


The Socio-Pragmatics of Digital Slang in Post-Pandemic Online Communities

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Keywords	Abstract
digital slang socio-pragmatics affective communication identity post-pandemic discourse online communities	The COVID-19 epidemic significantly altered the lines separating work, education, and personal life by increasing people's dependence on digital communication and changing how people use language in online contexts. Digital slang is analyzed in this theoretical article as a socio-pragmatic phenomena that illustrates how intimacy, identity, and ideology interact in post-pandemic communication. The research conceptualizes how slang serves interpersonal, expressive, identity, and ideological purposes in digital discourse by drawing on Speech Act Theory, Politeness Theory, and Relevance Theory. According to the investigation, slang serves as a tool for subtle power negotiation, in-group connection, and emotional attunement, especially in Zoom culture and online communities like TikTok and Discord. This study frames digital slang as a language strategy of adaptation, an dynamic reflection of how people reconstruct social meaning, emotion, and belonging in mediated interaction, by combining viewpoints from digital ethnography and affective pragmatics. In the end, comprehending digital slang is equivalent to comprehending the sociocultural processes by which language continuously adjusts to the complex post-pandemic environment.

I. Introduction

Online communication behaviors have accelerated globally in a way never seen before due to the COVID-19 epidemic. Since lockdowns, social distance, remote employment, and virtual

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schooling have become more common, people have been engaging online more than ever before through social media, messaging applications, and video conversations. Online technologies have become essential for social life, employment, and education as a result of the pandemic (Gupta et al., 2021). One such study indicates that many in-person activities were replaced by digital ones. The increasing prevalence of informal and non-standard language use, including slang, in cyberspace has also had a significant impact on students' linguistic identities, according to studies on young populations (Irianto & Malik, 2025). Instead, a new normal has come to existence where digital interactions are more prevalent in everyday life. Social media, gaming platforms, messaging groups, and forums are among the online communities that have gained importance and have been a constant source of new language. Digital slang has taken place in these communities; emoji-based expressions, memes, online neologisms, innovative abbreviations, and other non-standard language have become the vital means to show identification, emotion, group membership, and attitude.

Digital slang is useful in social situations and is not only ornamental or incidental. It can give a common code among community members, foster familiarity, ease tensions brought on by unclear internet communication, and shorten social distance. Slang, in particular, can be regarded as a tool that grants the youth access to the cultural norms while at the same time signaling their in-group membership. Research on the use of Generation Z slang in Instagram and TikTok has discovered that these language variations not only promote but also enhance solidarity and expressiveness (Murni & Anjani, 2025; Sawe, 2025; Sitohang & Ristia, 2025). In post-pandemic online ecosystems, digital slang is far from peripheral: it functions as a linguistic innovation, a social code, and a mechanism of identity and community building. On Vietnamese social media, for example, “hot-trend” expressions (e.g. “o may zing good job”, “xuc xac xuc xe”, or “get go”) proliferate rapidly, circulated via memes, comment threads, and remixed posts (Nguyen, 2025). Similarly, scholarship on Facebook slang in Vietnam highlights how the English loanword “*flex*” has been appropriated as a marker of self-presentation or status within youth networks, with usage frequency correlated to social influence and peer norms (Le et al., 2024). These phenomena show that digital slang is not simply playful variation, but a form of social action embedded in everyday communicative life.

Viewing things through the socio-pragmatic lens, a good understanding of these processes can be obtained. Pragmatics deals with the whole process of meaning being determined in a particular situation, that is, what is said or written does not always correspond directly to what is meant, but rather depends on the situation, the norms that are shared, the relationships between the people, and their expectations. Socio-pragmatics carries this discussion further and emphasizes the social aspects of the pragmatic acts; how language use is influenced by and influences identity, power, group membership, politeness or face norms, and community values. This is how socio-pragmatics makes the investigation of digital slang not only a matter of lexical innovation but also of sociolinguistics. Among the theoretical frameworks that come into play here are Speech Act



Theory (e.g. Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969), which aids in the comprehension of what kinds of actions digital slang performs (e.g. solidarity, teasing, greeting); Politeness Theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987), which gives us a handle on how speakers manage face-needs in online interactions that are either constrained or ambiguous; Community of Practice theory (Wenger, 1999), which depicts how shared linguistic norms, including slang, are formed in virtual communities; Indexicality and Relevance Theory, which account for why certain slang expressions become identity markers or indicators of shared values or stance among users.

