

GENERATION Z'S LEXICAL CREATIVITY ON SOCIAL MEDIA: AN ANALYSIS OF WORD FORMATION PATTERNS AND SEMANTIC SHIFT

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ABSTRACT

The development of social media has not only transformed Generation Z's communication patterns but has also given rise to linguistic dynamics marked by the creation of new lexical forms and meanings. This study aims to analyze the patterns of word formation and semantic shift as a representation of Generation Z's lexical creativity on social media. The research uses a qualitative descriptive approach from a morphological and semantic perspective. The data consist of lexical forms used in Generation Z's communication on TikTok, Instagram, X, Facebook, and WhatsApp, collected through observation, note-taking, and documentation techniques, and analyzed through identification, classification, contextual meaning analysis, and interpretation of the relationship between form and meaning. The results show that lexical creativity is formed through acronymization, shortening, blending, borrowing, and form modification, while at the semantic level there is a tendency toward broadening, metaphorization, contextualization, and reinterpretation of meaning. The relationship between these two dimensions forms three main patterns: a change in form with relatively preserved meaning, a relatively unchanged form with shifted meaning, and the adoption of a form accompanied by recontextualization of meaning. These findings confirm that Generation Z's lexical creativity is not merely a symptom of slang use, but a form of linguistic productivity that brings together morphological innovation and semantic dynamics. Social media thus becomes an important space for the formation, dissemination, and re-signification of vocabulary that reflects language's adaptation to the culture of digital communication.

Keywords: Generation Z; lexical creativity; social media; word formation; semantic shift.

INTRODUCTION

Social media has become an important space for language development because it allows the form, function, and meaning of language to change and spread rapidly. In digital communication, language does not only serve to convey information but also to build identity, social closeness, and community membership. Crystal (2011) explains that the internet creates a distinctive linguistic environment through new ways of producing and distributing language, while Tagg (2015) asserts that digital linguistic practices continuously adapt to the medium, the communicative purpose, and the social relations of their users. This condition makes social media a productive space for language innovation, particularly at the lexical level. Indeed, the spread of a neologism is not determined solely by its frequency of use, but also by the network structure and community that uses it (Würschinger, 2021).

Generation Z is one of the groups most active in these dynamics. The intensity of digital interaction has driven the emergence of concise, expressive, and context-dependent vocabulary through abbreviations, acronyms, clipping, blending, spelling changes, sound play, language mixing, and the reuse of old words in new contexts. Fitriah et al. (2023) found processes of shortening, abbreviation, wordplay, elision, insertion, and sound change in Generation Z slang on TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter. These findings show that Generation Z's language is not merely an informal register but represents a linguistic creativity with distinct patterns and mechanisms.

From a morphological perspective, this creativity relates to the productivity of word formation as a mechanism for lexicon development (Bauer, 1983; Plag, 2003). In the context of social media, Shahlee and Ahmad (2022) found a variety of morphological processes among neologisms on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Nazman et al. (2023), based on a corpus of 25,679 words from 2,000 posts by young Twitter users, showed that clipping is the dominant lexical innovation process, followed by pseudo-elliptical construction, blending, and lengthening of form. In the Indonesian context, Putri et al. (2021) identified abbreviation, borrowing, acronymization, metathesis, contraction, and clipping in TikTok slang, while Zahra et al. (2024) found acronyms, abbreviations, back-slang varieties, contractions, and clipping in Generation Z's language on Twitter. These findings confirm that digital communication drives lexical productivity through a variety of word-formation mechanisms.

Lexical creativity, however, is not only related to the creation of new forms. Vocabulary used on social media can retain its form while acquiring new meaning, or undergo both a change in form and a change in meaning. Wan Mohd Muzani and Mohammad Lotfie (2024) showed that TikTok slang involves both morphological processes and semantic shift simultaneously, so that lexical innovation needs to be understood through the interconnection of structure and meaning. Similar findings were obtained by Iskandar et al. (2025) in Generation Z's Acehese speech, which revealed four main mechanisms: adaptation of Indonesian slang, phonological modification, morphological play, and semantic shift. This innovation also functions to express humor, familiarity, evaluation, and generational identity. Lexical creativity is thus simultaneously a morphosemantic and a social phenomenon.

The development of Generation Z's vocabulary is also not entirely bound to a single platform. Lexical forms that emerge or become popular on one social media platform can move, be replicated, and be reused on other platforms with different contexts and nuances of meaning. Yudistira (2025) showed that TikTok drives the emergence of neologisms and new linguistic forms that influence social communication. At the cross-platform level, Imam et al. (2026) found that Generation Z's neologisms on TikTok, X, and Facebook display morphosyntactic patterns as well as communicative functions and identity. This phenomenon shows that social media forms a linguistic ecosystem in which vocabulary moves, adapts, and undergoes re-signification.

