



Digital Discourse: A Study of the Linguistic Patterns of Internet Slang

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ABSTRACT

Language is constantly evolving, and the rate of change is directly proportional to the population size. The Internet with its vast user base thus becomes a landscape with its own lexicons. These lexicons or Internet slang are subject to distinct linguistic similarities. The purpose of this research is to understand the morphological, phonological and semantic patterns of internet slang to better facilitate communication and to map out the common trends. Seventy-two internet lexicons were selected and data ranging from their popularity, morphology, phonology and semantic change were analysed and systematically categorized. Repeating patterns such as abbreviations and consonant syllable clusters are observed among the chosen lexicons. These patterns draw a positive relation to the economy of words, as internet slang is fast paced, the lexicons that are favoured often tend to be short yet convey a message that is complex. Internet slang has also shown a tendency to be used outside of computer mediated communication and permeate in person communication of avid internet users. This research demonstrates that internet users tend to favour short, versatile slangs with rich semantic associations.

Keywords: morphology, phonology, semantics, internet slang.

INTRODUCTION

Social media is currently of importance across the globe. It is estimated that an average individual spends six and a half hours on the Internet every day [Forbes, 2024]. This equates to roughly twenty-seven percent of their day spent online. The Internet thus acts as a hub for social interaction, which is facilitated by the many social media platforms present across the web. This results in the formation and thus inevitably, the evolution of internet culture with its own distinct rules. One facet of this is the language used across the

internet and its subsequent evolution from its predecessors to the current version.

Internet slang has common characteristics such as the economy of language and ease of use, as well as morphological and phonetic patterns. Categorizing these traits will provide a gateway into understanding the formation and the latter adoption of these slang by the internet community and thus the society at large. Understanding these patterns will enable the production of more natural language models [Tagliamonte,2016]. Words tend to have associated meanings that is referential to the place of its origin, the person who made it popular or the reason why the word garnered attention. Linguistic economy is all about how we naturally streamline our speech and writing to make communication easier and clearer. It refers to our tendency to cut down on effort when we talk or write. This means we often simplify or shorten words and phrases while keeping the meaning intact. For example, we use contractions like "don't" instead of "do not," or acronyms like "ASAP" for "as soon as possible." Over time, language tends to evolve in ways that make expressions shorter and more straightforward. Research by Frontiers in Psychology highlights how internet slang in advertising captures attention due to its novelty and relatability, although overuse can sometimes impact brand perception. This study underscores how slang moves beyond casual use into commercial and persuasive contexts [Frontiers,2019].

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Internet slang evolves at a rapid pace and is highly unpredictable. The pace at which new words are adopted and disposed of is unprecedented. Growing use of Internet terminologies and colloquial slang often pose a challenge for the new users in terms of decoding the intended message/meanings of the prevalent Internet slang used online these days. This paper aims to understand the phonetics, morphological and semantic aspects of Internet slang formation.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. Decoding the phonological, morphological, and semantic aspects of new internet word formation on the internet.
2. Understanding the level of impact of internet slang in the everyday life of individuals who frequent internet slang.
3. Categorizing the morphological, phonetic, semantic patterns of the Internet Slang and finding repeating trends.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How often does an individual use internet slang outside of computer mediated communication and does it affect communication efficiency?
2. How does the frequent use of internet slang influence communication patterns in the everyday lives of individuals who regularly engage with online communities?
3. What are the key morphological, phonetic, and semantic patterns in internet slang, and how do these patterns evolve to form recurring trends in digital communication?

