



A Semantic Study of Gen Z Slang: User Perceptions of "Slay," "Cringe," and "Cooked"

Studi Semantik Bahasa Gaul Generasi Z: Persepsi Pengguna tentang "Slay," "Cringe," dan "Cooked"

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Abstrak

Perkembangan pesat platform media sosial telah mempercepat transformasi bahasa gaul anak muda, menjadikannya subjek penting untuk penyelidikan semantik. Studi ini meneliti makna denotatif dan konotatif dari tiga kata gaul Generasi Z, yaitu "slay," "cringe," dan "cooked," sebagaimana dipahami oleh pengguna media sosial aktif. Pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif digunakan, dengan data yang dikumpulkan melalui kuesioner terstruktur sepuluh item yang diberikan kepada tiga responden berusia 17 hingga 25 tahun yang aktif menggunakan TikTok, Instagram, dan X (sebelumnya Twitter). Temuan menunjukkan bahwa ketiga kata tersebut telah mengalami transformasi substansial dari makna literal aslinya: "slay" bergeser dari menunjukkan tindakan membunuh menjadi mengekspresikan kinerja luar biasa atau penampilan yang mengagumkan; "cringe" berevolusi dari menggambarkan gerakan mundur fisik menjadi menandai sesuatu yang memalukan atau canggung secara sosial; dan "cooked," meskipun sebagian besar ditafsirkan sebagai menggambarkan situasi tanpa harapan, mengungkapkan ambiguitas konotatif karena dua responden mengaitkannya dengan kesan yang mengesankan. Makna bahasa gaul ditemukan dibentuk secara kolektif oleh komunitas daring, bukan oleh pengguna individu; penggunaannya terbatas pada lingkungan komunikasi informal; dan tingkat pergeseran semantik dianggap sangat signifikan, dengan evolusi berkelanjutan yang diantisipasi. Temuan ini meningkatkan pemahaman tentang bagaimana makna leksikal dibangun dan dinegosiasikan dalam komunitas pemuda yang dimediasi secara digital.

Kata kunci: Makna konotatif; makna denotatif; bahasa gaul Generasi Z

Abstract

The rapid proliferation of social media platforms has accelerated the transformation of youth slang, making it a significant subject for semantic inquiry. This study investigated the denotative and connotative meanings of three Generation Z slang words "slay," "cringe," and "cooked" as perceived by active social media users. A qualitative descriptive approach was employed, with data gathered through a structured ten-item questionnaire administered to three respondents aged 17 to 25 years who actively used TikTok, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter). The findings showed that all three words had undergone substantial transformation from their original literal meanings: "slay" shifted from denoting the act of killing to expressing exceptional performance or admirable appearance; "cringe" evolved from describing a physical recoiling motion to marking something socially embarrassing or awkward; and "cooked," while predominantly interpreted as describing a hopeless situation, revealed connotative ambiguity as two respondents associated it with impressiveness. Slang meaning was found to be shaped collectively by online communities rather than individual users, usage was restricted to informal communicative settings, and the degree of semantic shift was perceived as highly significant, with continued evolution anticipated. These findings advance the



understanding of how lexical meaning is constructed and negotiated within digitally mediated youth communities.

Keywords: Connotative meaning; denotative meaning; Gen Z slang

INTRODUCTION

Language functions as a dynamic system, continually influenced by social, cultural, and technological developments. In the current digital era, the rapid expansion of social media platforms, especially TikTok, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter), has significantly accelerated the emergence and spread of slang among younger generations, particularly Generation Z. Lexical items that previously possessed clear literal meanings have experienced substantial connotative transformations, often within notably brief periods.

Notable examples of this phenomenon include the lexical items "slay," "cringe," and "cooked." Etymologically, "slay" originates from the Old English verb *slēan*, meaning to strike or kill. In contemporary Gen Z vernacular, the term now signifies exceptional performance or outstanding appearance. Similarly, "cringe" has shifted from denoting a physical recoiling motion in response to fear or pain to representing social embarrassment or awkwardness. "Cooked," originally associated with culinary contexts, predominantly refers to a person or situation considered irreversibly hopeless or failed; however, a subset of users also applies it to describe something impressively executed. Collectively, these terms exemplify the fluidity of lexical meaning in digital communication and present a valuable focus for semantic analysis.

