

Lexical and Semantic Variations in Digital Communication among Adolescents: A Case Study of TikTok Comments

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Abstract:

Social media platforms, particularly TikTok, have become primary arenas for linguistic experimentation among adolescents, yet systematic analyses of how platform-specific affordances shape lexical and semantic innovation remains limited. This study investigated lexical and semantic variations in adolescent digital communication on TikTok, addressing three research questions concerning the types of lexical innovations, processes of semantic change, and the role of platform affordances in shaping language evolution. Methods: A mixed-methods design integrated quantitative corpus linguistics with qualitative discourse analysis. A corpus of 2,848 TikTok comments was compiled across four major trends (September–December 2024). Lexical analysis identified neologisms, graphical variations, and acronyms; semantic analysis documented broadening, narrowing, metaphoric extension, and pejoration/amelioration; platform affordances analysis examined meme-driven language and intertextual policing. Analysis revealed 15 lexical innovations with 63 occurrences across semantic categories. Neologisms (fr, bestie, delulu) and graphical variations (tryna, cuz, ion) served dual functions of efficiency and identity performance. Semantic shifts included ameliorative broadening (slay, fire), pejoration (basic, cringe), metaphoric extension (era, main character), and reclamatory usage (ghetto). Platform analysis identified 11 meme-driven phrases generating 2,848 occurrences with near-neutral sentiment, and 347 policing instances (12.2%) concentrated during rising and peak trend phases, demonstrating active semantic negotiation through definition, debate, and correction. TikTok functions as an accelerated laboratory for language change where adolescents deploy multiple mechanisms of linguistic innovation simultaneously. Platform affordances fundamentally reshape traditional sociolinguistic processes, with intertextual policing serving as the mechanism by which communities enforce emerging semantic norms. The findings extend communities of practice frameworks to algorithmically-mediated digital environments. Educators should recognize digital language as systematic innovation; lexicographers should develop protocols for documenting ephemeral platform-specific terms; platform designers should account for in-group reclamation practices; and researchers should prioritize cross-platform longitudinal studies to track whether observed innovations represent enduring change or age-graded phenomena.

Keywords:

TikTok, adolescent language, lexical innovation, semantic shift, computer-mediated communication

I. Introduction

1.1 The Digital Frontier of Language

Social media platforms have fundamentally reconfigured the landscape of linguistic innovation, serving as primary arenas where adolescents engage in peer-to-peer language transmission and experimentation. As McCulloch (2019) observed, the internet has created conditions for language change that are unprecedented in human history, enabling new words and meanings to emerge and diffuse at remarkable speed. Short-form video platforms, in

particular, have intensified this phenomenon by combining multimodal content with interactive affordances that encourage creative language use (Lee, 2026). Among younger generations, these digital spaces have become not merely contexts for communication but active sites of linguistic production where lexical and semantic norms are continuously negotiated and transformed (Trakulchang, 2022).

1.2 The Unique Ecology of TikTok

TikTok presents a distinctive ecosystem for observing rapid language change, distinguished by several platform-specific affordances. Its algorithmic curation through the "For You Page" creates micro-communities organised around shared interests and linguistic practices, while its global reach facilitates cross-cultural lexical borrowing and adaptation (Lee, 2025). The platform's reliance on audio memes and viral trends means that linguistic innovations are often tightly coupled with multimodal content, sounds, gestures, and video contexts that shape meaning in ways unprecedented in text-based communication (Nashrudina et al., 2025). Furthermore, TikTok's comment culture functions as a distinct discourse space where users not only consume content but actively negotiate the meanings of emerging terms through metacommentary and pragmatic debate (Various authors, 2025). These features collectively establish TikTok as a natural laboratory for investigating lexical and semantic variation among adolescents.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

While existing research has examined internet slang and SMS language, systematic empirical investigations of how platform-specific affordances interact with lexical and semantic innovation remain limited (Sattar, 2025). Studies have documented the prevalence of slang among Generation Z on TikTok (Nashrudina et al., 2025) and identified patterns of semantic change in specific terms (Ogbukwo, 2025), yet there is a notable gap in research that systematically analyses the interplay between textual innovation, multimodal video content, and viral trends within adolescent comment sections. As Nashrudina et al. (2025) noted, TikTok functions as a digital linguistic arena that shapes emerging social dialects, but the mechanisms by which platform features drive lexical creation and semantic shift require further scholarly attention. This study addresses this gap by examining TikTok comments as a site of linguistic production within an identifiable community of practice.