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Internet slang is an ever-changing onslaught of terms and phrases that are adopted by the internet as a whole or by many of its subcategories or niches. This has become an effective mode of communication online and understanding these terms is paramount to traverse the internet. Creating a model of these terms provides large language model data to better reproduce the natural language patterns of the target audience and understanding these terms and categorizing them will help future researchers to understand the nuances of the evolution of language.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study is limited by budgetary constraints as much of the statistical data is locked behind a paywall. The study is also limited by time constraints as the scope of this study is vast, but the time limit provided severely falls short to do in-depth research on each individual internet slang. The study is further limited by the lack of proper documentation of internet slang by well-reputed and peer-reviewed dictionaries. Lastly, the mode of data collection is done in person and in a discreet manner which limits the number of available participants.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language is a system of conventional spoken, manual (signed), or written symbols by means of which human beings, as members of a social group and participants in its culture, express themselves. The functions of language include communication, the expression of identity, play, imaginative expression, and emotional release [Brittanica, 2024]. Languages with larger populations tend to simplify structurally, focusing on easy-to-diffuse conventions like vocabulary, while smaller communities maintain more complex structures due to closer, more frequent interactions, enabling

the preservation of intricate linguistic features like grammar [Reali F, Chater N, Christiansen MH, 2018]. It can be thus noted that language is an integral part of human connection. Linguistic economy, or the tendency to reduce effort in speech, leads speakers to omit, abbreviate, or simplify words and structures whenever the meaning is still clear [Kapralikova,2022]. This is seen in common practices like contractions (e.g., "don't" for "do not"), acronyms (like "ASAP" for "as soon as possible"), and even in historical language changes that make expressions more concise over time. Meanwhile, linguistic efficiency focuses on achieving clarity with minimal effort, helping speakers convey information accurately without unnecessary repetition or complexity.

Slang reflects linguistic innovation and creativity, as seen in neologism formation, where speakers coin new words to capture cultural shifts, and in blending and compounding processes (e.g., "lookmaxxing," "glow up") that showcase language's flexibility [SlangSensei,2024]. Additionally, slang often involves reappropriation, with words like "ghosted" and "based" taking on new meanings to mirror societal changes, while semantic shifts, such as the broadening of "drip" from fashion to general style, highlight how words adapt to specific contexts. Digital platforms like TikTok, Twitter, and Instagram amplify these changes, spreading slang quickly through viral content and memes, which embed new terms in memorable visual and textual contexts that boost their popularity and integration into everyday language. [Nwala, M., & Tamunobelega, I, 2019].

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper analyses seventy-two curated lists of internet slang concerning their morphology and phonetics. These words are then considered on a case-by-case basis and studied - regarding their semantics and frequency of use. The frequency is analysed by using Google Trends.

METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

The research data is collected by using questionnaires. A curated list of seven slang that shows a high frequency of use along with three less frequently used slang are then implemented in questionnaires to determine the impact of internet slang outside of the internet. The questionnaires are presented in person and discreetly in an informal setting to reduce any biases that may originate.

METHODS OF DATA ANALYSIS

The participants (n=12) were asked questions regarding their usage of internet slangs in their face-to-face conversation and online conversations. Simple comparison analysis is done throughout the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

INTEGRATION OF INTERNET SLANG INTO DAILY LIFE

The participants (n=12) were asked questions regarding the use of words within the internet landscape and outside of it. The majority of participants (n=10) used at least 5 of the presented internet slang (Chart 1) and n=3 of the participants has used at least one slang in face-to-face conversation within or outside of the list of slang provided. The complete list of frequency analyses of all seventy-two words is provided in Table 1.

