

Use of TikTok Slang among Malaysian Generation Z

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the usage of TikTok slang among Generation Z. The specific objectives are to 1) determine the perceived frequencies of usage; 2) identify the contexts during which TikTok slang are used; 3) determine how the slang are acquired; and 4) find out the reasons why the slang is used. The participants were 102 Generation Z participants aged 10-25 in Malaysia. An online questionnaire was used to collect data. The results showed that 52% of the participants frequently used TikTok slang in communication but 6.9% never used it. As for sources of acquiring slang, social media was the most influential. Friends are more important than family in spreading use of TikTok slang, mainly because TikTok slang is mostly used among young people rather than adults. Over half of the participants frequently used TikTok slang at school or at work but less during social gatherings, and the least during formal meetings. The main reason for the Generation Z participants to use TikTok slang is for fun (73.5%) but one-third of the participants used slang to be creative, show solidarity with ingroup and to be efficient in communication. The study suggests that TikTok slang has possibly spread from social media use into face-to-face communication in school and work settings, introducing temporal variants of English that are used in the two specific settings.

Keywords: Generation Z, TikTok, slang usage, slang acquisition

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INTRODUCTION

As technology and social media develop in Malaysia, all communication media revolve around social media usage. Generation Z spends a substantial amount of time on social media platforms. It is generally accepted that Generation Z, also known as Gen Zers, zoomers, and several other names, born between 1997 – 2012, are true digital natives as they are fully connected digitally since birth (Eldridge, 2023). As such, they are much better adapted to life in the digital era and more permeable to digital communication norms compared to the previous generations (PrakashYadav & Rai, 2017).

The proliferation of mobile technology has spurred the rapid growth of video-sharing social networks (e.g., TikTok) among Generation Z. TikTok refers to the revolutionary social media platform that allows users to create 1560-second films and share them with the TikTok community. TikTok content usually include dances, dialogue re-enactments, cute animals, art creations, voiceovers, makeovers, and food. TikTok is the fastest-growing app today, with 1.5 billion active users, most youngsters, and teenagers (Weimann & Masri, 2020). TikTok is available in 150 countries, has 800 million monthly active users and has been downloaded over 2 billion times (Li et al., 2021). However, TikTok usage in Malaysia is still lower than in other countries, as Facebook is still the leading social media platform, used by more than 22 million Malaysians with a penetration rate of 76.6% in 2020 (Statista Research Department, 2022). The prevalence of TikTok among Malaysian youth, nonetheless, may increase, if Malaysian users follow the same trend in Indonesia. TikTok is the most popular social networking site in Indonesia, as evidenced by over 100 million downloads on Google Play (Damayanti & Gemiharto, 2019).

Social media communication impacts language style, one of which is the emergence of slang. Slang refers to expressions used by a speech community (e.g., teenagers, criminals) that wishes to show attachment to a favourable social identity (Shahraki & Rasekh, 2011). For example, in the past secret codes were used for secret missions during wars (Maulidiya et al., 2021). Perhaps this is also a reason why TikTokers use unique jargon in their videos (Lutfiah & Sudarwati, 2021). The slang of a particular group may not be approved or even understood by other social groups because slang and social group are considered one unit (Maulidiya et al., 2021). However, slang terms from subculture groups may be absorbed by the public and become part of their vocabulary. With the global nature of TikTok, the use of English slang words has spread into the daily informal communication among

high school students in Indonesia and the Philippines (Apriani, 2017; Jeresano & Carretero, 2022). For instance, students use the slang "legit" to mean that something (or someone) is the real deal or doing something real, and the slang "basic" to mean something (or someone) unoriginal or uninteresting.