In post-pandemic online communities, digital slang is a socio-pragmatic phenomena that reflects and negotiates identity, social connections, power, and affect in novel technical and social contexts, according to this research. The goal is to theoretically outline the ways in which digital slang acts as a social act, including its purposes, the norms it involves, and its effects on community, identity, and communication in the digital age. The following lays forth the theoretical backdrop, including definitions and important terms related to identity, slang, digital discourse, and socio-pragmatics. The study then looks at how online communities and communication standards have changed in the post-pandemic environment. Digital slang's socio-pragmatic roles are studied in terms of identity, interpersonal relationships, expression, and ideology. Finally, the discussion ends with the implications for a wider understanding of digital communication and future theoretical works.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. Socio-Pragmatics and Digital Communication

Socio-pragmatics, one of the areas of pragmatics, studies the way that the employment of language not only reflects but also creates social ties, identities, and power relations. On the other hand, pragmatics considers the whole picture of which communication is the case, that is, the context, intention, and the presentation of the speakers or language users when it comes to (Leech, 1983). Socio-pragmatics, however, concentrates on how the socially defined and the socially recognized meanings are established and passed on in a given community (Thomas, 1995). To say it differently, pragmatics deals with what the speakers mean; on the other hand, socio-pragmatics studies how social factors dictate what they mean and how they are allowed to mean it. The division is significant for online communication since usually in such situations there are little to no linguistic cues, and social meaning has to be built up using alternative strategies, such as humor, emojis, memes, and innovative slang. Socio-pragmatic analysis thrives in digital communication because online discourse combines rich contextual signaling with grammatical simplicity. In order to convey alignment, tone, and posture, users traverse multimodal elements such as text, emoji, GIFs, and hashtags (Tagg, 2015). Online spaces are new writing cultures, as Androutsopoulos (2014) observes, where social positioning, intimacy, and group affiliation are performed through microlinguistic decisions. The technologization of communication also changes the pragmatics of ordinary speech, forcing people to create new language indicators for sarcasm, comedy, or politeness (Crystal, 2011).



There are still a number of traditional frameworks that are essential for comprehending these socio-pragmatic phenomena in digital settings. According to the Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969), language is an action, with utterances carrying out illocutionary tasks including making demands, making promises, expressing emotions, or proclaiming. In the digital sphere, speech actions are frequently condensed into language shortcuts, such as "*fr*" (for real), which serves as an aggressive gesture of agreement, or "*no cap*," which indicates sincerity and solidarity. Regardless of the asynchronous nature of texting, these performative micro-acts are still very helpful in maintaining community unity. The second basic paradigm is Politeness Theory, which shows how speakers control their faces through language, emphasizing the need for approval (positive face) and independence (negative face) (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Emojis, softeners, and amusing language to reduce possible offense or ambiguity are examples of politeness in digital contexts. A face-saving technique that preserves harmony and interpersonal intimacy between interlocutors is the use of phrases like "*lmao*," "*brooo*," or fun exaggerations following a taunting comment. Last but not least, the sociological framework provided by Community of Practice theory (Wenger, 1999) explains how online communities, including fandoms, gaming circles, and meme communities, create common terminology and communication standards. The "*digital tribes*" or those adhering to the same groups online create their presence and hierarchy through mutual participation, collaborative activities, and the constant use of the same words. Hence, one could view the emergence of distinct slang (for instance, "*touch grass*" and "*based*") as a byproduct of joint meaning-making and community identity efforts.

Relevance Theory captures inferential efficiency in meaning-making, Politeness Theory emphasizes relationship management, and Speech Act Theory emphasizes the performative power of digital communications. When taken as a whole, they provide a multifaceted view of how users balance face, affect, and economy in online conversation. Consequently, socio-pragmatics offers the conceptual framework for comprehending how digital language functions as a means of social negotiation in addition to being a means of expression. These theories provide light on how individuals utilize digital slang in post-pandemic online communities to enact social cohesiveness in a digitally mediated environment by performing acts of resistance, humor, and alignment.