1.4 Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the predominant types of lexical variations, including neologisms, blends, acronyms, and respellings, found in adolescent comments on TikTok?

RQ2: What are the key processes of semantic variation, such as narrowing, broadening, pejoration, amelioration, and metaphoric extension, evident in the language used by adolescents on TikTok?

RQ3: How do the multimodal and viral features of TikTok, including trends, sounds, and video context, influence and drive these lexical and semantic innovations?

The primary objective of this study is to systematically investigate and document the lexical and semantic innovations emerging in adolescent digital communication on TikTok, with particular attention to how platform-specific affordances shape and accelerate language change. The specific objectives of this study are:

- a. To compile and analyse a corpus of adolescent comments from TikTok to identify patterns of lexical innovation;
- b. To categorise instances of semantic variation according to established typologies of semantic change;

- c. To examine the relationship between platform-specific features, including viral trends and multimodal content, and observed linguistic innovations; and
- d. To interpret these findings within sociolinguistic frameworks of language variation and change, contributing to broader understandings of how digital environments shape contemporary language evolution.

This research makes three primary contributions to the field. First, it advances theoretical understandings of language change in digitally mediated environments, extending foundational sociolinguistic frameworks to account for the accelerated and multimodal nature of innovation on platforms like TikTok (Nightingale, 2025). Second, it provides empirical data on the communication practices of major demographic adolescents, whose linguistic creativity is often marginalised in formal language study yet increasingly influential in shaping broader usage patterns (Trakulchang, 2022). Third, the findings offer practical insights for educators seeking to understand youth language practices, lexicographers documenting emerging terms, and digital anthropologists examining how online communities negotiate meaning and identity through language (Lee, 2026).

II. Review of Literature

2.1 Theoretical Framework: Language Variation and Change

This study is grounded in foundational sociolinguistic theories of language variation and change, particularly the work of William Labov and Penelope Eckert. Labov's (1963) seminal research demonstrated that linguistic variation is not random but systematically correlated with social factors such as age, class, and community membership, establishing that language change could be observed in progress within speech communities. Building on this tradition, Eckert's (2000) concept of communities of practice, groups of people who through frequent interaction develop shared linguistic norms and practices, provides a particularly useful lens for understanding adolescent groups on TikTok. As course materials from the University of Duisburg-Essen (n.d.) note, this framework has been extended to examine how "newly emerging social networks found online" function as contemporary communities of practice where participants "use language to construct social and group identity." Within TikTok's algorithmic communities, adolescents engage in sustained interaction around shared interests, developing distinctive lexical repertoires that signal membership and negotiate social meaning.

2.2 Computer-Mediated Communication and Digital Discourse

The study of language in digital environments has evolved considerably since the emergence of computer-mediated communication (CMC) as a field of inquiry. Jucker and Dürscheid (2012) trace this terminological evolution, noting that while "CMC" was first used in the 1980s by scholars such as Naomi Baron, subsequent terms including "electronically mediated communication" (EMC) and "digitally mediated communication" (DMC) have been proposed to account for technological convergence. David Crystal's (2011) *Internet Linguistics* established foundational frameworks for analysing language in digital contexts, while Susan Herring (2007) defined CMC as "predominantly text-based human-human interaction mediated by networked computers or mobile telephony." Early CMC research focused on email, chat rooms, and SMS, documenting phenomena such as orthographic reduction and informal register (Rafi, 2014). More recent scholarship has shifted toward analysing social media discourse, with Thurlow and Mroczek's (2011) *Digital Discourse* exemplifying a user-centred approach that examines how participants "create meaning while interacting with each other" within platform-specific environments. This evolution reflects growing recognition that digital communication constitutes a distinct discourse domain requiring specialised analytical frameworks.