The theoretical orientation of this study draws upon Geoffrey Leech's (1974; 1981) foundational framework of meaning, which distinguishes between conceptual (denotative) meaning, dictionary-defined content of a word and connotative meaning, which encompasses the emotional, cultural, and associative dimensions that extend beyond the literal. Leech (1974, p. 9) characterizes conceptual meaning as "widely assumed to be the central factor in linguistic communication," while connotative meaning is described as "the communicative value an expression has by virtue of what it refers to, over and above its purely conceptual content" (Leech, 1974, p. 12). This dual framework provides the analytical lens through which respondents' perceptions are systematically examined.

Complementing Leech's semantic theory, Ullmann's (1962) taxonomy of semantic change offers a structural basis for categorizing the transformations observed in these three terms. Ullmann identifies several mechanisms of semantic shift, including narrowing, broadening, amelioration, pejoration, and metaphorical extension. Processes that are demonstrably at work in the evolution of Gen Z slang. Additionally, Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle illuminates the pragmatic dimension of meaning-making, foregrounding the role of context and shared knowledge in interpreting slang terms. Labov's (1972) sociolinguistic model further contextualizes meaning variation as a socially embedded, community-driven process, providing theoretical grounding for the study's focus on user perception and speech community dynamics.

Prior scholarships on related themes has yielded several relevant contributions; however, notable lacunae persist. Pinasti et al. (2025) investigated slang on TikTok, including "slay" and "cringe," yet their methodology was limited to observational collection, without eliciting users' meanings or interpretations. Sitohang and Damanik (2025) engaged Gen Z respondents directly but



distributed their analysis across an extensive range of slang terms, precluding depth of inquiry into any single item. Paula et al. (2024) examined generational variation in Gen Z and Gen Alpha slang; however, the three words examined appeared only as peripheral examples within a broader comparative framework, with no semantic analysis conducted at the level of individual user interaction. These gaps collectively underscore the need for a study that is simultaneously focused in scope, user-centered in methodology, and analytically grounded in both denotative and connotative dimensions of meaning.

This study addresses these gaps by focusing on three specific slang words, collecting data directly from Gen Z respondents via a structured questionnaire, and analyzing both the literal and associative meanings of each term as perceived and reported by active users. This approach advances understanding of how digital communities construct, negotiate, and perpetuate lexical meaning, a domain of growing importance within sociolinguistics and semantic research. The study is guided by five research questions: (1) What are the denotative and connotative meanings of "slay," "cringe," and "cooked" as perceived by Gen Z users? (2) How do Gen Z users interpret these slang terms in their everyday communicative experiences? (3) Does the meaning of these words vary depending on contextual factors such as formality or interlocutor? (4) Who determines the meaning of these slang words: individuals or online communities? (5) How significant is the semantic shift in these three words, and will their meanings continue to evolve?

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach, as conceptualized by Creswell (2009), which is well-suited to the goal of exploring and articulating participants' meanings, perceptions, and lived communicative experiences without reducing the data to numerical abstraction. The design prioritizes richness and nuance of description, enabling a grounded account of how Gen Z users understand and deploy the slang terms under investigation.

Primary data were gathered through a structured questionnaire comprising ten closed-ended questions, administered to three Gen Z respondents (designated R-01, R-02, and R-03), each of whom met the criteria of active social media engagement on at least one of the platforms identified as central to Gen Z slang dissemination: TikTok, Instagram, and X (Twitter). Respondents ranged in age from 17 to 25 years, corresponding to the broadly recognized age parameters of Generation Z. R-01 (aged 21–25) identified X (Twitter) as the primary platform for slang exposure; R-02 (aged 17–20) reported Instagram as the dominant platform; and R-03 (aged 21–25) similarly identified X (Twitter). Secondary data were drawn from foundational theoretical texts and peer-reviewed journal articles directly relevant to the study's analytical framework.

