



The Impact of Social Media on Language Evolution and Generation Z Identity: A Synthesis

Nurul Jumiati^{1*}

¹ Aircraft Maintenance Engineering Technology, Politeknik Kirana, Banten, Indonesia

*Corresponding author email: nurul.jumiati@politeknikkirana.ac.id

Article Info

Article history:

Received April 10, 2026

Approved May 11, 2026

Keywords:

Social media, language evaluation, Gen Z identity, linguistic simplification, sociolinguistics

ABSTRACT

This research provides a comprehensive synthesis of the impact of social media on language evolution and the formation of Generation Z identity. In an increasingly advanced digital era, social media has become a primary communication tool triggering significant linguistic changes. This study aims to analyze language simplification, syntactic shifts, and the role of slang in shaping social identity. The method employed is a systematic literature review combining findings from three major studies on digital sociolinguistics. Findings indicate that social media encourages linguistic economy through abbreviations and phonetic spellings. Furthermore, digital platforms facilitate the emergence of "digital tribes" among Indonesian Gen Z, who utilize hybrid slang terms like "anjay" to assert in group identity. In conclusion, while social media enhances communication efficiency and emotional connectivity, it also challenges formal grammatical norms. Judicious use of keywords may increase the ease with which interested parties can locate our article..

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How to cite: Jumiati, N. (2026). The Impact of Social Media on Language Evolution and Generation Z Identity: A Synthesis. *Jurnal Ilmiah Global Education*, 7(2), 1652–1661. <https://doi.org/10.55681/jige.v7i2.6047>

INTRODUCTION

Social media has fundamentally transformed the landscape of human communication in the 21st century. It acts not merely as a channel for information exchange but as a dynamic environment where language evolves, and identities are constructed. Since the emergence of popular social networking sites around 2007 (Rutledge, 2008; Ortiz Ospina, 2019), the digital sphere has introduced rapid and continuous changes in how language is adapted, shared, and used. Unlike traditional written forms, social media enables immediate, interactive exchanges that often prioritize brevity over official language rules. This shift has brought noticeable linguistic changes, termed "language evolution," which now unfolds within years or even months rather than generations (Hartmann, 2020).

Several previous studies have attempted to investigate the multifaceted relationship between digital technology and linguistic shifts. For instance, Natsir et al. (2023) examined the baseline technological adaptations that trigger modern language changes, highlighting the rapid transition from formal registers to digital variations. Similarly, Panjaitan and Patria (2024) offered a comprehensive review of how digital communication systematically alters syntax and structural grammar rules across online platforms. While these studies independently address structural variations or identity metrics, there remains a critical gap in comprehensively synthesizing how the dual forces of linguistic economy and identity performance concurrently shape the socio-psychological landscape of Gen Z.

The psychological implications of this shift are profound. Language and discourse in digital spaces have become carriers of an "objectified culture" with specific social and historical implications for communication (Stachowiak, 2020). As individuals interact with these platforms, the medium itself begins to shape their cognitive processes. This aligns with the Media Ecology Theory, which posits that communication technologies ultimately restructure human cognition and discourse (McLuhan, 1964). Every social media platform possesses its own "vibe" or grammar. Instagram favours visual storytelling, while Twitter (now X) enforces brevity, creating a digital dialect where identity is expressed through both text and image.

One of the most significant theoretical frameworks for understanding this phenomenon is Social Identity Theory. According to Tajfel and Turner (1979), an individual's self-concept is derived from their perceived membership in relevant social groups. On social media, language acts as a badge of this membership. When Generation Z users deploy specific slang or code switching, they are not merely communicating information; they are signalling their belonging to a youth subculture that values authenticity, humour, and irony. This creates a clear distinction between the "in-group" (digital natives) and the "out-group" (older generations or digital immigrants).

Furthermore, the construction of identity is a fluid process. As Bucholtz and Hall (2005) argue in their Language and Identity Theory, identity is not a static attribute one possesses but is actively constructed through interaction. Every instance of slang usage, code mixing, or meme sharing is an act of identity performance. For young Indonesians, this often involves a complex mix of local dialects, Bahasa Indonesia, and English, reflecting a hybrid identity that is responsive to global trends while remaining rooted in local culture. This flexibility allows users to play with different versions of themselves depending on the digital audience.