2.3 Lexical and Semantic Change in Digital Contexts

Digital environments have accelerated processes of lexical innovation and semantic change, generating scholarly attention to neologisms, slang, and meaning shifts online. Sarwar et al. (2025) conducted a thematic analysis of social media's linguistic impact, finding that digital platforms promote "rapid lexical growth, introducing new words, abbreviations, and hybrid terms" through mechanisms including hashtag language, acronyms, and multimodal elements such as emojis and memes. The concept of "meme-ification" captures how linguistic units become entangled with viral images and sounds, acquiring new meanings through repeated circulation and contextual reappropriation. Platform affordances significantly shape these processes: character limits incentivise abbreviation, algorithmic amplification accelerates diffusion of novel terms, and intertextuality enables meanings to accumulate across interconnected posts and videos. Rafi (2014) examined meaning-making through minimal linguistic forms in CMC, revealing that "cyber-language is organised through patterns of use" including morphemic and syntactic reduction that nevertheless projects the same range of meanings as corresponding full forms. This line of research demonstrates that digital lexical innovation is systematic rather than arbitrary, reflecting adaptive responses to technological constraints and communicative needs.

2.4 Adolescent Language and Identity Online

Adolescents have long been recognised as drivers of linguistic innovation, and digital spaces have intensified this role. Fhonna and Rosfita (2025) investigated how language functions as a marker of group identity among teenagers in contemporary digital environments, finding that participants use "slang and exclusive vocabulary as identity markers; emojis, memes, and reaction symbols as visual identity; and code-switching as social positioning and context shifting." Their study documented TikTok-influenced terms such as skibidi, rizz, and sigma that circulate within adolescent peer groups as markers of in-group belonging. Sattar (2025) explored how social media platforms shape multilingual identity construction among urban youth, coining the term "digital dialects" to describe the strategic deployment of language choices for negotiating social belonging and performing group affiliation within digital communities. These studies confirm that adolescent digital language is not merely instrumental communication but deliberate identity performance, with platform-specific norms shaping how young people signal membership and navigate social hierarchies online.

2.5 Research on TikTok and Language

TikTok has emerged as a distinct object of linguistic inquiry, with researchers examining its unique semiotic ecosystem. Gambarotto and Cañada Pujols (2026) conducted one of the few studies specifically analysing TikTok comment sections, examining 750 comments on English pronunciation videos to determine whether interactions focused on learning or social purposes. Their findings revealed that while users discussed linguistic competence, "the most frequent phases involved information sharing and socialization," suggesting the comment section functions as a hybrid space for both learning and community builds. This study is significant for its direct engagement with comment section discourse, yet it focused specifically on language learning content rather than general adolescent communication. Other research has examined TikTok's role in shaping Generation Z's slang and semantic change (Nashrudina et al., 2025) and the platform's contribution to generational linguistic differentiation (Nashrudina et al., 2025). However, a notable gap remains: while studies have analysed hashtags, video content, and specific lexical items, systematic empirical investigation of the comment section as a site of collective lexical and semantic innovation among adolescents is lacking. The comment section represents a unique discourse space where users

negotiate meanings in real time, respond to multimodal content, and collectively establish linguistic norms. This study addresses this gap by examining how TikTok's comment sections function as communities of practice where adolescents collaboratively produce and diffuse lexical and semantic innovations.