Although research on Generation Z's language is developing rapidly, there remains an important analytical gap to address. Previous studies tend to treat word formation and meaning change as two separate areas of focus. Morphological studies have largely identified abbreviations, acronyms, clipping, blending, borrowing, and form modification (Putri et al., 2021; Shahlee & Ahmad, 2022; Nazman et al., 2023; Zahra et al., 2024), while other research has shown semantic shifts and the social functions of digital vocabulary (Wan Mohd Muzani & Mohammad Lotfie, 2024; Iskandar et al., 2025). In addition, some studies still focus on a single platform, while available cross-platform studies have not specifically explained the relationship between word-formation mechanisms and meaning shift. Yet in digital communication, innovation in form and innovation in meaning can occur simultaneously and mutually influence each other.

Based on this gap, this study offers an integrative analysis of word-formation patterns and semantic shift to explain Generation Z's lexical creativity within the social

media ecosystem across platforms. This perspective does not position Generation Z's vocabulary merely as "slang," but as a manifestation of linguistic productivity that brings together morphological and semantic dimensions within digital culture. This study aims to (1) identify and analyze the word-formation patterns that represent Generation Z's lexical creativity on social media, and (2) analyze the forms of semantic shift that occur in this vocabulary within the context of digital communication. The results of this study are expected to enrich the study of contemporary language morphology and semantics while also providing an understanding of the dynamics of Generation Z's language change on social media.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative descriptive approach from a morphological and semantic perspective to examine Generation Z's lexical creativity on social media. The data consist of words, terms, abbreviations, acronyms, shortened forms, blends, borrowings, and other lexical forms that show a process of word formation and/or semantic shift in Generation Z's communication. The data sources come from language use on TikTok, Instagram, X, Facebook, and WhatsApp, selected purposively based on their relevance to the research focus. Data collection was carried out through observation, note-taking, and documentation of posts, captions, comments, and digital conversations, while removing user identities. The procedures for data collection and grouping adapted the studies of lexical creativity and innovation on social media conducted by Nazman et al. (2023), Wan Mohd Muzani and Mohammad Lotfie (2024), and Iskandar et al. (2025). The analysis was carried out in four stages: (1) identifying and inventorying lexical forms, (2) classifying the data based on word-formation patterns, (3) comparing lexical meaning with contextual meaning to identify semantic shift, and (4) interpreting the relationship between word-formation patterns and meaning change as a form of Generation Z's lexical creativity. The validity of the data was strengthened through persistent observation and source triangulation by comparing the occurrence and use of lexical forms across different platforms or communicative contexts. The results of the analysis are presented descriptively in the form of categories, anonymized authentic data, contexts of use, and linguistic interpretation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Word Formation Patterns in Generation Z's Lexical Creativity

The findings show that Generation Z's lexical creativity on social media is formed through several main mechanisms: acronymization, shortening, blending of elements, borrowing from foreign languages, form modification, and the use of existing forms with new functions. This pattern reflects Generation Z's tendency to produce language forms that are economical, expressive, easily replicated, and suited to the pace of digital interaction. Paramarta's (2022) study, for instance, found twelve word-formation patterns in social media communication and showed that the resulting forms tend to be more concise than their source forms. Factors such as speed of communication, closeness between users, currency, group identity, and efficiency are important reasons for the use of these forms.

Table 1. Generation Z's Word Formation Patterns on Social Media

No	Lexical Data	Original Form/Source	Formation Pattern	Meaning in Use
1	mager	malas + gerak ("lazy + move")	Acronym	reluctant to do any activity
2	gabut	gaji + buta ("blind + salary")	Acronym/contraction	having nothing to do; bored
3	salting	salah + tingkah ("wrong + behavior")	Acronym/contraction	nervous or awkward
4	bucin	budak + cinta ("slave + love")	Acronym	someone who is overly submissive/attached to a partner
5	gercep	gerak + cepat ("move + fast")	Acronym	to act quickly
6	spill	spill (English)	Borrowing from English	to reveal/give information
7	bestie	bestie (English)	Borrowing from English	a friendly term of address, not always a close friend
8	healing	healing (English)	Borrowing from English	recreation/calming oneself from routine
9	flexing	flexing (English)	Borrowing from English	showing off wealth, achievement, or lifestyle
10	relate	relate (English)	Borrowing/shortened use	feeling one shares the same experience
11	FOMO	fear of missing out	Acronym	fear of missing out on a trend/information
12	POV	point of view	Acronym	point of view/scenario in content
13	red flag	red flag (English)	Borrowing/phrase	a sign of a trait or situation considered problematic
14	green flag	green flag (English)	Borrowing/phrase	a sign of a trait or condition considered positive
15	delulu	delusional	Shortening and modification	thinking unrealistically

The data in Table 1 show two main tendencies. First, there is a compression of Indonesian-language forms, such as mager, gabut, salting, bucin, and gercep. These forms combine certain parts of two words to produce a single new lexical unit. The use of salting, for example, has been documented as a contraction of salah tingkah ("wrong behavior") and is used to describe a state of nervousness or embarrassment in social interaction. A similar pattern is found in mager, formed from malas gerak ("lazy to move"), used to express reluctance to carry out an activity. Empirical evidence for the use of such forms has also

been found in studies of slang on Instagram and among teenagers on social media.

