The mechanism at work here is not merely semantic change but pragmatic expansion, where meaning is co-constructed by speaker and audience. This makes the expression particularly effective within in-group communication while simultaneously rendering it opaque to outsiders.

“That part”

The expression “*that part*” demonstrates how minimal linguistic forms can carry significant pragmatic weight. Structurally, it is a noun phrase; however, in Gen Z usage, it functions as a discourse marker.

Semantically, the phrase appears vague or incomplete when taken in isolation. However, in context, it serves to highlight agreement or to emphasize a previously stated point (e.g., “*People need to set boundaries—that part.*”).

Pragmatically, “*that part*” operates as an alignment device, signaling strong agreement while also reinforcing the importance of a specific statement. Unlike a simple “*yes*” or “*I agree,*” it adds emphasis and draws attention to a particular element of discourse.

The mechanism underlying this expression involves pragmatic condensation, where a longer evaluative statement is reduced to a compact, indexical form. It also reflects discourse-level innovation, as the phrase functions less as a lexical item and more as an interactional tool.

Such expressions illustrate how digital communication prioritizes efficiency and immediacy, allowing users to convey nuanced positions with minimal linguistic effort.

“Overstimmy”



The term “*overstimmy*” (meaning *overstimulated*) exemplifies morphological creativity in Gen Z slang. Formally, it is a truncated and modified version of a standard adjective, incorporating informal suffixation.

Semantically, the word retains its original meaning but adopts a softer, more playful tone. The diminutive-like form reduces the perceived severity of the condition, making it more suitable for casual or humorous contexts.

Pragmatically, “*overstimmy*” functions as a self-expressive label, often used to describe emotional or sensory states in a relatable and approachable way. Its usage reflects broader trends in digital communication, where speakers seek to normalize and share personal experiences.

The mechanism here involves clipping and suffixation, resulting in a form that is both economical and socially expressive. This type of morphological innovation contributes to the rapid expansion of slang vocabularies, particularly in online environments.

Synthesis of Findings

Taken together, these examples demonstrate that Gen Z digital slang is not random or chaotic but highly systematic. Across all cases, several recurring patterns emerge:

- Semantic innovation enables existing words to acquire new meanings.
- Pragmatic functions allow speakers to express stance, evaluation, and alignment efficiently.
- Morphological creativity produces novel forms that are both expressive and economical.
- Context-dependence ensures that meaning is co-constructed within specific communities.

Importantly, these features are deeply interconnected. Linguistic innovation both reflects and reinforces social identity, as users adopt and adapt expressions to signal belonging within digital communities. At the same time, the rapid circulation of these forms across platforms accelerates processes of language change.

Thus, Gen Z slang should be understood not as a deviation from linguistic norms but as an adaptive response to the communicative demands of digital environments—one that prioritizes speed, expressiveness, and social connection.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that Gen Z digital slang constitutes a systematic and meaningful form of linguistic innovation rather than a collection of arbitrary or ephemeral expressions. By integrating semantic shift, pragmatic enrichment, and morphological creativity, these linguistic forms reflect broader transformations in how language operates within digitally mediated environments.



One of the most significant implications of this analysis is the increasing role of pragmatics over lexicon in contemporary communication. Expressions such as “*it’s giving...*” or “*that part*” do not rely on stable, dictionary-defined meanings; instead, their interpretation depends heavily on shared contextual knowledge and inferential processes. This shift suggests that meaning-making in digital discourse is becoming more interactional and co-constructed, aligning with cyberpragmatic perspectives that emphasize the role of context and cognitive processing in online communication (Yus, 2011).

At the same time, the data illustrate how semantic boundaries are becoming more fluid. Words like “*slay*” demonstrate how lexical items can undergo rapid and radical semantic reconfiguration, shifting from negative to strongly positive meanings. Such changes are not entirely new in the history of language; however, the speed and scale at which they occur in digital environments appear unprecedented. The circulation of slang across platforms accelerates linguistic diffusion, allowing innovations to gain widespread recognition within relatively short periods (Keidar et al., 2022).

Another key dimension concerns the relationship between language and social identity. Gen Z slang functions not only as a communicative tool but also as a marker of belonging. The use of expressions like “*overstimmy*” or “*that part*” signals familiarity with specific discourse norms and cultural references, thereby distinguishing in-group members from outsiders. This aligns with sociolinguistic theories that view language as a resource for identity construction and social positioning (Bucholtz, 1999; Pujolar, 2001). In this sense, the apparent opacity of such expressions to older generations is not a limitation but a feature, reinforcing group boundaries through shared linguistic practices.