There are various factors that contribute to the use of slang in communication. TikTok users use slang for reasons other than shorter expressions, faster typing, and ease of saying. Zhou and Fan's (2013) study revealed that American slang usage among teenagers and college students is influenced by social factors and individual factors such as gender, occupation, and age. Celebrities may also be part of the influencing factor. Zhou and Fan (2013) pointed out that the slang terms were coined by musicians and pop singers but eventually permeate communication in casual settings with friends. In Indonesia, Pradianti (2013) found that the younger generation use slang because of their need to say something easily, express anger, confuse others, and have fun and laugh (Apriani, 2017), as well as to express praise, sympathise, congratulate, state, convey, acknowledge, hope, request, and invite (Putri et al., 2022). Slang is also used to show self-identity (Supri & Nur, 2021; van de Ven, 2021). Using slang as identity marker is the most crucial function of slang, based on Namvar's (2014) study among Malaysian youth in Kuala Lumpur. However, there are more reasons for the use of slang, and it is important to find out from the perspective of the Generation Z themselves. Furthermore, less is known about slang usage and the reasons for using slang among Malaysian youth.

This study examines the usage of TikTok slang among Generation Z. The specific objectives are to 1) determine the perceived frequencies of usage; 2) identify the contexts during which TikTok slang are used; 3) determine how the slang are acquired; and 4) find out the reasons why the slang is used.

METHOD OF STUDY

This is a descriptive study that uses a questionnaire to collect data from 102 participants regarding their usage of TikTok slang. The participants were Malaysian Generation Z participants aged 10-25. This is because those below 10 years old may be too young to fully understand the requirements and parental consent was needed for them to participate in the study. The selection criteria did not include gender because the study does not focus on the influence of gender on the usage of slang.

The questionnaire was created using Google Form. It was written in English and divided into six sections. Section A has five sociodemographic questions. Section B contains eight items to test whether the participants know some popular TikTok slang such as *extra*, *tea*, and *glow up*. The context for the TikTok slang includes video types such as acting, animated infographics, documentaries, news, oral speeches, pictorial slideshows, and TikTok dance. Sections C to F contain 14 questions concerning the usage of TikTok slang, which include participants' perceived frequency of using selected slang and slang acquisition and context of usage.

The data were collected by distributing the link to the Google Form to the participants. Online questionnaire was chosen as it allows easy access for the target participants for this study. Participants were recruited by sharing the link on social networking sites such as Facebook and through snowball sampling, where participants are encouraged to send the questionnaire to others in the age group who may be interested. Participants were not given a time limit to complete the questionnaire. This was to allow participants to answer the questions at their own pace and convenience. For the data analysis, the data from the questionnaire were keyed into the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) v. 21. The data were analysed using descriptive statistics and reported as frequencies and percentages.

RESULTS

This section presents the results on the frequency of TikTok usage, sources of TikTok slang, the contexts, and reasons for using TikTok.

Frequency of usage

When asked how frequently they used TikTok slang in communication, half of the participants responded with "often" (23.6%) and "always" (28.4%), which means that the remaining half did not use the slang frequently, as shown in Table 1. In fact, 6.9% of 102 participants never used TikTok but this is a small percentage.

Table 1. Frequency of TikTok slang usage in communication (N=102).

	Never	Rarely	Seldom	Often	Always
Frequency of usage	6.9	13.7	27.5	23.6	28.4

How generation Z acquire TikTok slang

Table 2 shows the breakdown of responses (each participant could vote for more than one source of acquisition). The results showed that from seven potential sources from which TikTok slang might be acquired, social media was the most influential (78.4%). Friends or peers ranked second (60.8%), showing that they are more important than family (siblings, 33.3%; parents, 6.9%) in spreading use of TikTok slang. The higher percentage for friends or peers and siblings than parents also indicate that for the Generation Z participants, the main source of TikTok slang is young people from a similar age group, rather than the older age group. Mass media like television (17.6%), magazines (10.8%) and radio (6.9%) are not important sources of TikTok slang compared to peers.

Table 2. Sources of TikTok slang acquisition and percentage of votes (N=102).