The questionnaire instrument was designed to elicit responses aligned with each of the five research questions. Questions 1 and 2 captured respondent profile data (age and primary social media platform). Questions 3 and 4 (RQ1) probed awareness of original denotative meanings and current connotative interpretations. Question 5 (RQ2) investigated user perception of contextual usage. Question 6 (RQ3) examined contextual variation in slang use. Questions 7 and 8 (RQ4) explored the locus of meaning construction. Questions 9 and 10 (RQ5) assessed the perceived degree of semantic shift and anticipated future trajectories. Data collection was conducted on March 29, 2026, with all responses recorded verbatim and subsequently annotated and color-coded according to the relevant research question category.



Analysis followed a systematic process of coding, thematic categorization, and cross-respondent comparison. Each response was interpreted using the relevant theoretical framework: Leech's semantic typology for RQ1 and RQ2; Grice's Cooperative Principle for RQ3; Labov's sociolinguistic model for RQ4; and Ullmann's taxonomy of semantic change for RQ5. Patterns of convergence and divergence among respondents were identified and discussed to produce findings representative of broader Gen Z semantic practices, while recognizing the interpretive variation inherent in user-driven meaning.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The following section presents and interprets findings from the questionnaire responses of three Gen Z respondents (R-01, R-02, R-03), organized according to the five research questions. Where relevant, the analysis references the theoretical frameworks outlined above to contextualize and explain the identified patterns.

Denotative and Connotative Meanings of "Slay," "Cringe," and "Cooked" (RQ1)

The first research question examined whether Gen Z respondents retained awareness of the original, dictionary-defined (denotative) meanings of the three target words and how they characterized the current connotative meanings circulating within their communities. Table 1 summarizes the respondents' answers to Questions 3 and 4 of the questionnaires.

Table 1. Respondent Awareness of Denotative and Connotative Meanings

Respondent	Awareness of 'slay' denotative meaning (to kill)	Connotative meaning of 'cringe' in gen z usage	Platform
R-01 (21–25)	Yes (aware of original meaning)	Something embarrassing or awkward	X (Twitter)
R-02 (17–20)	Yes (aware of original meaning)	Something funny or entertaining	Instagram
R-03 (21–25)	Yes (aware of original meaning)	Something embarrassing or awkward	X (Twitter)

All three respondents demonstrated awareness of the original denotative meaning of "slay" (to kill), indicating that the older, literal sense of the word has not been entirely displaced from conscious knowledge. This finding aligns with Leech's (1981) observation that conceptual meaning constitutes a stable semantic core that persists even as connotative meanings undergo transformation. The co-existence of the traditional denotative meaning and the emergent connotative sense in Gen Z users' lexical knowledge attests to a layered semantic competence, one in which users consciously navigate between the historical and contemporary registers of a word. This awareness is particularly notable given the rapid pace at which "slay" has been semantically reconstituted within digital discourse, where it now predominantly functions as an expression of admiration for exceptional performance or outstanding appearance. From Ullmann's (1962) perspective, this transformation exemplifies amelioration, a shift toward a more favorable evaluative dimension as a once-violent term acquires strongly positive connotations within a socially affirming context.

The connotative meanings attributed to "cringe" reveal a dominant pattern of negativity across the respondent pool, with R-01 and R-03 converging on the interpretation of the word as



denoting something embarrassing or socially awkward. This consensus reflects the lexical trajectory of "cringe" on social media platforms, where it functions as a form of social judgment, a marker of behavior or content perceived as violating community norms of coolness or appropriateness. The spread of this connotation is consistent with Labov's (1972) model of sociolinguistic variation, wherein shared linguistic norms emerge within defined speech communities through repeated and reinforced use.

A notable divergence was observed in R-02's interpretation of "cringe" as something funny or entertaining, a reading that suggests a partial ameliorative trajectory for this term within certain platform-specific communities. Instagram, identified as R-02's primary platform, tends to host ironic and self-deprecating content in which "cringe" is embraced rather than condemned. This divergence foregrounds the platform-mediated nature of connotative meaning and supports Grice's (1975) assertion that the communicative value of an utterance is shaped by shared contextual assumptions between interlocutors.

User Perception and Interpretation of Slang (RQ2)

The second research question examined how respondents perceive and use these slang terms in their everyday communicative practices, with particular focus on the word "cooked." Table 2 presents the reported usage contexts for this term.