2.2. The Nature of Digital Slang

A collection of informal, imaginative, and context-specific language patterns that develop and spread within online discourse groups is known as "digital slang." Emoji combinations, acronyms, new spellings, and memetic phrases that have social and emotional connotations beyond their literal form are all included (Eble, 2012; Tagg, 2015). Digital slang is distinguished linguistically by its multimodality, inventiveness, and brevity. From a morphological perspective, it frequently entails humorous re-spelling ("*u*" for "*you*"), cutting ("*sus*" from "*suspicious*"), or orthographic stylization ("*brooo*"). Many slang terms see quick semantic changes as they spread among internet communities.



Digital slang has many communication and cultural purposes and is thus considered very important in the society of today. It is an indicator of in-group identification (Eckert, 2000), which in turn, promotes camaraderie among peers who are aware of the context and the slang used. Moreover, it manifests itself as social resistance, for instance, mocking of the authoritative ones, use of sarcasm, or questioning the prevailing discourse. Online language originality, according to Androutsopoulos (2014), frequently reflects young innovation and countercultural position. Additionally, digital slang facilitates affective expression in the absence of paralinguistic signals by serving as an expressive and emotional medium. Examples of slang terms that convey approbation or sincerity include "*based*" and "*no cap*," while "*touch grass*" parodies internet infatuation in a hilarious way.

The memetic nature of digital slang is one of its unique characteristics. As people remix, hashtag, and incorporate it into memes or short movies, it changes and spreads virally. The logic of internet culture itself, such as ephemeral, participative, and community-driven, is reflected in this "*language viralization*" (Shifman, 2014). These diffusion mechanisms strengthen social barriers between insiders and outsiders in addition to reproducing language patterns. Digital slang is a reflection of the persistence of social play and the development of hybrid linguistic identities influenced by prolonged online presence in the setting of post-pandemic communication. Its ability to capture shared experience, emotion, and adjustment to life mediated by digital means makes it socio-pragmatically significant. Recognizing digital slang as a semiotic instrument of affect, inventiveness, and belonging in the dynamic ecology of online discourse is therefore necessary to comprehend it.

3. Post-Pandemic Context and the Evolution of Online Communities

3.1. Digital Intimacy and Emotional Expression

The COVID-19 epidemic caused a persistent rearrangement of daily contact that academics have dubbed a new kind of digital intimacy by compressing traditionally separate social spheres, such as work, study, and leisure, into overlapping digital settings (Baym, 2015). Extended mediated co-presence (with associated affordances and limitations) became commonplace with video conferencing and remote work. Research on virtual meetings during the pandemic shows how these platforms' social demands increased and how they helped to reestablish interpersonal norms (Karl et al., 2021). Fast, multimodal practices of expression (mesmes, soundclips, stickers, slang) that provide instant affective alignment and shared emotional framing were simultaneously promoted by short-form platforms like TikTok and participatory places like Discord and other chat groups. As a result, digital slang serves as an affective resource: short, high-inference expressions (text, emoji, meme) that perform social reassurance and emotional attunement across dispersed networks. This process is linked to ambient affiliation, as defined by Zappavigna and Martin (2018), and it builds alignment and values through social media micro-interaction and social tagging.



3.2. Identity, Power, and Group Solidarity

Digital slang has developed into a crucial indicator of social affiliation and identity performance in post-pandemic online environments. Slang phrases serve as semiotic markers that connect language form to social meanings like age, subcultural affiliation, or ideological attitude, in line with Silverstein's (2003) idea of indexicality. In digital tribes, terms like "*based*," "*ok boomer*," and "*touch grass*" indicate group alignment and shared ideals rather than just propositional content. Thus, online communities, from political meme cultures to fandoms, become communities of practice where language innovation serves as a signal of in-group participation and expertise (Wenger, 1999).

Language is also used to negotiate power dynamics in these settings. Slang usage or coinage frequently gives influencers, moderators, and subcultural elites who mold discursive norms symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1991). Based on wider hierarchies of visibility and influence, these players have the linguistic power to validate or invalidate particular statements. Irony and comedy also function as socio-pragmatic instruments of resistance and unity. Online comedy, in accordance Milner (2016), recontextualizes shared experiences via playful irreverence, so fostering unity and challenging authority. In this sense, post-pandemic digital slang is discursively charged and enacts social critique, exclusion, and inclusion; it is not only lighthearted. In addition to speeding up digitization, the epidemic changed the practical definitions of comedy, empathy, and belonging. Therefore, in the absence of co-present engagement, digital slang developed as a semiotic tool for users to adjust emotional expression.

