

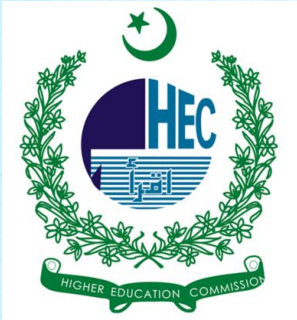
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Decoding Digital Talk: Gen Z Understanding of Slang in Digital Communication



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Abstract

Online communication tools such as Whatsapp have changed the way we use language and slang has become the most prominent feature in Generation Z's mode of communication. The purpose of the study is to establish how slang influences meanings, misunderstanding and interpretation of WhatsApp discourse among Gen Z users. This research is useful as it contributes to digital sociolinguistics in the digital communication environment by way of exploring mean making in informal language and using contextual clues and shared cultural knowledge in the process. The study was designed as both quantitative and qualitative and data collection was performed with a self-administered online questionnaire including open-ended and close-ended questions. The underlying theory for the analysis is based on Grice's Pragmatics to analyze contextual inference and implicature, and Barthes' Semiotics, to dig into slang as culture symbol and code. Results indicate that slang is effective as a communicative tool when both interlocutors can be said to share contextual and cultural knowledge but not particularly efficient in communicating those who do not possess such knowledge. It finds meaning in WhatsApp messages not to be pre-defined but co-constructed through pragmatics-inference and semiotics-interpretation, thus putting into stress the importance of context and cultural identity in the use of digital language.

Keywords: Digital Communication, Slang, WhatsApp, Generation Z, Meaning Construction, Pragmatics

1. Introduction

The emergence of social media and messaging apps over the last few years has changed the way individuals communicate in language. In the Internet, the distinction between speech and writing is more complex, and new hybrid forms have been developed that are usually referred to as written speech (Tagg, 2015). WhatsApp is one of these platforms, the number of its users worldwide amounts to more than 2.7 billion, making it a large portion of the daily conversation (Jerdean et al., 2024). According to researchers, a loose environment of WhatsApp encourages the use of creative languages. As an example, Shahbaz et al. note that the extensive use of

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WhatsApp introduces a new form of digital dialect with its own innovative abbreviations and informal words as well as incorrect grammar (Shahbaz et al., 2024). This online vernacular is an example of how the features of a platform (such as brevity and multimedia) intersect with users to create online linguistic conventions.

This is particularly applicable to Generation Z (individuals born at the end of the 1990s and 2000s). Gen Z is an actual digital native generation that is highly engaged in instant messaging. According to surveys, apps such as WhatsApp are one of the most preferred communication tools of Gen Z, along with the Tik Tok, Instagram, and YouTube (Mohammed et al., 2025). The most important traits of the discourse in these chat platforms are the high usage of slang and informal words. In this context, the term slang is used to describe new nonstandard words or phrases that have a social connotation. The research has shown that slang has significant social purposes among young people: it brings about humor and friendliness through its defiance of decency, and it is a marker of group membership (Mohammed et al., 2025; Silalahi & Silalahi, 2023). Digital slang can be multimodal with a mixture of wordplay and visual components (emojis, memes, and other visual clues) to add an affective meaning (Arshad, 2025; Androutsopoulos, 2013). Much to the point, slang is a crucial asset helping Gen Z to establish social ties and express identity within the online chat.

These trends are amplified in WhatsApp in particular. WhatsApp messages are usually multicast and combine text and images, emojis and stickers. The code-switching between languages or dialects often takes place even within one message, as users switch between them (Shahbaz et al., 2024). A single line of conversation could contain English slang, local expressions and visual icons. According to researchers, WhatsApp encourages the practice of hybrid code-switching and visual-textual blends (Shahbaz et al., 2024). Considering the popularity and the versatility of WhatsApp, slang that develops in the situation is usually dynamic and highly context-dependent. All that makes it very important to research the Gen Z slang particularly on WhatsApp to learn how this generation develops meaning over the Internet.

1.1 Research Objectives

The main objectives of this research is to identify common slang expressions used by Gen Z in WhatsApp chats, while also analyzing how contextual cues such as emojis,

tone indicators, and message timing influence the meaning of slang. In addition it intends to explore how Gen Z users interpret and negotiate meaning when slang leads to ambiguity or confusion in digital communication.

1.2 Research Questions

1. What are the most frequently used slang terms among Gen Z WhatsApp users?
2. How does context shape the meaning of these slang expressions?
3. How do Gen Z users clarify or negotiate meaning when slang causes misunderstanding?