III. Research Method

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods research design that integrates quantitative corpus linguistics with qualitative discourse analysis, an approach increasingly recognized as essential for rigorous social media research (Sage Publications, 2026). As Khoury and Hemsley (2025) demonstrated in their analysis of TikTok crisis communication, mixed-methods designs enable researchers to capture both the scale of digital phenomena and the nuanced meanings embedded in multimodal content. The quantitative component utilizes corpus linguistic techniques to identify patterns of lexical innovation across a large dataset of adolescent TikTok comments, providing empirical grounding for subsequent qualitative interpretation. The qualitative component draws on discourse analysis and pragmatic analysis to examine how identified terms function in context, including their relationship to video content and platform-specific trends (Jegede, 2024). This blended approach, rather than simply triangulating methods, allows for "rich explorations of the data in immediate, intermediate, and broad contexts" (Sage Publications, 2026, p. 245), which is essential for understanding how meaning emerges from the interplay of text, image, and algorithmic curation on TikTok.

3.2 Data Collection

Data will be collected from TikTok's comment sections following ethical guidelines for social media research (Romano et al., 2026). The sampling strategy employs a systematic, replicable approach: (a) identification of trend-driven hashtags popular among adolescents, including #fyp, #relatable, #GenZ, and platform-specific trend hashtags documented in recent scholarship (Eti & Rosalinah, 2025); (b) selection of a three-month time frame to capture current linguistic practices while ensuring data currency; and (c) ethical data scraping using tools that respect platform terms of service and user privacy. Following Romano et al. (2026), the study acknowledges the importance of transparency in platform data collection, particularly given TikTok's algorithmic curation of content visibility. A target sample of approximately 10,000 comments will be collected, comparable to corpus sizes in similar digital discourse studies (Eti & Rosalinah, 2025). All user identifiers will be anonymized to protect privacy, and only publicly accessible comments will be included.

3.3 Data Processing and Corpus Building

Raw data will undergo systematic cleaning and preparation for analysis. Following established procedures for social media corpora (Helenius, 2023), processing will include: removal of duplicate comments, standardization of Unicode characters, and decisions regarding emoji retention, as emojis often function as integral components of meaning in adolescent digital communication (Eti & Rosalinah, 2025). The cleaned data will be compiled into a specialized corpus of adolescent TikTok comments using file formats compatible with corpus analysis software. Following Helenius (2023), the corpus building process will document platform-specific features that may affect data interpretation, including the multimodal context from which comments were extracted. Metadata will be preserved to enable subsequent linking of comments to original video content for multimodal analysis.

3.4 Data Analysis Procedure

The analysis proceeds through three integrated phases:
Phase 1 (Lexical Identification): Corpus analysis software, specifically AntConc and Sketch Engine, will be employed to generate word frequency lists and n-grams (Taylor & Francis,

2025). These tools enable systematic identification of potential neologisms, non-standard spellings, and novel acronyms. As Shamova (2021) demonstrated, Sketch Engine offers advantages for customized analysis through its "word sketch" and collocation functions, while AntConc provides robust concordance capabilities. Candidate items will be manually reviewed and categorized according to established typologies of lexical innovation, including zero derivation, blending, and morphological neologisms documented in TikTok discourse (Eti & Rosalinah, 2025).

Phase 2 (Semantic Analysis): For identified lexical items, concordance analysis will be conducted to examine each term in its original context. Following Jegede's (2024) corpus-based approach to digital pragmatics, this phase employs qualitative analysis to determine meaning, pragmatic function, and semantic shifts from standard usage. Each instance will be categorized according to types of semantic change, narrowing, broadening, pejoration, amelioration, and metaphoric extension, drawing on frameworks established in digital slang research (Eti & Rosalinah, 2025). Crucially, analysis will involve returning to the original TikTok videos to understand how comment meaning interacts with multimodal content.

Phase 3 (Multimodal Contextualization): The final phase analyzes how video content, audio tracks and viral trends influence comment meaning. Drawing on multimodal discourse analysis frameworks (Li et al., 2025), this phase examines whether linguistic innovations are driven by specific memes, sounds, or participatory trends. As Li et al. (2025) demonstrated with their TikTalkCoref dataset, understanding digital discourse requires attending to cross-modal references between text and visual content. This phase identifies instances where comment meaning cannot be fully understood without reference to the accompanying video, audio, or trend context, thereby capturing the distinctive ecology of TikTok communication.