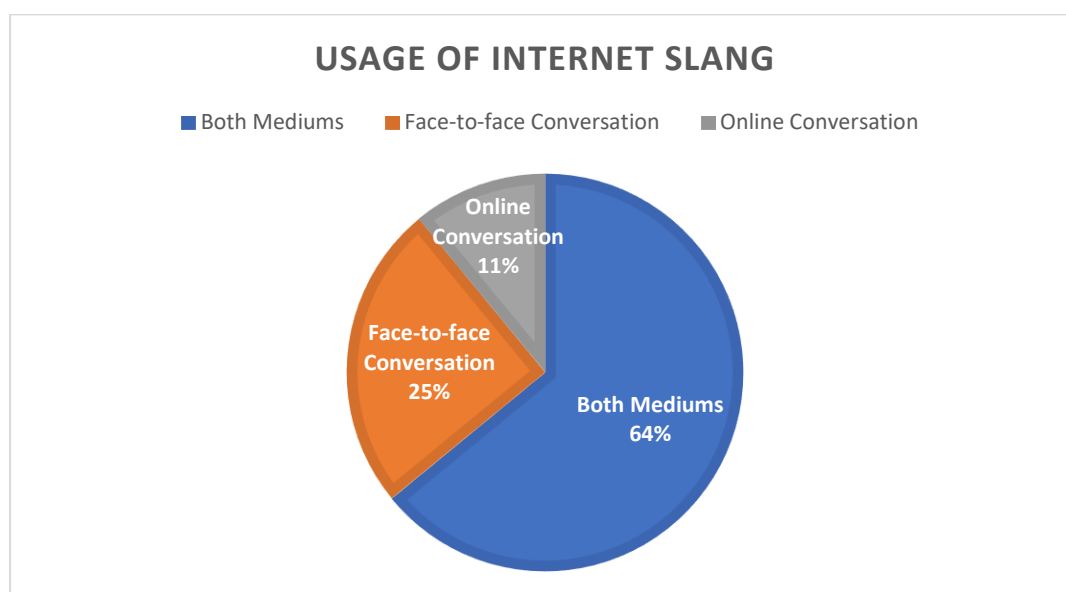


Chart 1

MORPHOLOGY OF INTERNET SLANG

The most repeating morphological characteristics of internet slang are truncations and compounding. Words such as rizz (derived from charisma) and gyatt (derived from goddamn) are examples of abbreviations whereas words such as lookmaxxing are compounded words (look+maxing). The abbreviated words tend to be further compounded into new slangs, examples of such slangs are 'W/L rizz' where both W and L are adjectives that refer to the degree of success of rizz or charisma. W/L is another example of a morphological element, words like win or lose are abbreviated into their most simplistic forms. Other examples of such words include BDE, LOL, and NPC. Words that have an onomatopoeic value to them have generally been observed to have a sustained presence over the internet landscape. Words such as yeet or yap have seen stable usage across many subcultures. The reappropriation of words and semantic shift are the last two observed morphological phenomena that contribute to the creation of internet slang. Terms such as goat, grinding, slay, flex, and basic have

undergone a semantic shift from their original meaning to a completely new one.

PHONETICS OF INTERNET SLANG

Internet slang is a particular form of speech whose development reflects the rapid and informal nature of digital communication. Characterized by its simplicity and often cryptic nature, Internet slang exhibits a range of sounds that make it unique.

One of the most unique aspects of Internet slang is the simplification of language groups. This idea reduces communication connectivity, as seen in terms such as "gr8" (meaning "good") or "w/e" (meaning "however"). In addition, Internet slang often uses short, sharp vowels to convey urgency or uncertainty. Examples include words such as "OMG" (oh my god) and "LOL" (laugh out loud). The pattern of Internet slang is usually monosyllabic or simple disyllabic, making it easier to say and remember. This simplicity is further enhanced by the use of consonants, which are generally considered less intense and more relaxed than consonants. In addition, Internet slang also often includes glides and nasal sounds, which are often considered diverse and informal. Diphthongs and long vowels also appear in some Internet slang, increasing its expressiveness.

SEMANTICS OF INTERNET SLANG

Slang is like a living, breathing part of our language that changes as our culture evolves. For many, especially younger people, slang is a way to express who they are, connect with their peers, and create a sense of belonging within their communities. Older generation tend to have difficulty understanding newer online slangs. Understanding its origin and its linguistic patterns (most importantly, the semantic patterns) will facilitate better communication. As time goes on, we can expect these terms to keep evolving, shaped by the latest social movements, technological advancements, and the world we live in. It's fascinating to see how language adapts and transforms, capturing the spirit of each generation.