1.3 Significance of the Study

This research will be valuable to digital sociolinguistics since it will fill the gaps of the existing studies. A majority of the available research on digital language has been a comparison of various platforms or age groups, but minimal focus has been directed towards language variation within a generation on a particular platform. As an example, Gen Z terms become trendy, scholars commonly put them in lists or contrasts Gen Z with older users, yet they never consider the question: what does slang mean to Gen Z themselves? (Tufail et al., 2024). Specifically, there is not much information on how the interpretation of the slang of another Gen Z user in WhatsApp conversations is consistent. This study appeals to that intra-generational divide by asking Gen Z users how they understand common WhatsApp-slang in their peer group specifically using a questionnaire about how they understand common WhatsApp-slang within their peer group. The emphasis on WhatsApp and Gen Z is in line with the need to conduct language use studies that are place-specific (Arshad, 2025). The empirical data used in this study will provide an insight into the co-construction of language and identity in day-to-day online interaction. Messaging behaviors are significant in a globalized digital world context where they indicate larger patterns in language change and cultural identity (Shahbaz et al., 2024). The analysis of the Gen Z WhatsApp language can help understand the social and cognitive processes through which online interaction contributes to the development of language and allows keeping a documentation of a living vernacular. Overall, the study will contribute to the knowledge concerning the use of the networked generation in digital communication and the formation of meaning and social identity.

2. Literature Review

The Internet is now an integral part of contemporary life, and linguists are increasingly studying its influence on language (Crystal,2011). Slang is an interesting phenomenon of language that infuses itself into the daily dimension of your life, instilling life and movement to communication (Muaka, 2018). Slang is often used in wordplay and humor. Slang words may be funny, satirical, or provocative and it may bring to communication a bit of amusement and sense of creative humor. They may be employed to add light to the discussed subjects, build some puns, and even express sarcasm. Slang is no longer exclusive to a certain own age, although it frequently tends to be more common among young audiences. The digital age has led to new forms of communication that are brought about by technology. Messaging platforms, social media, and video conferencing have made it possible to connect with individuals worldwide in real time (Manurung et al., 2022). These are the platforms that allow people to communicate in real time and share messages, multimedia content, voice or video call (Wilhelm, 2002). In slang, the meaning of a word or phrases that may differ significantly from the usual or standard meanings used in Daily language (Rezeki & Sagala, 2019). WhatsApp language is very context-specific, connected to the socio-cultural nature of different communities (Shahbaz et al., 2024). WhatsApp facilitates code-switching in a multilingual society, where we often mix regional slang into global languages, such as English (Gómez & Toubia, 2018). According to Trudgill and Hannah (2013), nonstandard or innovated words are listed in dictionaries to indicate that they are commonly used but not necessarily because they are correct or standard forms. AbuSa'alek (2015) identifies the following features of e-discourse: shortening, clippings, contractions, unconventional, spellings, word-letter replacement, word-digits replacement, word combination, initialisms, and emoticons (Nghipondoka, 2020). In the process, teenagers and adult learners who frequently use online communication produce new vocabularies, spelling modifications, symbols, and emoticons in their online written communication (Laksana & Boyce, 2020). First, Trimastuti (2017) found that slang language that used in talk between teenagers can be understood by certain group particularly group who use 'alay' language. 'Alay' language for communication has many errors in Bahasa Indonesia. Alay language in social media can be minimized in order to avoid

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misunderstanding in delivering message. Second, Pradianti (2013) concluded that slang words are frequently used among teenagers, have their own words to be used when interacting with their friends and slang words are a marker of teenagers' identity in their conversation style. Third, Amir (2017) indicated that slang language used by students of English Education Department in their daily conversation were slang in theater, art slang, public school or university slang as well as society slang. Besides, the male and female slang language was different caused of some factors such as situation and condition, age and politeness, as well as gender itself (qtd. in Rezeki & Sagala, 2019). It was found out that the Gen Z slang undergone specific and sometimes multiple morphological processes and reflect its digital culture. It also aids students in language fluency, communication skills and help gain confidence but create language barrier to older generation and have negative impact in their writing skills. Therefore, Gen Z slang was not encouraged during class discussions and in writing essays, but allowed when talking only among themselves. The biggest distinction for Gen Z is that technology is such a central part of their upbringing (Jeresano & Carretero, 2022). Slang is a form of non-standard language that is applied by specific group of people in their everyday speech. Slang, according to Sulaiman (2019), is defined as slang that is not standardized and is widely used in daily conversation by teenagers or certain social groups. Because Slang is crude, we cannot translate every word and must pay attention to who we are talking to. Slang is usually only understood by certain social groups or like-minded interlocutors, but some are also understood by others. This is because slang has a secret code that makes it difficult to understand in general (Syaputra et al., 2024). Although the use of slang on social media by Generation Z can be seen as a form of language creativity, it is important to realize that this can also have a negative impact. Excessive use of slang can hinder effective communication, especially with other generations who do not understand the context in which it is used. In addition, the inappropriate use of slang can also degrade the quality of language and lead to the deviation of prevailing language norms. Therefore, efforts are needed to increase Generation Z's awareness of the importance of good and correct language use, including in the context of social media. Education and socialization on language ethics in social media can be one solution to minimize the negative impact of excessive use of slang (Syaputra et al.,