Second, there is a strong tendency toward the appropriation of English elements into Indonesian communication. Forms such as spill, healing, bestie, flexing, relate, red flag, and green flag are not always used with meanings identical to their original lexical use. In the context of Indonesian social media, these forms undergo pragmatic adaptation according to users' communicative needs. Research on TikTok slang has also found a dominance of English borrowings such as spill, healing, bestie, and cringe, while studies of Indonesian X users have documented expressions such as red flag, flexing, ghosting, toxic, spill, FOMO, healing, green flag, and POV. This phenomenon shows that borrowing is not merely a transfer of vocabulary between languages, but can be an initial stage in the formation of new functions and meanings within a digital community.

These findings reinforce the results of Shahlee and Ahmad (2022), who showed that social media is a productive space for the formation of neologisms through various morphological processes. Nkhata and Jimaima (2020) even position social media neologisms as a manifestation of both creativity and linguistic productivity. Thus, the main character of Generation Z's lexical formation is not solely the creation of entirely new words, but the ability to process available elements through compression, blending, borrowing, and reconfiguration of form according to the needs of digital communication.

Semantic Shift in Generation Z's Vocabulary

A more interesting finding emerges when the lexical form is compared with its meaning in use. A number of vocabulary items retain their original form but undergo broadening, narrowing, metaphorization, or reinterpretation when they enter Generation Z's communication. This shows that lexical creativity does not always produce new forms; creativity also occurs when users assign a new semantic function to an already available form.

Table 2. Semantic Shift in Generation Z's Vocabulary on Social Media

Data	Original Meaning	Meaning in Gen Z Communication	Direction of Shift
spill	to spill (a liquid)	to reveal/share information or a secret	Metaphorization/broadening
healing	the process of healing	recreation or activity to restore one's mood	Broadening/contextualization
bestie	best friend	a friendly term of address, even for other users	Broadening
flexing	to flex/stretch	showing off wealth, achievement, or lifestyle	Metaphorization
red flag	a red flag/warning	a trait of a person or relationship considered problematic	Metaphorization
green flag	a green flag/sign	a character or	Metaphorization

Data	Original Meaning	Meaning in Gen Z Communication	Direction of Shift
		relationship judged to be healthy/positive	
relate	to be related/connected	feeling one shares the same experience or condition	Contextualization
ghosting	derived from "ghost"	abruptly cutting off communication without explanation	Metaphorization
aura	the aura/quality felt from someone or something	a value of attractiveness, charisma, or social "points" of a person	Digital reinterpretation
receh	small-denomination money	simple/trivial but entertaining humor	Metaphorization/broadening
julid	a form already developed in informal usage	a sarcastic remark or negative criticism	Contextual specialization
gas	gas (the substance)	an invitation to do something right away	Metaphorization/pragmatization

One of the clearest examples is spill. Literally, spill in English relates to the act of spilling something. In Indonesian digital communication, this form has developed into a request or act of revealing information, as in the constructions spill dong, spill tempatnya, or spill ceritanya. Studies of slang usage have also documented spill as a form used to mean "reveal, leak, show, or tell." The transfer of the form spill into Indonesian communication is thus accompanied by a metaphorization from the physical act of spilling something to "spilling" information.

A similar pattern occurs with healing. Its basic meaning relates to the process of recovery, but in Indonesian digital communication its use has broadened to refer to activities such as vacationing, traveling, relaxing, or temporarily stepping away from routine to gain psychological comfort. This shift shows that users are not merely borrowing an English form but are engaging in semantic recontextualization. Fitriani et al. (2026) confirm that social media influences changes and shifts in the meaning of the Indonesian language among young users, as words acquire new interpretations through digital communicative practice.

In the word bestie, the change occurs through referential broadening. The form originally denoting "best friend" is no longer limited to one's closest companion. In Indonesian social media communication, bestie can be used as a term of address for an ordinary friend, a follower, or even a user with no personal relationship to the speaker. Thus, the change moves from a relatively specific interpersonal relationship toward a broader marker of familiarity. This phenomenon shows that semantic shift can simultaneously serve a social function: the word is used to create an impression of closeness even when the relationship between users is not actually close.