The way slang evolves is a fascinating reflection of how our language changes over time. You can see different patterns in how meanings shift. For instance, some words broaden to include more contexts, while others become more specific. This flexibility in meaning often comes from metaphorization, where terms move away from their original, literal meanings to take on more abstract or emotional ones. Popular culture, especially through platforms like social media and catchy songs, plays a major role in this transformation. Some slang words emerge as symbols of empowerment or critique, highlighting social behaviours and personal traits

in a way that resonates with people. Exaggeration is another common theme—words that start off simple can take on a life of their own, intensifying descriptions or drawing attention to unique qualities. Moreover, many slang terms serve as markers of identity, helping people feel a sense of belonging to a particular group. They often carry a playful or humorous tone, making conversations lively and engaging. All these patterns show how slang adapts to the cultural currents, social interactions, and communication styles of our time, giving us a glimpse into the ever-evolving nature of language in today's society.

CONCLUSION

This paper thus conclusively proves that internet slang permeates the real world and has a direct impact in shaping our speech patterns by introducing slang into casual conversation. They can shape our manner of speech as well as the method of conveying a message as internet slang places a strong emphasis on simplicity and ease of communication. This can adversely affect an individual's ability to be verbose and articulate. We can also note that there are several overarching and prevalent morphological, phonetic and semantic similarities among internet slang.

Through morphological aspect we see that Internet slang often relies on truncation, compounding, and semantic shifts to create new words and meanings, streamlining communication and adapting familiar words to express novel or nuanced ideas. Through phonetical aspect we see that Internet slang often utilizes short, sharp vowels, glides, nasal sounds, and simple consonants, creating a sound pattern that conveys urgency, informality, and ease of pronunciation. Through semantics we see that Internet slang often undergoes semantic shifts, such as broadening, narrowing, and metaphorization, allowing words to evolve beyond their original meanings to capture new, abstract, or emotional connotations that resonate with cultural trends and group identities.

These patterns are present in all the selected lists of words with variable degrees of importance. We can thus posit that the internet hive-mind actively prefers slang with these attributes.

Recommendations

We suggest that future researchers work with a larger list of slang and refer to credible and/or peer-reviewed sources for data collection.

Collecting data from a diverse set of audience and not limited to a certain area, will eliminate unseen variables.

Table 1

Slang Term	Approximate Emergence	Peak Popularity	Phonology	Current Usage (2024)	Meaning
Bussin	2021	2022	/ 'bʌs in /	Widely used, especially in food contexts	Used to describe something exceptionally good, especially food.
Cheugy	2020	2021-2022	/ 't/'tʃu:gi/ʃ u:gi/	Still used, slightly declining	Refers to something that is out of date or trying too hard to be trendy.
No Cap (Cap)	2017	2018-2019	/ noʊ / / kæp /	Continues to be widely used	"No cap" means "no lie" or "for real."
Rizz	2022	2023	/ rɪz /	Popular among Gen Z	Refers to someone's ability to attract or charm others, especially in a romantic context.
Goat	2018	2019-2020	/ goʊt /	Steady use in sports and entertainment	Used to describe someone who is the best in their field.
Slay	2015	2016-2017	/ sleɪ /	Continues to be	To perform exceptionally

				popular	ly well or to look fantastic.
Stan	2014	2015-2016	/ stæn /	Maintains steady use	An obsessive fan.
Lit	2014	2015-2017	/ lit /	Still commonly used	Exciting, excellent, or intoxicated.
Vibing	2015	2016-2018	/ vaɪbɪŋ /	Continues to be widely used	Enjoying the current atmosphere or feeling relaxed.
Fam	2014	2014-present	/ fæm /	Evergreen usage	Close friends considered as family.
Glow Up	2018	2019-2020	/ glou / /ʌp/	Remains popular	A significant improvement in appearance, confidence, or overall life.
Hits Different	2021	2022	/ hits / ər ənt, rənt /	'dɪf 'dɪf Increasing usage	Something feels uniquely impactful or resonates in a new way.
Simp	2019	2020-2021	/ simp /	Remains prevalent	Someone who is overly attentive or submissive