2024). The language of GenZ consists of lots of short forms, they mostly use slang and informal language, borrow words from different cultures and sometimes also coin new words based on memes or normalize using grammatically wrong phrases or spelling in day-to-day communication (Mitul, 2024).

2.1 Research Gap

However, despite the presence of research on slang as a youth identity, digital creativity, and nonstandard language use in most of the previous studies have concentrated either on the general linguistic characteristics, morphological mechanisms, or the sociolinguistic influence of slang on the language norms and education. Although the prevalence, creativity, and possible disadvantages of slang in digital communication are a focus of researchers like Crystal (2011), Muaka (2018), and Syaputra et al. (2024), there is little empirical interest in how meaning is perceived, negotiated, and misinterpreted in digital real-time communication, especially on WhatsApp, one of the most context-dependent platforms that is popular among the Generation Z. Furthermore, the literature available talks much about the application of slang descriptively, and does not adequately combine pragmatic and semiotic theories in describing how users derive meaning beyond the literal meaning, or in the event of failure to harness the contextual clues to create meaning. The literature on miscommunication is more likely to be devoted to the language difference across generations and the study of the meaning negotiation intra-generational within Gen Z users themselves. Thus, the research provides a major gap, as it seeks to examine the application of Gen Z, interpretation, and misinterpretation of slang in WhatsApp through the perspective of pragmatics presented by Grice and semiotics introduced by Barthes to understand how situational cues, cultural codes, and cooperative communication strategies influence the meaning-making processes in the digital discourse.

3. Methodology

3.1 Data Collection

This study obtained the data by the means of completion of the online questionnaire which was self-administered to the WhatsApp users of Generation Z. The researchers utilized self-reported information, but not direct interpretation of the contents of WhatsApp chats to uphold the ethics of the research, guarantee the privacy of

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participants, and permit effective data collection. The participants in the study were 47 people, who use WhatsApp on a regular basis to communicate informally, and who were born in the late 1990s to the early 2000s. This was deemed enough to explore the meaning-making practices in online communications through a linguistic study.

Quantitative and qualitative data was produced by the questionnaire. Distribution of quantitative responses concerned the frequency of slang use, knowledge of the slang words, and their perceived ease of decipherment with descriptive statistical analysis, the count of frequencies and percentages. The findings were subsequently made in the form of graph and pie charts to demonstrate clearly how slang is used and understood by Gen Z users. Themes of analysis were used to analyze qualitative data obtained through open-ended questions, and this involved the careful reading of the responses, preliminary coding and categorizing of recurrent thoughts into broader themes as outlined below: contextual inference, humor, ambiguity, identity construction, and meaning negotiation.

The theoretical framework of the study helped to explicitly perform the interpretation of qualitative findings. The Pragmatics by Grice was used to investigate how the participants were able to draw meanings of implied meaning of a slang based on the surrounding and mutual assumptions in a conversation, especially when there was non-literary or ambiguity use. The Semiotic theory introduced by Barthes influenced the study of slang as a cultural code that has connotative meanings that are associated with identity, membership and the mutual knowledge across generational lines. Themes were also cross-checked between responses to increase the credibility of the analysis and representative statements of the participants were used to corroborate interpretations. The methodological choice of using an online questionnaire was adequate due to the digital nature of the study and the level of technological familiarity of the generation Z, as well as guaranteed the level of anonymity and promoted honest answers.