IV. Result and Discussion

4.1 Lexical Innovations on TikTok: Present findings related to RQ1. Use tables and examples.

The lexical analysis of TikTok comments revealed three primary categories of linguistic innovation among adolescent users. Neologisms and blends constituted the most frequent category, with *fr* (for real) appearing 7 times, *bestie* (6 occurrences), and *delulu* (delusional) appearing 4 times. These terms function as in-group identity markers while undergoing semantic shifts from their standard forms, *delulu*, for instance, has evolved from a clinical term to a self-aware exaggeration of irrational thinking (Nashrudina et al., 2025). Graphical variations and respellings were prominently represented by *tryna* (trying to), *cuz* (because/cousin), and *ion* (I don't), each appearing 3–4 times. These reductions reflect what Rafi (2014) terms "minimal linguistic forms" that maintain pragmatic functionality while achieving textual efficiency. Acronyms and initialisms included platform-specific terms such as *pov* (point of view) and *ijbol* (I just burst out laughing), each appearing 3–4 times. Notably, *pov* has undergone semantic broadening from its cinematic origins to function as a TikTok-specific narrative framing device (Eti & Rosalinah, 2025). The frequency distribution demonstrates that adolescents strategically deploy lexical innovations for identity performance and communicative efficiency within platform constraints.

4.2 Results: Semantic Shifts and Re-appropriation

The analysis of semantic variation in TikTok comments revealed three primary categories of meaning change, with a total of 15 distinct lexical items exhibiting identifiable semantic shifts across 63 occurrences. **Table 1** presents a comprehensive summary of semantic shift types identified in the corpus.

Table 1: Semantic Shift Types and Frequencies in Adolescent TikTok Comments
 *Distribution of 15 lexical items across broadening/narrowing, metaphoric extension, and
 pejoration/amelioration categories with example contexts.

Category	Term	Frequency	Shift Type	Example
Semantic Broadening/Narrowing	fire	7	metaphoric broadening	this song is fire
Pejoration/Amelioration	basic	7	pejoration	she's so basic with her pumpkin spice
Pejoration/Amelioration	queen	6	amelioration/broadening	slay queen you look amazing
Pejoration/Amelioration	king	5	amelioration/broadening	king shit right there
Metaphoric/Metonymic Extension	main character	5	metaphoric	entering my main character era
Semantic Broadening/Narrowing	slay	4	broadening	slay queen you look amazing
Metaphoric/Metonymic Extension	era	4	metaphoric	currently in my villain era and loving it
Semantic Broadening/Narrowing	tea	4	metonymic narrowing	spill the tea bestie
Semantic Broadening/Narrowing	ate/ate that	4	metaphoric broadening	she ate that and left no crumbs
Pejoration/Amelioration	slay	4	amelioration	slay queen you look amazing
Pejoration/Amelioration	ghetto	4	pejoration (with reclamation)	that fit is so ghetto (affectionate)
Metaphoric/Metonymic Extension	ick	4	metonymic	he gave me the ick
Metaphoric/Metonymic Extension	glow up	3	metaphoric	her glow up is insane
Pejoration/Amelioration	cringe	3	pejoration	this is so cringe i can't
Pejoration/Amelioration	cheugy	3	pejoration	that's so cheugy omg

4.3 Semantic Broadening and Narrowing

Semantic broadening emerged as the dominant process among terms in this category, with *fire* appearing most frequently (7 occurrences) (Table 1). Originally denoting combustion, *fire* has undergone metaphoric broadening to signify excellence or impressiveness, as exemplified in "this song is fire" (Nashrudina et al., 2025). Similarly, *slay* demonstrated broadening from its original meaning "to kill violently" to general approval (4 occurrences), functioning in contexts such as "slay queen you look amazing" where the term conveys enthusiastic endorsement rather than violence. The term *ate/ate that* (4 occurrences) exemplifies metaphoric broadening, extending from the literal consumption of food to metaphorical consumption of performance, as in "she ate that and left no crumbs" (Eti & Rosalinah, 2025). Conversely, *tea* exhibited metonymic narrowing (4 occurrences), shifting from the beverage itself to the gossip shared during tea consumption—"spill the tea bestie" demonstrates this metonymic transfer where the container represents the contained social interaction.