4. SOCIO-PRAGMATIC FUNCTIONS OF DIGITAL SLANG

Beyond merely inventing new words, digital slang has several socio-pragmatic functions. In online environments, it functions as a communicative tool for establishing interpersonal connections, expressing emotive attitude, communicating social identity, and negotiating ideological implications. From the standpoint of socio-pragmatics, these functions show how language is used to carry out social work, how speakers use seemingly lighthearted forms of communication to control power, closeness, and belonging.

Building and maintaining interpersonal ties is one of the main purposes of digital slang. Slang creates a casual tone that promotes camaraderie and conviviality and frequently indicates in-group identification. Austin (1962) and Searle (1969) would categorize expressions like "*bruh*," "*bestie*," and "*no cap*" as expressive speech acts, acts that reflect sentiments and build interpersonal ties. This interpersonal characteristic is in line with Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory, which maintains that amusing slang lowers the likelihood of face-threatening circumstances by emphasizing familiarity and softening directness. For instance, phrases like "*chill phet*," "*mlem mlem*," or "*dinh kout*," which reflect global trends of online sociability, similarly perform digital intimacy and community membership in Vietnamese digital culture.



By indexing age, ideological attitude, and group membership, digital slang also carries out identification work. According to Silverstein's (2003) concept of indexicality, slang expressions indicate affiliation with certain subcultures and communities of practice (Wenger, 1999). For example, in the online communication of Generation Z, terms such as "*based*," "*cringe*," or "*simp*" are markers of the generation, whereas expressions like "touch grass" or "ok boomer" are used to express sarcasm and opposition between the generations. In this manner, slang mirrors the youth culture and digital participation; at the same time, it serves as a symbolic barrier, making the grouping stronger (Eckert, 2012).

Crucially, users intentionally remark on, mock, or influence language trends as a means of stance-taking in digital slang, which is also a place of metapragmatic awareness. Using sarcastic quotation marks, spoof instructions, or meme captions such as "*POV: you still say 'yeet' in 2025*," online speakers frequently present slang as a humorous or critical object. Slang is not just an impromptu linguistic creation, but also a self-aware commentary on language usage, identity performance, and cultural engagement, as demonstrated by these reflective activities. As a result, metapragmatic reflexivity is included into the way users in networked discourse negotiate belonging and authenticity.

The dynamics of gender and power also have a significant impact on who has the right to create or spread digital slang. According to Bourdieu's (1991) concept of linguistic capital, socially prominent actors, including influencers, streamers, or subcultural elites, are frequently the source of slang innovation. Their online status validates some terms while marginalizing others. Likewise, gendered trends show up: women and queer users are typically the first to employ emotional or stylistic slang (such as "*slay*," "*bestie*," or "*it's giving*"), but their language innovation is usually hijacked or trivialized in popular discourse. Therefore, the socio-pragmatic study of slang has to focus on how digital hierarchies both provide opportunities for fun resistance and redefinition and replicate larger injustices.

Digital slang's expressive role is highlighted by its emotive and affective usage. Slang improves communicative efficiency by distilling emotional meanings into highly inferential, context-sensitive statements, according to Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1995). Phrases that communicate great emotive resonance and shared comprehension, such as "*I'm dead*" or "*mood*," require little semantic information. These forms are prime examples of affective pragmatics, which emphasizes communal empathy and emotional attitude with little language effort. This expressive modality is further enhanced by the inventive use of emojis, GIFs, and phonetic spellings (e.g., "*brooo*," "*slayy*"), which execute digital counterparts of tone and gesture (Zappavigna & Martin, 2018).

Digital slang has ideological significance in addition to interpersonal and expressive objectives. To mirror public judgments, through irony and critique, it nonetheless serves as a vehicle for social commentary. The labels "*Karen*," "*NPC*," and "*snowflake*" are indicative of the cultural tales



dealing with ethics, genuineness, and a conflict with the dominant narratives (Milner, 2016). Such remarks are like discourse guns that, in a few words, take away the legitimacy of certain behaviors or opinions and, at the same time affirm the membership of the group. These ideological roles make clear how the politics of representation and power dynamics in online communities are mediated by digital lingo. From a socio-pragmatic perspective, these expressions are performative actions of stance-taking that help shape public discourse in the post-pandemic age, rather than just being hilarious (Bourdieu, 1991).