3.2 Theoretical Framework

The research is based on two complementary views pragmatics and semiotics. In pragmatics, scholars take the issue of meaning inference in context other than literal words. A classical paradigm is Cooperative Principle developed by Grice with four maxims of quantity, quality, relation and manner in conversation speakers

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collaboratively make contributions that are as informative, truthful, relevant, and clear as possible (Grice, 1975). By deliberately going against a maxim (e.g. with an understatement or hyperbole), listeners derive an implicated meaning or connotation. Such implicatures are not rare in the use of the online slang. As an example, short language or slang such as dead or sus cannot have a literal meaning but can acquire meaning through the context. Online chats will shift a bit more of the information to emojis, punctuations, and tone rather than the spoken words, as Eragamreddy notes, so it is frequently necessary to interpret what is implied by slang (Eragamreddy, 2025). That is, the Gen Z consumers look at the cooperative communication and rely on context and practical indicators to decode slangy messages. In case there seems to be a violation of a maxim, the readers seek a conversational implicature that sets meaning back. Therefore, Gricean pragmatics can be used to understand the process by which the participants of Gen Z chats can read between the lines and understand seemingly incomprehensible slang.

Pragmatic inference is particularly significant in computer-mediated communication (CMC) such as in WhatsApp where nonverbal communication is missing. During in-person communication, the tone of voice or bod language can be used to pass a message; in the internet, the user depends on other indicators. Research indicates that the participants fill in the gaps with shared background knowledge, conversation history, and paralinguistic features such as emojis (Eragamreddy, 2025; Li & Yang, 2018). As an example, Herring and Dainas (2017) refer to emojis and punctuation as pragmatic markers that are used to regulate the tone, which reveals humor, sarcasm, or an emphasis. Li and Yang (2018) also observe that computer-mediated implicature tends to need additional inferencing in a situation where there are limited context cues. Text messaging on the WhatsApp group chat is trickier since a few words with an emoji of laughter can imply irony and not the actual meaning. Eragamreddy (2025) claims that online space is useful in transforming the nature of implicatures: online space is an inference-rich environment where meanings are usually provided to what is not explicitly stated. Therefore, a pragmatics lens will focus more on the active participation of the reader in creating meaning of Gen Z slang with the help of whatever clues (textual or visual) they have.

Semiotics provides the alternative viewpoint in regard to slang as a sign system.

According to the semiotic model of Roland Barthes, all the signs are structured in such a way that they consist of a signifier (the word or form) and a signified (the concept) and the meaning is both literal (denotation) and cultural (connotation) (Barthes, 1968). In this perspective, slang terms are not random tokens, but symbols that have a social meaning. Slangs are almost always connoted in terms of group norms, values and identity. Like Farhan and Hassan discover in their research on American slang, reduplicative slang terms not only have a literal meaning but convey significant cultural and social associations, as such, they are used as cultural identifiers, in informal conversation (Farhan & Hassan, 2025). The same is true of gen z-specific slang: whether it is a main character energy or lowkey, a certain type of slang is coded with shared jokes, attitudes, experiences of that generation. The meaning of every slang word lives in the cultural codes of the Gen Z digital culture. Misunderstanding may not exist due to the absence of language competency but instead, users belong to slightly different subcultures. According to the theory presented by Barthes, in case slang creates confusion, the participants will bargain by introducing additional signs including paraphrasing, including emojis, or sending memes to redefine their common code. In such a manner, slang in web-based chat plays the role of a semiotic system: Gen Z members indicate belonging to the group and their belonging and affiliation to the group by means of an ever-changing sign vocabulary. This semiotic strategy supplements the pragmatic perspective by demonstrating the nature of meaning that slang communicates of identity and culture, and not necessarily inference on a sentence-by-sentence basis.

3.3 Data Analysis

This section analyzes and discusses the practical questionnaire survey's responses from the Gen Z. This section includes responses to closed-ended questions in the form of graph and pie charts.

4. How often do you use WhatsApp to communicate?

47 responses

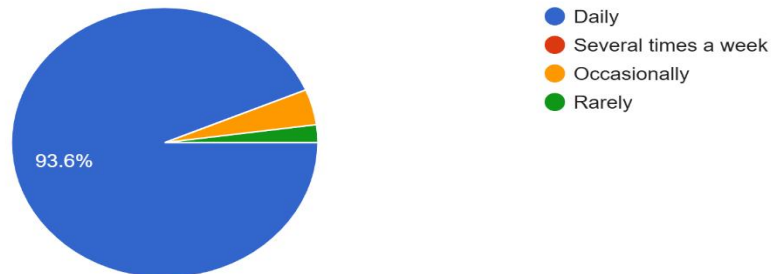


Figure 1: *Frequency of Whatsapp Usage Among Gen Z*

Figure 1 illustrates Gen Z respondents' frequency of using WhatsApp for communication. The data show that 93.6% of Gen Z use WhatsApp as their primary mode of communication on a daily basis. In contrast, 4.26% of respondents said they use it occasionally, and 2.13% responds they use it rarely. On the other hand, 0% of the respondents reported using WhatsApp several times a week. Due to high percentage of daily users who use WhatsApp daily as their main communication platform, all subsequent questions in this research were designed exclusively around the WhatsApp platform.