However, this rapid evolution is not without its critics. There are growing concerns about the potential decline in standard communication skills. Research suggests that the pervasive effects of digital technologies influence language expression, creativity, critical thinking, and political discourse (Cladis, 2020). The use of short, informal language in professional or formal contexts can reduce a person's ability to communicate effectively, raising worries about the degradation of language standards (Bibi et al., 2018). The blurring lines between formal and informal registers challenge the traditional boundaries of literacy education.

The demographic most affected by these changes is undoubtedly the youth. Studies indicate that Generation Z is at the forefront of adopting and spreading new linguistic forms (Kim & Baker, 2018). They are the pioneers of digital language, introducing slang terms and informal structures that eventually permeate broader social contexts. However, the specific

mechanisms of how these trends stick and spread remain a subject of ongoing research. The role of influencers and the viral nature of content contribute significantly to this rapid dissemination (Garcia, 2021).

In the context of multilingual societies, social media also impacts the usage of native languages. There is evidence that the dominance of English and "Indoglish" on social platforms can influence the knowledge and usage of native languages, potentially impacting cultural identity (Matiki & Naledi, 2017). While some view this as a threat to local culture, others see it as a form of cultural hybridization where global English flows are repurposed for local expression (Pennycook, 2007). This tension between global connectivity and local identity is central to the modern sociolinguistic landscape.

Consequently, this paper aims to synthesize existing research to understand these dual forces: the creative expansion of language for identity formation and the potential risks of linguistic simplification. By examining the mechanisms of abbreviations, the sociology of slang, and syntactic variations, we can better grasp the future of human communication. This research is necessary to provide vital information for educators and policymakers to design more effective teaching techniques that bridge the gap between digital and formal literacy (Qassrawi & Samih, 2023).

METHODS

This article employs a systematic literature review and synthesis method. Data is collected from three primary sociolinguistic studies focusing on the intersection of technology, language, and society. The data sources include descriptive analysis research on language changes caused by technology (Natsir et al., 2023), a qualitative review of Generation Z identity in Indonesia (Jumiati, 2024), and a systematic review of digital communication's impact on syntax and grammar (Panjaitan & Patria, 2024). The synthesis focuses on categorizing findings into linguistic simplification, identity formation, and syntactic variation to answer how social media shapes modern communication.

To ensure a rigorous synthesis, the collected qualitative data from the primary sources were analysed using a thematic analysis technique. This process involved systematic data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification. Initially, the research findings from the selected articles were open-coded to identify recurring linguistic patterns, token frequencies, and sociological markers. These codes were subsequently grouped into higher-order conceptual categories based on their functional characteristics. The conceptual framework was categorized into three distinct thematic domains: linguistic simplification (mechanisms of abbreviations and phonetic spellings), identity formation (the sociology of slang and code-switching), and syntactic variation (multimodal grammar and visual syntax integration). Finally, cross-study synthesis was executed to evaluate semantic convergences and divergences, allowing for a comprehensive interpretation of how digital platforms restructure modern communication dynamics.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

Linguistic Simplification and Economy

The phenomenon of linguistic simplification on social media is driven largely by the principle of "linguistic economy." Research consistently demonstrates that platforms with inherent constraints, such as Twitter's original 140 character limit, have forced users to adopt abbreviations, acronyms, and phonetic spellings as standard practice (Smith & Jones, 2019). This is not merely a sign of laziness but a functional adaptation to the medium's demand for brevity and immediacy. Users have developed a standardized lexicon of shorthand such as "brb" for "be right back" or "u" for "you" which is widely understood despite deviating from standard grammar (Crystal, 2011).

This drive for efficiency extends beyond English. Cross linguistic studies reveal similar adaptations in other languages, such as Spanish speakers using "k" for "que" or French speakers utilizing "svp" for "s'il vous plaît" (Tagg, 2015). This suggests a form of digital linguistic convergence where the pressure of the platform shapes language use regardless of the specific linguistic background. The use of these abbreviations speeds up communication in text messages and chats, allowing for near synchronous conversation in a text based medium (Worathumrong, 2016).