Table 2. Respondent Perceptions of "Cooked" in Contextual Usage (Q5)

Respondent	Reported usage context for "cooked"
R-01	When someone is in a hopeless or failed situation
R-02	When someone does something impressive
R-03	When someone does something impressive

The responses regarding "cooked" reveal a meaningful divergence in user perception that warrants close analytical attention. R-01's interpretation associating the term with a hopeless or irreversibly failed situation, represents the dominant connotative usage documented in broader Gen Z discourse and is consistent with the pejoration of the term's original culinary denotation. From Ullmann's (1962) perspective, this constitutes a narrowing combined with a pejorative shift, whereby the word's semantic range contracts and acquires an evaluatively negative dimension.

By contrast, R-02 and R-03 both reported interpreting "cooked" as expressing impressiveness, a positive connotation that stands in direct opposition to the predominant usage. The convergence of two respondents on this alternative reading is analytically significant: it suggests that the term occupies a space of genuine semantic instability, simultaneously sustaining a pejorative and an ameliorative trajectory within overlapping but distinct subcommunities. This ambiguity aligns with Leech's (1981) characterization of connotative meaning as open-ended and culturally contingent, susceptible to variation across social and interactional contexts in which a word is deployed. The presence of competing connotations within the same generational cohort further corroborates Labov's (1972) model of intra-community linguistic variation, wherein speech communities are not monolithic but encompass divergent norms and practices shaped by subgroup identity and platform affordances.



Contextual Variation in Slang Use (RQ3)

The third research question examined whether the meanings and uses of these slang terms shift according to contextual variables, including the degree of formality in a given communicative setting and the identity of the interlocutor. All three respondents confirmed context-dependent variation in their slang use, though the nature of that variation differed between respondents. R-01 and R-03 indicated that they employ slang exclusively in informal contexts, such as casual social media exchanges and private messaging, while avoiding it entirely in formal settings such as academic communication or professional interaction. This binary distinction between formal and informal registers is well-established in sociolinguistic theory (Labov, 1972) and reflects an internalized awareness of situational appropriateness.

R-02 demonstrated a more nuanced contextual sensitivity, indicating that meaning varies not only with the formal/informal distinction but also with the identity of the conversational partner. This observation introduces an interpersonal dimension to the analysis: even within informal settings, the semantic value of a slang term may be adjusted based on the relationship, shared knowledge, and communicative expectations between speaker and addressee. This finding aligns with Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle, which frames meaning as a co-constructed, context-sensitive phenomenon shaped by mutual recognition of communicative conventions. The pragmatic flexibility of terms such as "slay," "cringe," and "cooked" is therefore influenced not only by register but also by relational dynamics, enhancing the understanding of Gen Z slang as a socially indexical resource.

User-Driven Meaning Construction (RQ4)

The fourth research question investigated the locus of meaning construction for Gen Z slang: specifically, whether meaning is primarily determined by individual users or by broader online communities and social media networks. Table 3 summarizes respondent answers to Questions 7 and 8.

Table 3. Respondent Views on the Source of Slang Meaning (Q7 and Q8)

Respondent	Who shapes slang meaning? (Q7)	Personal deviation from community usage? (Q8)
R-01	Social media users and online communities	No (follows community norms)
R-02	Social media users and online communities	Yes (uses words with personal meaning)
R-03	Social media users and online communities	No (follows community norms)

All three respondents attributed the construction of slang meaning to social media users and online communities, a finding that corroborates the theoretical framework of user-driven meaning as elaborated through Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle. Meaning, in this model, is not assigned by institutional authority or lexicographic convention but is negotiated through the collective communicative practices of engaged online participants. The social media ecosystem, with its algorithms, viral content mechanics, and community-specific discursive norms, serves as the primary arena in which slang meanings are produced, contested, and stabilized.