5. Who do you mostly chat with on WhatsApp?

47 responses

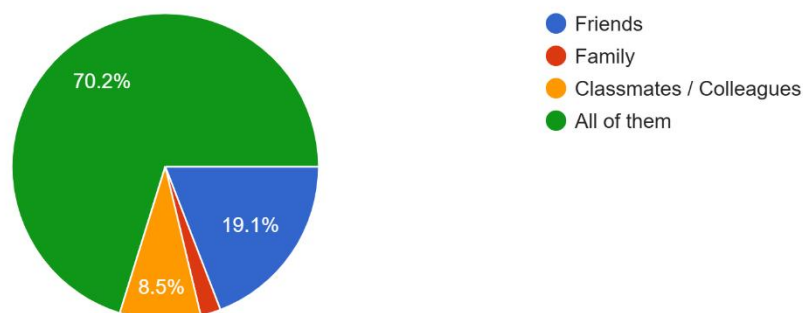


Figure 2: *Primary Communication Groups on Whatsapp*

As shown in **Figure 2**, that 70.2% of respondents use WhatsApp to communicate with friends, family, classmates, and colleagues, while 19.1% use it exclusively to communicate with friends. Additionally, 8.5% use WhatsApp only to communicate with classmates and colleagues, and 2.1% use it solely to communicate with family.

These findings indicate that the majority of respondents communicate with friends, family, classmates, and colleagues. This suggests that the participants' interactions involve audiences of a similar age group mostly Gen Z, which provides a balanced context for our research, as both senders and receivers of communication belong to the same generational cohort.

6. How frequently do you use slang in your WhatsApp messages?

47 responses

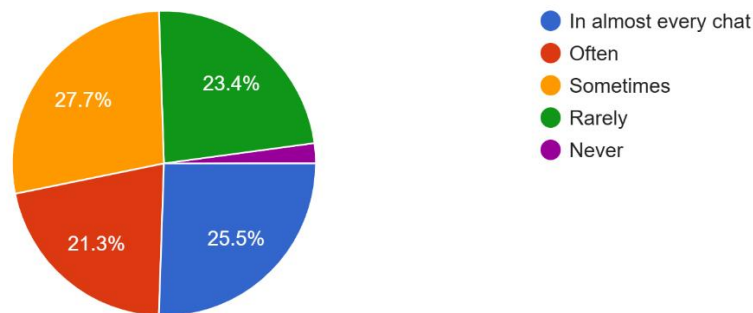


Figure 3: *Frequency of Slang Usage in Whatsapp Communication*

As our research is about how Gen Z uses and interprets slang in digital communication, it is necessary to analyze how frequently they use slang. As shown in **Figure 3**, that 27.7% of respondents use slang sometimes, 25.5% use slang in almost every chat, and 21.3% report using slang often. In contrast, 23.4% of respondents use slang rarely, while only 2.1% stated that they never use slang in their communication. Generally, the data shows that the majority of respondents frequently use slang, while only a small ratio use it rarely or not at all in their daily communication.

8. Do you think you understand the meaning of all the slang words you come across?

47 responses

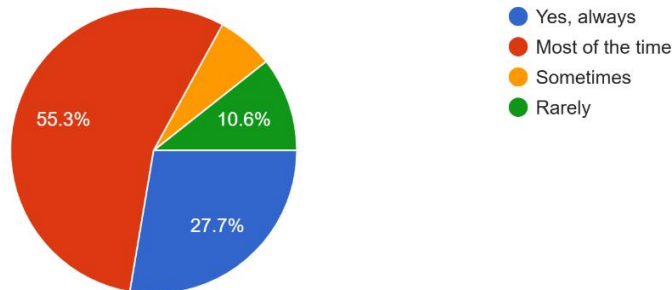


Figure 4: *Level of Understanding of Slang Meanings Among Gen Z*

Figure 4 illustrates that 55.3% of respondents understand the meanings of slang words most of the time, while 27.7% reported that they always understand them. In contrast, 10.6% of respondents understand slang rarely, and 6.4% understand it sometimes. Generally, the findings suggest that only 27.7% of respondents are fully confident and claim that they understand all slang meanings. The remaining majority experience incomplete or inconsistent understanding, indicating that their understanding of slang depends on context and its usage.