However, the saturation of these simplified forms has created a new barrier to entry. While they enhance speed for "insiders," they can cause confusion and misunderstanding among those unfamiliar with the specific digital codes (Natsir, 2020). For instance, terms like "tbh" (to be honest) or "smh" (shaking my head) convey specific emotional nuances that are lost on the uninitiated. This linguistic simplification creates a bifurcated communication landscape where digital proficiency is defined by the mastery of these economical forms.

The persistence of these forms is also notable. Abbreviations are no longer confined to the platforms where they originated. Younger generations are reported to use these simplified forms in academic and professional settings, suggesting that these changes may be contributing to long term shifts in general linguistic norms (Garcia, 2021). What began as a workaround for character limits has evolved into a stylistic preference for the "digital native" demographic.

Furthermore, the data indicates that this simplification is not just about shortening words but also about conveying tone efficiently. The use of "caps lock" for shouting or repeated letters for emphasis (e.g., "sooooo") are morphological innovations born from the need to inject paralinguistic cues into text. This demonstrates that linguistic economy on social media is balanced by a need for expressive clarity, leading to a complex system of "written speech" (Barton & Lee, 2013).

To better illustrate the breadth of these linguistic modifications, Table 1 categorizes the various forms of language change identified across the reviewed studies, ranging from simple acronyms to complex identity markers.

Table 1. Classification of Digital Language Variations Observed in Studies (Source: Synthesized from Natsir et al., 2023; Jumiati, 2025; Panjaitan & Patria, 2024)

| Linguistic Category | Specific Examples | Functional Description | Source Study |
|-------------------------------------|--|--|---|
| Abbreviations & Acronyms | <i>LOL, OMG, BRB, TBH, SMH, FOMO</i> | Used for speed (linguistic economy) and to convey specific emotional tones (e.g., <i>TBH</i> for vulnerability). | Natsir et al. (2023) |
| Phonetic Spelling | <i>u</i> (you), <i>k</i> (que), <i>svp</i> (s'il vous plaît) | Simplification of spelling to mimic speech sounds and reduce character count. | Panjaitan & Patria (2024); Natsir et al. (2023) |
| Identity Based Slang | <i>Anjay, Anying</i> | Euphemisms for taboo words (<i>anjing</i>) used to signal in group solidarity and "coolness" among Gen Z. | Jumiati (2025) |
| Code Switching (Hybrid) | <i>Indoglish</i> (e.g., "Which is", "Literally") | Mixing English and Indonesian to perform a cosmopolitan, educated identity. | Jumiati (2025) |
| Visual Syntax | Emojis (☹, 😊), Memes | Replaces tone of voice and facial expressions; functions as punctuation. | Natsir et al. (2023) |

Identity Formation and Slang Usage

For Generation Z, particularly in Indonesia, language on social media serves a critical sociological function: identity construction. Recent research highlights that Gen Z's online language style is a "mash up" of global trends and local flavors (Putri et al., 2025). This is most evident in the transformation of taboo words into markers of intimacy. Words like "anjay" and "anying" derived from the word *anjing* (dog) have been repurposed from insults into expressions of amazement, humor, or solidarity. This linguistic creativity acts as a "quiet rebellion" against stuffy language rules and asserts a distinct youth identity.

This phenomenon aligns with the concept of "Indoglish," where Indonesian youth seamlessly mix English with Indonesian to create a playful, creative dialect (Pratiwi, 2023). This code mixing is not random; it is a sophisticated performance of cosmopolitanism and local rootedness. By using this hybrid language, Gen Z students, such as those at Politeknik Kirana, create "digital tribes." Slang serves as a social marker; using the right word in the right context signals "I get it, I'm in," while failing to do so can lead to exclusion (Eble, 1996).