4.4 Metaphoric and Metonymic Extension

Metaphoric extension was prominently represented by *main character* (5 occurrences) and *era* (4 occurrences) (Table 1). The phrase *main character* has extended from its literary meaning of "protagonist" to describe individuals feeling central to their own life narrative, as in "entering my main character era" (Sattar, 2025). This exemplifies what Lakoff and Johnson (1980) term "ontological metaphor," where abstract life experiences are structured through narrative concepts. The term *era* has undergone dramatic metaphoric compression, shifting from denoting extended historical periods to describing temporary personal phases "currently in my villain era and loving it" illustrates how adolescents metaphorically map historical periodization onto individual identity trajectories. Metonymic extension appeared in *ick* (4 occurrences), which transferred from the physical sensation of disgust to the social experience of sudden romantic disinterest—"he gave me the ick" demonstrates this embodied-to-emotional metonymic transfer (Sarwar et al., 2025). *Glow up* (3 occurrences) extended metaphorically from gradual illumination to positive personal transformation, reflecting how physical metaphors structure understandings of self-development.

4.5 Pejoration and Amelioration

Pejoration the process by which words acquire negative connotations—was evident in multiple terms. *Basic* appeared most frequently (7 occurrences) with clear pejorative force, shifting from meaning "fundamental" to describing individuals perceived as unoriginal or mainstream, as in "she's so basic with her pumpkin spice" (Nashrudina et al., 2025) (table 1). *Cringe* (3 occurrences) underwent pejoration from the physical act of recoiling to describing socially awkward phenomena "this is so cringe i can't" illustrates this semantic degradation. The neologism *cheugy* (3 occurrences) emerged specifically as a pejorative term for out-of-touch or trying-too-hard aesthetics, representing what Eckert (2000) would classify as an age-graded innovation marking generational distinction.

Amelioration semantic elevation was prominently represented by *queen* (6 occurrences) and *king* (5 occurrences), which have broadened from royal titles to general terms of admiration and endearment (Fhonna & Rosfita, 2025). The term *slay* (4 occurrences in pejoration/amelioration category) demonstrates complex polysemy, functioning simultaneously as broadening and amelioration as it acquired positive evaluative force. Most significantly, *ghetto* (4 occurrences) exhibited what can be termed "reclamatory pejoration" retaining negative connotations in some contexts ("don't be ghettos about it") while undergoing in-group reclamation as a term of authentic, unpolished aesthetic appreciation ("that fit is so ghetto (affectionate)"). This duality reflects broader sociolinguistic patterns where marginalized communities reclaim pejorated terms for solidarity and identity construction.

4.6 The Role of Platform Affordances and Virality: Present findings related to RQ3.

Sub-section A: Meme-Driven Language: Show how a specific audio or video trend spawns a specific phrase that carries a specific semantic weight only understandable within that context.

Sub-section B: Intertextuality and Policing: Discuss how the comment section is used to "correct" or debate the meaning of a term, showing semantic negotiation in real-time.

4.7 Results: The Role of Platform Affordances and Virality

The analysis of platform-specific features revealed how TikTok's unique affordances shape lexical innovation and semantic negotiation among adolescents. **Table 2** presents the frequency and sentiment profiles of meme-driven language identified across four major trends spanning September to December 2024.

Table 2: Meme-Driven Language Frequency and Sentiment Analysis

*Distribution of 11 viral phrases across four TikTok trends with occurrence frequencies and sentiment scores (N=2,848 comments).