9. Have you ever come across a slang word that you didn't understand or misinterpreted?

47 responses

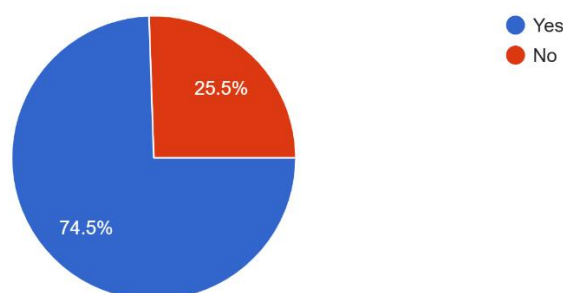


Figure 5: *Experience of Slang Misinterpretation Among Respondents*

As shown in **Figure 5**, that 74.5% of respondents have come to know a slang word that they did not understand or misinterpreted at some point in their communication. On the contrary, 25.5% respondents are completely sure that they have never misunderstood any slang word and they know all the slangs they come across. The findings show although Gen Z uses slangs frequently still, they misinterpret it, which

highlights the dependency of slang on context.

11. What do you think helps you understand slang correctly in chats? (tone, emoji, Context)

47 responses

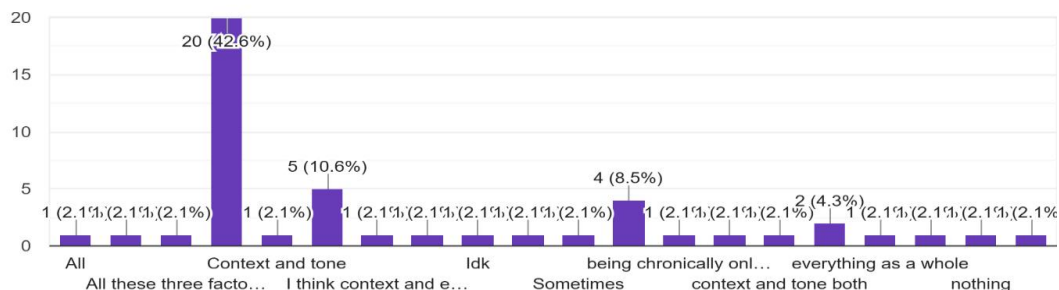


Figure 6: Contextual Factors Used to Interpret Slang Meaning

As shown in **Figure 6**, the majority of respondents understand the meaning of slang based on context. Some respondents interpret slang with the help of text and emojis, while a smaller group depends on tone, emojis, and context for obtaining meaning. A very few respondents reported that they do not understand slang, even when considering tone, emojis, or context. These findings suggest that context plays the central role for how Gen Z’s interpret slang, while additional cues such as emoji and tone provide further understanding for some users. Despite overall familiarity, a small portion of respondents experience difficulty comprehending slang, underscoring the diversity of interpretation strategies.

3.3.1 Qualitative Open-ended Responses

The responses to open-ended questions regarding Gen Z respondents’ interaction with slang are presented in this section of the data description, along with examples of when they misunderstood a slang term and then looked it up to clarify its meaning. The responses show that even though slang is widely used in everyday conversation, many respondents still come across terms that they are unfamiliar with. Whereas some of the participants are quite confident and claim that they are aware of slang terms that they encounter, others use contextual factors to derive the meaning of slang. The three provided below demonstrate how respondents had a good understanding and at the same time made inaccurate interpretations. One Gen Z respondent commented to Q1 (Describe a real-life example where you misunderstood or misinterpreted a slang word or acronym. What happened, and how did you realize the misunderstanding?) “There is a slang ‘delulu’ once I thought it’s a bad slang to use. I

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never use it in my conversations but when I was talking to my class fellows, I came to know that it's not a bad slang it actually means to live in once's own imagination.” this indicates a non-successful case of Gricean implicature, when the non-literal meaning that was intended was not reached because of absence of sufficient contextual exposure. On the same note, “I confused FYP (Final Year Project) with For You Page” demonstrates the pragmatic derivation of meaning by relevant situational perception. This resulted in a wrong solution due to the lack of an academic context. One more participant said, “I misinterpreted the acronym SMH. I imagined that it was so much hate, but that it is shaking my head.” In this case, literal expansion, but not conversational convention, steered the interpretation of the participant. These misinterpretations happen due to a semiotic reason whereby slang is a cultural sign whose connotative meaning can only be understood by people aware of the common digital sign and hence this explains why some respondents verified that they were misinterpreted and others did not.