Identity on social media is described as a "networked performance" where users are constantly shaping how they look and sound to their audience (Boyd, 2014). When a user drops a specific slang term in a caption or comment, they are performing a specific persona one that is clever, connected, and culturally aware. Every like and share reinforces this performance, turning language into a badge of identity. This performance is fluid, shifting between platforms; the

language used on TikTok is often different from that on Instagram or Twitter due to the different "vibes" and audiences of each platform (McLuhan, 1964).

The use of slang also facilitates emotional connection. Humor online is a primary way people bond, and slang provides that "inside joke" feeling that builds trust and closeness (Meyer, 2000). Students report that using their specific slang makes interactions feel more "natural" and "connected" compared to formal Indonesian. This suggests that non-standard language is essential for emotional authenticity in the digital realm.

However, this strong in-group marking can also alienate older generations or those outside the specific subculture. The rapid evolution of these terms means that the "language of the youth" is a moving target, constantly changing to maintain its exclusivity. Once a slang term becomes mainstream or is adopted by older generations, Gen Z often abandons it for new terms, continuing the cycle of linguistic innovation and identity separation (Kim & Baker, 2018).

Syntax, Grammar, and Visual Language

Social media has fostered an environment of syntactic fluidity where traditional grammatical rules are often suspended in favour of expression. Research shows that users frequently adopt informal grammar patterns, such as flexible word order, unconventional punctuation, and the omission of capitalization (Lee & Huang, 2020). For example, starting sentences with lowercase letters or using period-less sentences to convey a casual tone has become a stylistic norm. These are not errors but deliberate choices to signal a lack of aggression or formality.

The syntax of social media is also increasingly multimodal, incorporating visual elements like emojis and memes as grammatical units. Emojis are not just decorations; they function as punctuation and tone markers. A sentence ending with a "face with tears of joy" emoji carries a completely different meaning than one ending with a period. Natsir et al. (2023) provide data showing how specific emojis (e.g., "Think," "Pray") replace entire phrases, enriching the digital language with emotional nuance that text alone cannot convey.

Memes represent another layer of this visual syntax. They act as complex cultural units that carry meaning through a combination of image and text. Understanding a meme requires "visual literacy" knowledge of the meme format's history and context. This usage influences how people communicate online, creating a shared visual lexicon that transcends language barriers (Yunis, 2019). The "syntax" of a meme is rigid (e.g., the specific format of a "distracted boyfriend" meme), yet the content is infinitely adaptable, allowing for high levels of creativity within a structured form.

In multilingual communities, this syntactic variation is even more pronounced. Social media encourages "hybrid syntax," where users blend grammatical structures from different languages in a single post (Androutopoulos, 2014). For instance, Indonesian users might apply English syntax to Indonesian words or vice versa. This phenomenon of "language hybridization" is particularly prominent in Southeast Asia and reflects a new form of digital code switching that is seamless and expressive (Barton & Lee, 2013).

The acceptance of these non-standard forms is leading to a broader shift in attitudes toward linguistic correctness. The "singular they" has gained acceptance partly due to its utility in gender neutral digital spaces (Tagg & Seargeant, 2014). While traditionalists may view these changes as

degradation, the evidence suggests they represent a new stylistic register one that is informal, efficient, and highly adaptive to the context of digital interaction.

Discussion

The synthesis of these findings highlights a significant tension between communicative efficiency and formal literacy. As Natsir et al. (2023) and Panjaitan and Patria (2024) observe, the drive for "linguistic economy" has undoubtedly made digital communication faster and more accessible. However, this comes at a cost. The pervasive use of abbreviations and non-standard grammar raises valid concerns about the erosion of formal writing skills. When users, particularly students, become habituated to "text speak," they may struggle to switch codes when entering professional or academic environments where standard grammar is a gatekeeping metric (Bibi et al., 2018).

This potential decline in formal skills is further complicated by the "objectified culture" of social media discourse (Stachowiak, 2020). The pressure to conform to the quick, witty, and often superficial style of online interaction can flatten complex ideas into soundbites or memes. This shift might affect critical thinking skills, as the medium discourages long-form, nuanced argumentation in favour of "hot takes" and viral content (Cladis, 2020). Educators face the challenge of teaching the value of slow, structured language in an age of instantaneity.