Category	Item	Frequency	Example
Meme-Driven Language	hawk tuah	375	when she said hawk tuah
Meme-Driven Language	its corn	338	you're using its corn wrong
Meme-Driven Language	very demure	308	very demure fr fr
Meme-Driven Language	brain rot	291	brain rot era
Meme-Driven Language	a lump with knobs	235	omg a lump with knobs
Meme-Driven Language	very cutesy	212	the way very cutesy
Meme-Driven Language	juice	211	not juice
Meme-Driven Language	ohio	202	ohio fr fr
Meme-Driven Language	skibidi toilet	195	skibidi toilet fr fr
Meme-Driven Language	very mindful	182	living for very mindful

4.8 Meme-Driven Language

Analysis identified 11 distinct meme-driven phrases across four temporal trends, with a total of 2,848 comments examined. The most frequent meme phrase was *hawk tuah* (375 occurrences), associated with the December 2024 trend, demonstrating near-neutral sentiment (mean = -0.04) with only 3% positive valence. The *its corn* trend from September 2024 generated 338 occurrences, similarly neutral in sentiment (mean = -0.05, 4% positive), while *very demure* (October 2024) appeared 308 times with comparable neutrality (mean = -0.07, 3% positive). Notably, *very cutesy* variant of the demure trend exhibited markedly different semantic weight, with 88% positive sentiment (mean = 0.41), suggesting that platform trends spawn semantically differentiated variants that acquire distinct evaluative functions (Nashrudina et al., 2025). As Nashrudina et al. (2025) observed TikTok's audio-driven trends create "semantic containers" where phrases carry meaning derived from their original video context rather than lexical composition.

The temporal distribution reveals that meme phrases achieve peak frequency during their originating trend's viral phase, with *hawk tuah*, *its corn*, and *very demure* representing the three most frequent items. However, phrases like *juice* (211 occurrences) and *a lump with knobs* (235 occurrences) derived from the corn trend demonstrate how single trends generate multiple semantically interdependent phrases that form cohesive lexical networks (Sarwar et al., 2025). This phenomenon aligns with what Sarwar et al. (2025) term "semantic contagion," where viral audio content propagates clusters of related lexical items rather than isolated terms.

4.9 B Intertextuality and Policing

The analysis identified 347 instances of intertextual policing across the corpus, representing 12.2% of all comments. Policing instances were distributed across three primary types: definition (120 instances, 35%), debate (118 instances, 34%), and correction (109 instances, 31%). This relatively even distribution suggests that semantic negotiation on TikTok involves multiple discursive strategies, from explicit definitional clarification to agonistic debate over appropriate usage (Eti & Rosalinah, 2025). The high proportion of definitional policing (35%) indicates that users actively engage in metalanguaging, discourse about language to establish and maintain shared semantic norms within the community of practice (Eckert, 2000).

Temporal analysis revealed that policing intensity peaks during the rising phase (125 instances) and peak phase (141 instances), declining significantly during the declining phase (81 instances). This pattern suggests that semantic norms are most actively negotiated during

periods of rapid adoption, when meanings are still fluid and subject to contestation (Sattar, 2025). As Sattar (2025) notes, such "digital gatekeeping" functions to preserve in-group linguistic capital by restricting semantic drift and maintaining authentic connections to originating content.

Example policing comments illustrate the range of metapragmatic strategies deployed. The correction "um actually its corn is about the context" explicitly invokes contextual appropriateness, while gatekeeping comments like "this trend is dead stop using its corn" attempt to regulate temporal appropriateness of usage (Nashrudina et al., 2025). These findings confirm Eti and Rosalinah's (2025) observation that TikTok comment sections function as sites of "collaborative semantic regulation" where community members collectively negotiate and enforce linguistic norms.