In conclusion, the socio-pragmatic purposes of digital slang demonstrate how people utilize language to take social action. These forms demonstrate the dynamic interaction between language innovation, digital environment, and social meaning-making in modern online communication, whether they are used to convey intimacy, belonging, emotion, or ideology.

5. IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

In the post-pandemic period, the socio-pragmatic study of digital slang highlights the changing interplay between language, technology, and identity. Digital slang is a prime example of how linguistic practice is becoming more hybridized as communicative life increasingly takes place in hybrid contexts, where virtual and physical encounters coexist (Androutsopoulos, 2015; Varis & Blommaert, 2015). The example of people modifying languages to fit the advantages of the internet while still keeping social contact is a mixture of both technological and social aspects. As online conversation continues to alter the parameters of authentic or acceptable communication, the mix compels researchers to renew their faith in established sociolinguistic principles regarding community, register, and context.

In theory, with the objective of reflecting the users' transitions of meaning, emotion, and power, future studies should integrate digital ethnography along with socio-pragmatic inquiry (Pink et al., 2016). A more thorough comprehension of how language practices like slang function as social acts rooted within networked cultures may be achieved by combining pragmatic analysis with anthropological sensitivity. As slang and informal registers increasingly influence the design of chatbots, voice assistants, and generative AI systems, this multidisciplinary approach may also be used to the study of algorithmic communication and AI-mediated discourse (Bender & Friedman, 2018; Van Dijck, 2020).

Digital slang study has wider implications for language instruction and digital literacy than just its theoretical relevance. It is possible to develop instruction that encourages linguistic inventiveness rather than stigmatizing informal speech by understanding how young speakers use slang to generate humor, position, and solidarity (Gee, 2017). This makes socio-pragmatic awareness an aspect of critical digital literacy, which is the capacity to engage in the language economy of the online world in a meaningful way and to navigate and comprehend. The socio-pragmatic



examination of digital slang ultimately sheds light on the evolving nature of communication as well as the persistent human urge to play, interact, and interpret language.

6. CONCLUSION

One of the most prominent socio-pragmatic manifestations of the post-pandemic state is digital slang. It captures the ways speakers recreate sociality, identity, and affect in digitally mediated existence, and is by no means a language oddity or simple amusement. Slang evolved into a language technology of intimacy and resilience as a result of the pandemic's acceleration of interpersonal communication's shift into virtual spaces. Digital slang illustrates how language users reevaluate the values of collaboration, civility, and emotional expression in limited and fragmented online environments through its creative shortness, comedy, and intertextuality.

Digital slang not only reflects the digital persona that every online user shapes but also gives insights into how emotions are expressed through minimalistic signs and how the listeners' part in the making of the message is the main point in this type of communication, revealing the socio-pragmatic complexities of today's communication. The ways in which digital slang is used creatively should not be interpreted merely as random choices but rather as coming from an ideology that involves exercising power, identifying oneself with a certain age group, or belonging to a specific subculture. Thus, the negotiation of meaning online and consequently, the impact of language on social life have been uncovered through digital slang study, which employs the theories of Affective Pragmatics, Indexicality, Politeness, and Speech Acts. Language evolution, under the constraints of cutting-edge technology, may be mistaken for linguistic chaos, but it is, in fact, a systematic negotiation of the meaning that is taking place.

From a wider theoretical viewpoint, digital slang is a suitable example of the fusion of language and technology, what Blommaert (2018) refers to as the sociolinguistics of globalization. It signifies that the change in languages is not only in terms of vocabulary but in terms of the entire ecosystem of communication: the ecosystem is changing as people occupy the overlapping areas of digital and physical space. Therefore, understanding digital slang means understanding the ever-changing pragmatics of social life, how people deal with the issues of emotion, identity, and belonging in the chaos of a post-pandemic digital era. In the end, the sociolinguistics of globalization is best illustrated by digital slang, which shows how language changes to accommodate the hybrid ecology of digital and physical existence. It demonstrates that post-pandemic language development is a methodical negotiation of meaning, emotion, and belonging across mediated environments rather than a chaotic one.

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