A noteworthy divergence emerged in response to Question 8, which asked whether respondents had ever used these words with meanings that differed from prevailing community usage. R-01 and R-03 both reported strict adherence to community norms, identifying as participants in a shared semiotic system rather than as innovators of personal meaning. In contrast, R-02 acknowledged using these words with idiosyncratic personal meanings, representing individual semantic agency operating within, yet partially independent of, communal convention. This finding is theoretically significant, as it demonstrates that user-driven meaning construction is not uniformly collective but spans a spectrum from normative conformity to individualized interpretation. Labov's (1972) account of linguistic variation within speech communities accommodates this intra-group diversity, where individual actors may innovate at the margins even as the community maintains normative coherence.

Semantic Shift and Future Trajectories (RQ5)

The fifth research question examined the extent to which respondents perceived the meanings of these three words to have shifted from their original forms, and whether they anticipated continued semantic evolution. Table 4 presents the responses to Questions 9 and 10.

Table 4. Respondent Perceptions of Semantic Shift and Future Outlook (Q9 and Q10)

Respondent	Perceived degree of semantic shift? (Q9)	Expected meaning in 5 years (Q10)
R-01	Changed	Yes (meaning will remain stable)
R-02	Very much changed	Maybe (depends on trends and the internet)
R-03	Very much changed	Maybe (depends on trends and the internet)

The perceived degree of semantic shift was rated as highly significant by two of the three respondents (R-02 and R-03), with R-01 also acknowledging meaningful change, albeit with slightly less intensity. Collectively, these perceptions affirm that Gen Z users are reflexively aware of the gap between the historical denotative meanings of these words and their current connotative functions, an awareness that itself constitutes a form of metalinguistic competence. Ullmann's (1962) framework explains such shifts through mechanisms including amelioration (as in "slay"), pejoration (as in the dominant usage of "cooked"), and metaphorical extension (as in "cringe," which has moved from a physical action to a social-evaluative category).

Regarding future trajectories, R-02 and R-03 expressed uncertainty about the stability of these meanings, identifying internet trends and the broader digital ecosystem as the primary determinants of semantic longevity. This orientation reflects an intuitive grasp of the precarious nature of slang meaning: words that achieve rapid virality may be displaced just as quickly by successor terms as platform cultures shift and new communities emerge. R-01, by contrast, anticipated a degree of semantic stability, a minority view that may reflect differing platform experiences or a greater sense of personal investment in the current meanings of these terms. Ullmann's (1962) broader account of semantic shift as a socially driven and historically contingent process resonates with the majority outlook, supporting the conclusion that slang meanings in digitally mediated environments are intrinsically ephemeral and trend sensitive.



CONCLUSION

This study undertook a semantic analysis of three Generation Z slang terms "slay," "cringe," and "cooked" through the perceptions and communicative experiences of Gen Z users, employing Leech's (1974; 1981) theory of meaning, Ullmann's (1962) framework of semantic shift, Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle, and Labov's (1972) sociolinguistic model as the analytical foundation.

The findings confirm that all three lexical items have undergone substantial semantic transformation from their original denotative meanings. "Slay" has been ameliorated from its literal sense of killing to a marker of excellence and admirable performance. "Cringe" has shifted from denoting physical recoil to signifying social embarrassment or awkwardness, though traces of an ironic, entertaining connotation are discernible among a subset of users. "Cooked," the most semantically unstable of the three, sustains competing pejorative and ameliorative trajectories simultaneously within the Gen Z speech community, underscoring the connotative indeterminacy that characterizes dynamically evolving slang.

The study further established that slang meaning is primarily constituted through collective social media practice rather than individual lexical innovation, with the majority of respondents positioning online communities as the principal arbiters of meaning. Usage is consistently confined to informal communicative contexts, with awareness of code-switching between slang-appropriate and formal registers. Respondents broadly perceived the semantic shifts as highly significant and anticipated continued evolution contingent on digital trends, consistent with Ullmann's model of socially driven semantic change.

A key limitation of this study is its reliance on a small sample of three respondents, which, while suitable for qualitative depth, limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research should expand the participant pool and diversify platform representation. Corpus-based analysis of actual social media texts could complement questionnaire-derived perception data, enabling triangulation of user-reported meanings with patterns of naturalistic usage. Further investigation of additional Gen Z slang terms, such as "rizz," "mid," and "based," using the same dual denotative-connotative framework, would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of semantic practices within this generational speech community.

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