					to someone else, often without reciprocation.
Slaps	2017	2018-2019	/slæp/	Steady use, especially for music	Used to describe something excellent, especially music.
Tea	2014	2014-present	/ti:/	Consistently popular	Gossip or juicy information.
Ghosted	2014	2015-2017	/'gəʊ.stɪd/	Steady use	Suddenly cutting off all communication without explanation.
Giving	2016	2017-2018	/gɪvɪŋ/	Continues to be used	Conveying a particular impression or vibe.
High key / Low key	2018	2019-2020	/'haɪ'ki / / 'ləʊ'ki /	Remains in use	"High key" means something is obvious or intended to be seen; "low key" means something is subtle or understated.
Salty	2016	2017-2018	/'sɒl ti /	Still widely	Bitter or upset over

				used	something minor.
Sending me	2021	2022	/ sendɪŋ //mi:/	Popular in memes and reactions	Something is making the speaker laugh or react strongly.
Sus	2018	2019-2020	/sʌs/	Continues to be widely used	Something or someone appears deceitful or untrustworthy.
Bet	2017	2018-2019	/bét/	Steady use	Agreement or affirmation; similar to "okay" or "sure."
W (L)	2018	2019-2020	/W //(L)/	Continues in gaming and social media	Used to indicate a win or loss in a situation.
Big Yikes	2021	2022	/,bɪg//'yaɪks/	Increasing usage in expressing discomfort	A stronger expression of embarrassment or discomfort.
Alpha	2015	2016-2017	/ælfə/	Steady use in social hierarchies	Refers to someone dominant or a leader, often in a social hierarchy.
Sigma	2020	2021	/'sɪgmə/	Niche usage	Describes someone

					who operates outside traditional social hierarchies, often seen as independent or lone wolves.
Beta	2015	2016-2017	/'beɪtə/	Steady use, often paired with alpha	Refers to someone perceived as submissive or not dominant.
Blud	2018	2019	/blʌd/	Primarily UK English usage	Friend or mate, commonly used in British slang.
Bougie	2016	2017-2018	/'bu:ʒi/	Steady use, especially in lifestyle contexts	Describes someone who aspires to a higher social status or enjoys luxuries.
Pookie	2014	2014-present	/'pu:ki/	Evergreen as a term of endearment	A cute nickname for a loved one.
Ate	2019	2020	/eɪt/	Declining usage	To excel or dominate in something.

Aura	2018	2019-2020	/ˈɔːrə/	Steady use	The distinctive atmosphere or energy someone gives off.
Based	2016	2017-2018	/beɪst/	Declining but still used	Being true to oneself without regard for societal expectations.
Basic	2014	2015-2016	/ˈbeɪsɪk/	Steady use, though less trendy now	Describes someone or something as mainstream or unoriginal.
BDE	2018	2019-2020	/biː diː iː/	Niche usage, popular in specific contexts	Confident demeanor without arrogance.
Glazing	2020	2021	/ˈgleɪzɪŋ/	Limited usage	Enhancing one's appearance, often through makeup or style.
Brainrot	2019	2020	/ˈbreɪn rɒt/	Niche and sporadic usage	Excessive preoccupation with something to the point of it affecting one's thinking.

Grindin g	2016	2017- 2018	/'graɪndɪŋ/	Steady use, especially in work contexts	Working hard, especially towards a goal
Cap	2017	2018- 2019	/kæp/	Continues to be widely used	A lie or false statement.
Cook	2017	2018- 2019	/kʊk/	Steady use, especially in creative contexts	To fabricate or create something, often a lie.
Caught in 4k	2018	2019	/kɔ:t ɪn fɔ:keɪ/	Limited, niche usage	Being caught in the act with clear evidence.
Cooked	2017	2018- 2019	/kʊkt/	Steady use in describing intoxication	Being under the influence of drugs or alcohol.
Clapbac k	2016	2017- 2018	/'klæp,bæk/	Steady use, especially in social media	A quick, sharp response to criticism or an insult.
Dank	2015	2016- 2017	/dæŋk/	Popular in meme culture	High-quality or cool, especially regarding memes.
Ded	2020	2021	/ded/	Viral usage, especially on TikTok	Used to express something that is extremely