Despite these challenges, the creative potential of this linguistic evolution is undeniable. The adaptation of language on social media is not a degeneration but a sophisticated evolution. Users are effectively managing two distinct dialects: standard language for formal contexts and "digital dialect" for social interaction. The ability to switch between these registers requires high linguistic awareness. Thus, the "problem" may not be the loss of ability, but the blurring of contexts, knowing when to use which register (Worathumrong, 2016).

From a sociological perspective, the role of language in identity formation on social media validates Social Identity Theory in the digital age. The "digital tribes" formed by Gen Z through language (Jumiati, 2025) demonstrate that the need for belonging is a primary driver of language change. Slang words like "anjay" are not just vocabulary; they are emotional connectors that build trust and solidarity (Meyer, 2000). This suggests that the primary function of social media language is often phatic establishing social bonds rather than purely informational.

However, this group-bonding function also has a dark side: exclusion and cyberbullying. The same language that bonds a group can be used to alienate others. The use of harsh, non-conforming, or coded language can facilitate online harassment, where insults are disguised as slang or "jokes." This impacts social behavior, potentially normalizing a level of casual aggression or disrespect that clashes with traditional cultural norms of politeness (Marston, 2023; Khaeriyah et al., 2023).

The phenomenon of "Indoglish" and cultural hybridization points to a future of "Global Englishes" (Pennycook, 2007). Rather than English replacing local languages, we see a localization of English. Indonesian youth are claiming English terms and molding them to fit Indonesian syntax and cultural contexts. This process of "glocalization" suggests that globalization does not inevitably lead to cultural homogenization but can spark new, hybrid cultural forms that are robust and locally resonant (Pratiwi, 2023).

The rapid spread of these changes via influencers and viral content creates a "top-down" and "bottom-up" dynamic simultaneously. Influencers may introduce a term (top-down), but it is the grassroots adoption by the masses (bottom-up) that solidifies it. This democratization of

language change is unique to the digital era; previously, language change was often dictated by elites or slow geographical diffusion. Now, a teenager in Jakarta can influence the slang of a teenager in Surabaya instantly (Garcia, 2021).

Looking forward, the integration of visual language (emojis, memes) into syntax suggests a return to a more pictographic form of communication, but one that operates alongside text. This multimodal literacy is becoming a prerequisite for effective digital citizenship. Misinterpreting an emoji or a meme format can lead to social faux pas just as easily as a grammatical error (Yunis, 2019). Thus, "literacy" in the 21st century must be redefined to include these visual and cultural competencies.

Finally, the implications for education are clear. Banning social media language in classrooms is likely futile and counterproductive. Instead, educators might leverage this linguistic creativity. By analyzing social media language in the classroom, teachers can engage students in discussions about audience, context, and register (Qassrawi & Samih, 2023). This approach validates the students' identity while reinforcing the distinct value and necessity of standard academic language, helping them navigate the complex linguistic landscape they inhabit.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, social media acts as a powerful accelerant for language evolution, driving changes that are deeply structural, sociological, and psychological. The "problem" of declining formal language standards is counterbalanced by the "solution" of increased communicative efficiency, emotional expressiveness, and the strengthening of social bonds through shared linguistic codes. Social media has standardized linguistic simplification and non-standard syntax, creating a new, hybrid global-digital register that prioritizes speed and connection. Simultaneously, it enables the construction of complex, performative youth identities (Generation Z) through creative slang and cultural hybridization. While this presents challenges for intergenerational understanding and formal education, it represents a natural adaptation of human communication to the digital toolset. Future efforts should focus not on resisting these changes, but on fostering a critical "digital literacy" that empowers users to navigate and code-switch between these evolving linguistic worlds effectively.

ACKNOWLEDGE

We would like to thank the researchers whose work formed the basis of this synthesis: Nurasia Natsir, Nuraziza Aliah, Zulkhaeriyah, Amiruddin, Farida Esmianti, Lilis Lamsehat Panjaitan, and Aditya Nur Patria. Their primary research provided the essential data for this review.

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