The responses to the second question (Do you believe slang makes communication easier or more confusing? Explain briefly.) indicate the understanding of participants in the dual nature of slang as both the facilitator and an impediment to communication. One of the respondents commented, “I would say both sometimes it is confusing and sometimes it is easier” and slang either conforms or does not conform to maxims as outlined by Grice depending on common knowledge. Another respondent added that, “I think it makes communication easier but excessive use cause irritation and reason of losing interest in conversation”, this implies that too much implicature would impede cooperative communication. The comment “Easier of course. I hate writing paragraphs”, because it is pragmatic efficiency, which is also consistent with the maxim of quantity in Grice, which abides by minimizing the amount of linguistic effort. Conversely, this response “More confusing”, implies a failure of contextual inference with “Easy if we have some context”, giving a direct answer to the centrality of shared context. These reactions, semiotically speaking, imply that slang can act as a symbolic and informative, digital fluent, but loses its ability to communicate where the communicating parties are not part of the same cultural or contextual paradigm.

The third question (Have you ever used or heard a slang word that was misunderstood

in a conversation? Give a short example.) also demonstrates the negotiated nature of the meaning of slang between specific social and generational communities. One participant responded, “I said, ‘That is sick!’ (meaning that is cool) but my cousin believed I was calling it disgusted”, which illustrated the pragmatic ambiguity in which the implied meaning (i.e. that it is disgusting) takes precedence over the literal meaning (i.e. That it is cool). Other respondent said, “I would say ig and my friend would believe that I am referring to Instagram”, because acronyms depend on the context in which it is used. There are also similar misunderstandings in “I said That’s crazy! meaning it was unbelievable, but my friend thought i was calling someone insane”, “My friend used “fr” but her sister thought she is saying “phir” in Indian accent” in this case, conversational implicature was not effective because the cultures were unknown to each other. Lastly, “I said That is dope! Meaning that is great, but my mother ran over it to think about drugs”, this is emphasized by the fact that the slang term is used differently by both generations. In the light of semiotic Barthes treats slang as a set of signs with an ever-changing meaning, depending on geographical borders, whereas Grice describes pragmatics as the cause of unsuccessful communication when there are no common suppositions. Taken collectively, the results indicate that the meaning of slang is not predetermined, so it is constantly being created by the context, culture, and social knowledge.

4. Findings

This section of the research paper presents findings of the research, which directly answer the research questions. The findings of the study are based on both qualitative open-ended and quantitative closed-ended responses. According to the survey almost all Gen Z’s uses slangs in their communication. The quantitative study shows 27.7% uses slang sometimes, 25.5% almost use in every chat, 21.3% often use them. To answer our first research question ‘What are the most frequently used slang terms among Gen Z WhatsApp users?’ data collected through a Google Form questionnaire to identify a list of most frequently used slang expressions and abbreviations that Gen Z usually use in their WhatsApp chats. Just to name a few, slang words such as “roasted, slay, epic, salty, cooked, sus, and brain rot” and the abbreviations such as “lol, ngl, idk, btw, and tbh”. These expressions are not just technological terms but function as lexical innovations and semiotic signs that carry culturally specific

meanings within digital communication networks. The findings reveal that reduplicative slang expressions not only carry literal meanings but also embody rich cultural and social connotations, reflecting key aspects of everyday life. These expressions enhance interpersonal communication and serve as markers of cultural identity within informal discourse (Farhan, 2025). As someone responds in a google form “I once used ‘TBH’ for ‘to be heard,’ but later I found out that it actually means ‘to be honest’” while another mentioned “I don’t used ‘ngl’ until I knew it was a slang term” this shows people uses slangs after they know its meaning and social function. Each slang thus seen as a signifier, whose signified meaning is not from the standard dictionary but is a community, based concept that comes from experience and even more from sharing the same generational cohort. Slang terms like “sus (suspicious), salty (resentful), and brain rot (in a funny way, indicating that one is consuming content excessively and without using the brain)” not only signify that these signs are of layered connotations but also that the layers are negotiated through cultural practice rather than coming from predefined semantics.