					funny or shocking.
Delulu (Solulu)	2021	2022	/dɛˈluːluː/ (solulu: /sɒˈluːluː/)	Niche and meme-specific usage	Being out of touch with reality or having unrealistic beliefs.
Drip	2016	2017-2018	/driːp/	Steady use in fashion contexts	Stylish or fashionable appearance.
Era	2018	2019	ˈɛrə/	Steady use, often historical or stylistic	A distinctive period characterized by particular styles or trends.
Fanum Tax	2023	2023-2024	ˈfæ.nʌm tæks/	Very niche, specific to certain online communities	A joke term implying an arbitrary or unfair charge.
Fire	2015	2016-2017	ˈfaɪər/	Steady use, especially in music contexts	Something excellent or exciting.
Flex	2015	2016-2018	/fleks/	Steady use, especially in social media	To show off or boast.
Gucci	2015	2016-2018	ˈguːtʃi/	Steady use, synonymy	Good, cool, or going

				mous with "good"	well.
Gyatt	2023	2024	/gaɪ'æ/	Emergin g, limited to specific online commu nities	An exclamatio n or term of excitement, often about attractiven ess.
Ick	2021	2022	/ɪk/	Limited and context- specific usage	Disgust or aversion.
Jit	2015	2016- 2017	/dʒɪt/	Primaril y used in specific regions	A young person or child.
Karen	2018	2019- 2020	/'kærən/	Steady use as a pejorati ve term	A pejorative term for an entitled or demanding person, typically a middle- aged woman.
Lookma xxing	2022	2023	/'lɒkmæksɪ ŋ/	Niche usage, particul arly in online forums	Efforts to improve one's physical appearance to the fullest extent.
Mew	2023	2024	/mju:/	Emergin g, limited usage	Can refer to expressing surprise or excitement;

					also a nickname.
Moots	2021	2022	/mu:ts/	Limited, niche usage	Friends or close acquaintances.
NPC	2017	2018-2019	/ɛn pi: si:/	Steady use in gaming and online discourse	Used derogatorily to describe someone as lacking independent thought.
Ohio	2014	2014-present	/oo'haiou/	Consistently used in memes and cultural references	Often referenced in memes to represent something boring or ordinary.
Out of pocket	2016	2017-2018	/aot əv 'pɒkɪt/	Steady use, especially in American English	Behaving inappropriately or beyond accepted norms.
Glizzy	2017	2018-2019	/'glɪzi/	Steady use, especially in food contexts	A hot dog; sometimes used to refer to a gun.
Owned	2014	2015-2016	/oʊnd/	Steady use in gaming and online forums	Dominated or defeated someone, often humiliated them.
Pick me	2019	2020	/pɪk mi:/	Steady	Someone

				use in seeking social attention contexts or approval, often by distancing themselves from others.	
Ratio	2019	2020-2021	/'reɪʃi,ʊʊ/	Steady use, especially on Twitter	When replies or comments outnumber likes, indicating disapproval.
Roman Empire	2020	2021-2022	/'rɒmən 'ɛm.paiə/	Niche, often in meme or historical contexts	Used metaphorically in memes and discussions about vastness or historical impact.
Skibidi	2023	2024	/'skɪbɪdi/	Emerging, tied to specific viral content	Associated with the song's dance and meme culture.
Tweaking	2017	2018-2019	/'twi:kɪŋ/	Steady use in describing erratic behavior	Acting erratically or being under the influence of stimulants.
Yeet	2018	2019-2020	/ji:t/	Explosive viral growth, remains	To throw something with force; also an

				popular	exclamation of excitement.
Yap	2016	2017-2018	/jæp/	Steady use, especially in casual conversation	To talk incessantly or chatter.
Zesty	2023	2024	/'zɛsti/	Emerging, limited usage	Lively, exciting, or flavourful.

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