A more metaphorical change is seen in red flag and green flag. Both phrases no longer primarily refer to a flag as an object, but are used as evaluative devices for behavior, character, relationships, and even social situations. Red flag marks something to be wary of, while green flag indicates a quality regarded as positive. This shift shows how a visual symbol is conceptualized into a category of social judgment. In Generation Z communication, this form has become productive because it allows a complex judgment to be conveyed concisely.

Another important finding concerns aura. Contemporary research on word formation on TikTok and Instagram has documented a change in the use of aura in digital communication. In certain trends, aura no longer merely refers to the impression or radiance a person possesses, but has developed into something that can seemingly be given a "value," added to, or subtracted from. Forms such as +1000 aura or minus aura show a process of metaphorical quantification, in which an abstract concept such as charisma or social image is treated like a score. This phenomenon shows that Generation Z's creativity can operate without creating any new word form at all; the innovation instead lies in the way an old meaning is restructured through digital culture.

The study by Wan Mohd Muzani and Mohammad Lotfie (2024) supports this pattern by showing that semantic shift is one of the important mechanisms in the development of social media slang. Research on slang evolution from 2020–2025 also identifies broadening, narrowing, amelioration, and pejoration as forms of semantic change, and shows that humor, self-expression, viral trends, and group identity play a role in such changes (Dahlia et al., 2025). Lexical meaning on social media is thus highly responsive to the social and cultural context of its users.

The Relationship between Word Formation and Semantic Shift

Further analysis shows that word formation and semantic shift do not always follow the same pattern. Based on the characteristics of the data, the relationship between the two can be grouped into three main patterns.

Table 3. The Relationship between Innovation in Form and in Meaning

Pattern	Characteristics	Examples
Form changes, meaning relatively retained	The form is condensed without a major change to the underlying meaning	mager, gercep, salting
Form relatively unchanged, meaning shifts	The form is retained but acquires a new digital function/meaning	spill, healing, bestie, aura, gas
Form adopted and meaning recontextualized	A foreign element enters Indonesian while acquiring a distinctive social use	red flag, green flag, flexing, ghosting, relate

The first pattern shows that creativity operates mainly at the level of form. Mager and gercep, for instance, retain the meaning components of their source forms even though their structure is compressed. The second pattern instead shows a more dominant semantic creativity: spill, healing, bestie, and gas relatively retain their form, but their communicative

function changes when used within the Indonesian digital environment. The third pattern is more complex because it involves both language contact and the reconceptualization of meaning.

These results show that Generation Z's lexical creativity should not be understood merely as a tendency to "abbreviate language." Paramarta (2022) indeed found efficiency and speed to be factors in the use of new forms, but these factors explain only part of the phenomenon. Creativity is also related to identity expression, humor, social closeness, evaluation, and the need to present meaning relevant to digital experience. Iskandar et al.'s (2025) study shows that Generation Z's lexical innovation carries functions of humor, familiarity, evaluation, and identity, while research on TikTok neologisms shows that slang functions as a form of group association (Wan Mohd Muzani & Mohammad Lotfie, 2024).

The findings of this study thus reveal two layers of lexical creativity. The first layer is structural creativity, in which Generation Z manipulates form through acronymization, shortening, blending, and borrowing. The second layer is semantic creativity, in which an old form or a borrowed form is given new meaning and function according to the digital context. Both layers can appear separately or simultaneously. This is what distinguishes lexical creativity from mere slang usage: what occurs is not simply a replacement of vocabulary, but a productive process of forming and negotiating meaning.

These findings also explain why digital vocabulary can move quickly across platforms. Forms that are concise and highly expressive are more easily replicated, while their meaning continues to be negotiated as they enter new communities. Social media is thus not merely a channel for the spread of vocabulary, but a space for lexical production and reconstruction. Generation Z's creativity ultimately shows that digital language change occurs through a dynamic relationship between word structure, meaning change, language contact, group identity, and the culture of online communication.

CONCLUSION

The dynamics of communication on social media show that Generation Z is not merely a user of language but also plays an active role in developing the lexicon through various creative strategies. This creativity is evident in word formation through acronymization, shortening, blending, borrowing, and form modification, as well as in semantic processes such as broadening, metaphorization, contextualization, and reinterpretation of meaning. Analysis of the relationship between the two reveals three tendencies: a change in form with relatively preserved meaning, an unchanged form with shifted meaning, and the adoption of a form accompanied by recontextualization of meaning. These findings show that Generation Z's lexical creativity cannot be adequately understood as merely the use of slang or a tendency to shorten words, but rather as a linguistic process that brings together morphological productivity and semantic dynamics within digital culture. In this context, social media functions not merely as a channel for the dissemination of vocabulary, but as a space in which the form and meaning of language are continuously produced, negotiated, and renewed. The development of Generation Z's lexicon therefore reflects language's capacity to adapt to technological change and social practice, while also affirming that linguistic creativity in the digital space is part of the broader dynamics of contemporary language development.

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