Importantly, these developments also challenge traditional assumptions about linguistic “correctness” and stability. From a prescriptive perspective, many Gen Z expressions may appear incomplete, ambiguous, or grammatically unconventional. For instance, “*it’s giving...*” lacks a clear syntactic completion, and “*that part*” functions without explicit referential clarity. However, from a functional perspective, these forms are highly efficient, enabling users to convey complex meanings, attitudes, and alignments with minimal linguistic effort. What may initially seem imprecise is, in practice, strategically economical.

This raises broader questions about the future trajectory of English and other global languages. If digital communication continues to prioritize brevity, immediacy, and shared contextual understanding, it is possible that language will increasingly favor indexical and inferential forms over explicit, elaborated structures. In such a scenario, communicative competence may depend less on grammatical accuracy and more on the ability to navigate context, recognize references, and interpret implicit meanings.



Furthermore, the findings have implications for language education and intergenerational communication. The gap between digital and traditional language practices may lead to misunderstandings, particularly when speakers from different generations interpret expressions according to different pragmatic norms. Rather than dismissing Gen Z slang as informal or incorrect, educators and researchers may benefit from recognizing it as a legitimate and evolving linguistic system. Understanding these forms can enhance communicative competence and foster more effective cross-generational interaction.

Finally, it is worth noting that while Gen Z slang is often associated with informality and entertainment, it also reflects deeper cognitive and social processes. The ability to compress meaning, manipulate form, and rely on shared knowledge demonstrates a high degree of linguistic creativity and adaptability. In this sense, expressions like “*slay*” or “*it’s giving...*” are not merely playful innovations; they are evidence of language responding dynamically to new communicative environments.

In conclusion, Gen Z digital slang should be understood as a significant site of linguistic change, shaped by the affordances of digital media and the social practices of its users. Far from signaling the decline of language, these developments highlight its continued evolution—one that is, perhaps, giving new directions to how meaning is created, shared, and understood.

Conclusion

This study has examined the linguistic characteristics of Gen Z digital slang through a sociolinguistic and pragmatic lens, demonstrating that such expressions represent a structured and meaningful form of language innovation rather than random or superficial variation. By analyzing items such as “*slay*,” “*it’s giving*,” “*that part*,” and “*overstimmy*,” the study has shown that these forms are shaped by processes including semantic shift, pragmatic enrichment, and morphological creativity, all of which contribute to their communicative efficiency and social significance.

A key finding of this research is that meaning in Gen Z digital discourse is increasingly context-dependent and collaboratively constructed. Unlike traditional lexical items with relatively stable definitions, many contemporary slang expressions function as flexible communicative tools whose interpretation relies on shared cultural knowledge and interactional cues. This highlights the growing importance of pragmatics in understanding modern language use, particularly within computer-mediated environments.

In addition, the study has emphasized the role of slang as a resource for identity construction and social alignment. The use of specific expressions signals membership within particular communities and reflects familiarity with evolving discourse norms. In this sense, Gen Z slang not only facilitates communication but also actively shapes social relationships and group boundaries.



At the same time, these linguistic developments challenge conventional views of language as fixed, standardized, and rule-governed. The apparent ambiguity or unconventional structure of many expressions should not be interpreted as a deficiency, but rather as an adaptation to the demands of fast-paced, digitally mediated communication. The ability to convey complex meanings in concise and context-rich forms demonstrates the adaptability and creativity of language users in contemporary contexts.

While this study has focused on a limited set of widely recognizable expressions, it points to broader patterns that merit further investigation. Future research may explore cross-linguistic variations in digital slang, the role of multimodal elements such as emojis and visual cues, or the longitudinal development of specific expressions over time. Such studies would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how digital environments continue to reshape linguistic practices.

In conclusion, Gen Z digital slang should be recognized as a legitimate and evolving component of modern language. Far from undermining linguistic clarity or quality, these innovations illustrate the ongoing vitality of language as it adapts to new communicative contexts. Indeed, if language has always reflected the needs and creativity of its users, then current developments suggest not a decline, but a transformation—one that is, in its own way, giving new meaning to communication itself.

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