Referring to the **Figure 6**, the second research question “How does context shape the meaning of these slang expressions?” which shows majority of respondents understand and shape the meaning of the slang through contextual cues rather than literal meaning. The whole figure answers this question where emoji even tone helps responders to understand the meaning of the slang and abbreviation. As a respondent mentioned “slangs are confusing but context help me to understand the meaning” and another mentioned “easy if I have a background knowledge(context).” Slang terms such as “dead, cooked and salty” often carry meanings that changes often depending on the surroundings, and the situational background of the message. From a pragmatic perspective, this phenomenon can easily be described by the theory of Cooperative Principle developed by Grice as speakers assume shared knowledge while communicating. Slang is often understood using Conversational Implicature in which the intended meaning is not explicitly defined but is implied. As one respondent mentioned “when my friend said ‘I was completely dead last night’ I was so shocked. I looked at her in a very weird way like girl how were you dead and now you are standing right in front of me? But my other friend understood what she meant and by looking at me she laughed and explained it to me. This is how context helps me

understand slangs meaning.” As KAEWMAN (2013) said “for slang learning methods, guessing the meaning of slang words from the context was the most effective slang learning method.”

The data from open-ended responses answers this question “How do Gen Z users clarify or negotiate meaning when slang causes misunderstanding?” The responses shows that Gen Z users clarify and discuss the meaning when slang leads to misunderstanding. One respondent explained that "I once said ‘That’s lit!’ to mean ‘That’s amazing but my friend thought I was talking about something being on fire. We both laughed when I explained what it actually meant.” While another participant mentioned “I said ‘That’s crazy!’ meaning it was unbelievable, but my friend thought I was calling someone insane” and another example is “I said ‘That’s dope!’ meaning ‘That’s great’ but my mother misunderstood it as something related to drugs.” In each case the misunderstanding was resolved through direct explanation and laughter. Generation Z has a much higher understanding and usage of slang, while older generations are less familiar. Slang serves as a tool for expressing identity, humor, and social bonding, though generational gaps may challenge intergenerational communication, emphasizing the need for adaptive strategies and education (Fitri, 2025). These examples clearly shows that Gen Z users do not abandon slang when misinterpretation arrives and they actively convey meaning through communication, context and shared knowledge.

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this study is to examine how slang serves as a meaning-making resource. This study uses Grice’s Pragmatics and Barthes’s Semiotics as frameworks. Qualitative data was taken from a questionnaire of Generation Z WhatsApp messages in 2022. The Pragmatic analysis results showed that slang meaning in WhatsApp conversation was highly reliant on the context and shared assumptions. In other words, the participants who lacked knowledge of the context or didn’t have the relevant pragmatic background wrongly inferred the meaning. This supports Grice’ (1975) claim that not only what is said matters but also what is implicated and jointly inferred. Slang is also a cultural system of signs that shows identity humour and affiliation, the study further reveals. This means that slang, as a semiotic object, is a sign that refers to other signs of the generation and digital culture (Barthes, 1967).

Also, the misunderstanding of the participants, who did not use or share the social/generational code, was the inability to infer. Thus, this means that the meaning of a slang is not a constant meaning rather created through social interaction. Therefore, the results reveal how digital slang is a socio-cultural cage break that brings together or isolates interlocutors. In the end, the research provides digital sociolinguistics with new insights by showing how the processes of meaning-making pragmatic and semiotic can be digitally mediated. We are on common ground when we talk, in other words. Additional research may expand on this work through an examination of cultural differences in the use of slang, platform specific norms and longitudinal changes in the language, all contributing towards an enhanced understanding of processes through which meaning making occurs digitally.

6. Recommendation for Future Researchers

Future research on Decoding Digital Talk: How Gen Z Uses and Interprets Slangs can be expanded in several ways. First, this study collected data only from WhatsApp; therefore, future researchers are encouraged to include multiple digital platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, X (Twitter), or YouTube to gain a broader and more comparative understanding of Gen Z's digital slang usage across platforms.

Second, the present research was conducted with a limited sample of 45 participants. Future studies should involve a larger and more diverse sample size to enhance the reliability, validity, and generalizability of the findings.

Third, this study employed a questionnaire-based method, and therefore, subsequent scholars can use mixed-method or qualitative research designs, including chat logs or comment sections discourse analysis, face-to-face interviews, to research more naturalistic and context-sensitive language practices among Gen Z users.

Lastly, even though the current research primarily focused the abbreviations and lexical slang, it is suggested that future research can be conducted to investigate additional aspects of Gen Z digital communication, such as memes, code-switching, phonetic spelling, hybrid words, and changing online linguistic trends to present a more complete picture of how Gen Z communicates digitally.

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