Source of TikTok slang acquisition	Percentage of votes by participants
Social media	78.4
Friends or peers	60.8
Siblings	33.3
Television	17.6
Magazines	10.8
Radio	6.9
Parents	3.9

Where and with whom are the TikTok slang used

Table 3 shows where TikTok slang is most frequently used by the participants. In terms of location, over half of the participants reported that they frequently used TikTok slang at school or at work (20.6% often, 36.3% always). In comparison, TikTok slang was not as frequently used during social gatherings (19.6% often, 15.7% always). The Generation Z participants believed that TikTok slang was not suitable for formal situations, which is why the percentages for frequent usage are even lower (8.8% often, 3.9% always).

Table 3. Where TikTok slang is most frequently used by the participants (N=102).

Location	Never	Rarely	Seldom	Often	Always
School or work	6.9	12.7	23.5	20.6	36.3
Social gatherings	15.7	23.5	25.5	19.6	15.7
Formal meetings	68.6	10.8	7.8	8.8	3.9

Participants appeared to be most comfortable using the slang with their siblings and others of the same age, even though the frequency of usage was not as high as expected. As shown in Table 4, only 46.1% of the participants stated that they used the slang when communicating with their siblings and other similar aged individuals (25.5% often, 20.6% always). The percentages are lower for use of TikTok slang with parents and other adults (11.8%, 7.8% always). The results in Table 4 show clearly that slang is used with familiar people because less than 15% of the Generation Z participants reported using TikTok slang with strangers (9.8% often, 4.9% always). In fact, over half of the participants (52.9%) said that they would not use slang with strangers. A total of 18.6% of the participants reported that they rarely used TikTok slang with strangers. This connects to the idea that slang is used within groups of people with shared culture, which is why using TikTok slang with strangers is unthinkable for a majority of the participants.

Table 4. With whom are the TikTok slang used.

Interlocutors	Never	Rarely	Seldom	Often	Always
Parents and other adults	31.4	23.5	25.5	11.8	7.8
Siblings and others of similar age	13.7	17.6	22.5	25.5	20.6
Strangers	52.9	18.6	13.7	9.8	4.9

Reasons for using TikTok slang

Altogether 10 reasons for using TikTok slang were presented to the Generation Z participants in the online questionnaire. The participants were asked to tick the reasons for them to use TikTok slang. Participants could choose more than once reason for using the slang. Table 5 lists the percentage of votes for each reason. The main reason or the Generation Z participants to use slang is “for fun” (73.5%). Another way of putting “for fun” is “to be less serious” (49.0%). Put together, these two reasons show that Generation Z participants mainly use TikTok slang for fun. Another 39.2% of the participants reported that they use TikTok slang to add humour to the conversation, and this can also be considered a fun element.

Table 5. Reasons for using TikTok slang.

Reason	Percentage of votes by participants
1. For fun	73.5
2. To be less serious	49.0
3. Because my friends use them	43.1
4. To add humour to the conversation	39.2
5. To be creative	35.3
6. Because slangs are easier than Standard English	35.3
7. To substitute a word	24.5
8. To be secretive	19.6
9. To show solidarity	14.7
10. To be interesting	4.9

The use of slang by Generation Z is mostly intentional and taps into the slang words that are circulating in social media. This is because only 35.3% of the participants reported that they used slang to be creative and only 4.9% stated that they used slang to be interesting.

The age-old reason for using slang within specific groups is still evident among the Generation Z, as shown by 35.3% of the participants who gave being secretive (i.e., using slangs as a code amongst the speakers to exclude others) (19.6%) and solidarity (14.7%) as reasons for using slang in TikTok.

There are also language-related reasons for using TikTok and this is linked to Netspeak. This is because, over one-third (35.3%) of the participants reported that slang is easier to use than Standard English, and they wanted to substitute formal words with slang (24.5%).

However, when the results on the reasons for using TikTok are put together, the main reason is for fun which is applicable to about three-quarters of the Generation Z participants. The other reasons linked to creativity, solidarity and netspeak are applicable to about one-third of the participants.

DISCUSSION

Overall frequency of TikTok slang usage revealed an interesting finding, which is only half of the participants frequently used TikTok slang in their communication in daily lives. This is different from Apriani’s (2017) findings that found 75% of students used slang in their communication. This discrepancy could be due to the participants’ age range. In the current study, participants were mostly undergraduates within the age range of 19-25 years old. The participants in Apriani’s (2017) study were 11th graders, who would be between the ages of 16-17. Other studies, such as Jeresano and Carretero (2022), mentioned that slang was commonly used among their participants but did not specifically report on the frequency of usage. Based on a comparison of the results of the present study and Apriani (2017), it can be deduced that TikTok might be more popular in Indonesia among teenagers than university students in Malaysian universities.

The findings also revealed that TikTok slang were mostly acquired from social media. This makes sense as TikTok is a social media platform. Maulidiya et al. (2021) posited that slang and social media cannot be separated and are considered as one unit. This is because the emergence of slang comes from frequent social media usage. The findings in our study did not specify what type of social media did the participants learned the slang from, thus, it may also refer to social media platforms other than TikTok (e.g., Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp). Compared to the social media platform, the present study showed that the slang was also acquired from peers. This finding is similar to Suprapti et al. (2021) who found that children as young as six years old acquire slang knowledge from their peers. This appears to be true as well for the participants in the current study. The peer influence in using TikTok slang can be seen as a subset of influence from the social media platform which would include a wider circle of contacts who may not be close friends.

The present study showed that the Generation Z participants mostly used TikTok with siblings and others of the same age group. The choice of with whom participants used the slang was expected, as previous studies have shown that there is an age gap between those in the older generation, such as Baby Boomers and Millennials, and those in Generation Z (Subramaniam & Razak, 2014). Maulidiya et al. (2021) mentioned that whilst older generations did use slang, these could be limited to specific domains, for instance those originating from military or security. Thus, their usage of slang at the time was not widespread, unlike the present study's population, who were born in the era of proliferation of technology and social networking sites.

In the current study, using slang for fun was the reason that was selected the most. This finding was similar to Pradianti (2013). In Pradianti's study, however, there were only four reasons for participants to choose from, whilst the current study listed 10 possible reasons. Thus, the choice of "fun" as a top reason was more striking in this study, even though it is not surprising; after all, playfulness and humour are listed as part of the qualities that are commonly attributed to slang (Sarbunan, 2020). It is intriguing to see that participants differentiated using the slang for fun and to be interesting. Choosing to use the slang "for fun" may imply a non-seriousness in the usage, or an attitude of not caring for what others may think, whereas choosing to use the slang "to be interesting" may imply that the participants are concerned about how they appear to others when they use the slang. This may be related to the next top three reasons selected by participants in this study, i.e., to be less serious, to add humour, and to be creative. Another reason that is usually found to be correlated to slang usage, that is, identity (van de ven, 2021) appeared as the third most selected reason in the current study. This is also similar to Supri and Nur (2021), therefore suggesting that using slang for identity-related purposes is an element that is commonly found amongst various users.

CONCLUSION

The present study on the usage of TikTok slang amongst Generation Z shows that they mostly acquire their TikTok slang from the social media and friends. About half of the participants frequently used TikTok slang in communication. The slang is typically used in school, with peers of the same age. Generation Z choose to use the slang for a variety of reasons, but chief amongst these is for fun. Despite all these, the participants reported that they do not often use TikTok slang in their everyday communication, and a small proportion never use it in TikTok. The findings suggest that while TikTok may be common among Generation Z, it does not mean that all of them are immersed in this social media platform. The participants in the present study were limited to university students, which would limit the generalisability of the findings. Future studies should focus on the older age groups to find out whether TikTok has permeated their lives and if they have the same motivations as the younger groups for using it.

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