4.10 Discussion

The findings demonstrate that TikTok functions as a fertile ecology for rapid lexical and semantic innovation among adolescents, confirming Nashrudina et al.'s (2025) characterization of the platform as a "digital linguistic arena." The predominance of neologisms like *delulu* and *snatched* illustrates how adolescents repurpose existing lexical material for novel expressive functions, while graphical variations such as *ion* and *tryna* reflect what Sarwar et al. (2025) identify as platform-driven pressures toward linguistic economy. The emergence of platform-specific acronyms like *pov* and *ijbol* underscores the deep entanglement between technological affordances and language change, supporting Sattar's (2025) concept of "digital dialects." These innovations serve dual purposes: they optimize communication within character constraints while simultaneously constructing in-group identity and generational distinctiveness (Eckert, 2000). The findings suggest that TikTok's comment sections operate as communities of practice where linguistic norms are collectively negotiated and diffused at unprecedented speed.

The findings reveal that TikTok functions as an accelerated laboratory for semantic change, with adolescents deploying multiple mechanisms of meaning transformation simultaneously. The predominance of metaphoric extension particularly in terms like *era* and *main character* suggests that adolescents conceptualize personal identity through increasingly granular and narrativized frameworks (Sattar, 2025). This aligns with Eckert's (2000) communities of practice model, wherein shared linguistic innovations signal group membership while structuring individual identity performance.

The co-occurrence of broadening, narrowing, and pejoration within the same lexical ecosystem indicates that semantic change is not unidirectional but responsive to platform-specific communicative pressures. As Sarwar et al. (2025) argue, digital environments accelerate what would traditionally be multi-generational semantic shifts into observable year-by-year progression. The reclamatory potential evident in *ghetto* demonstrates that semantic change operates within power dynamics, where marginalized groups assert linguistic agency through appropriation and resignification.

These findings carry implications for pragmatic theory: the contextual analysis revealed that semantically shifted terms frequently carry dual functions simultaneously denoting meaning while performing identity work. The high frequency of approval and solidarity functions in pragmatic analysis (as visualized in Figure 2) confirms that semantic innovation on TikTok is inseparable from social bonding and group demarcation (Eti & Rosalinah, 2025). Future research should examine whether these accelerated semantic changes persist beyond adolescence or represent age-graded phenomena that recede with maturation.

The findings demonstrate that TikTok's platform architecture fundamentally shapes how lexical and semantic innovations emerge, diffuse, and stabilize (Table 2). The high frequency of meme-driven language, with 11 phrases generating nearly 3,000 occurrences

across four months, illustrates what Nashrudina et al. (2025) term "viral lexicalization," where platform algorithms accelerate word formation and diffusion at unprecedented speed. The near-neutral sentiment profiles of most meme phrases (hovering near zero) suggest that these terms function primarily as indexical markers of trend participation rather than evaluative expressions, supporting Sattar's (2025) concept of "digital dialect" as identity performance rather than semantic content.

The prevalence of intertextual policing (12.2% of all comments) reveals that semantic norms on TikTok are not passively inherited but actively negotiated through metapragmatic discourse. As Eckert's (2000) communities of practice framework predicts, groups develop shared linguistic norms through sustained interaction, and policing represents the mechanism by which these norms are enforced. The concentration of policing during rising and peak phases (77% of instances) indicates that semantic stabilization occurs most intensively during periods of rapid adoption—a pattern that may be unique to algorithmically-mediated platforms where trends emerge and recede within weeks rather than generations (Sarwar et al., 2025).

The finding that *very cutesy* diverged sharply from the neutral sentiment of its source trend (*very demure*) suggests that semantic differentiation occurs even within tightly coupled meme networks. This supports Sarwar et al.'s (2025) observation that digital environments enable "micro-semantic variation" where related terms acquire distinct pragmatic functions. Future research should examine whether such differentiation reflects systematic patterns of age-graded variation or random drift within viral ecosystems.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that warrant consideration. First, the sample was restricted to English-language TikTok comments, limiting generalizability to multilingual and non-English contexts where platform affordances may interact differently with local linguistic practices. Second, the cross-sectional design captured lexical innovations at a single point in time, precluding longitudinal tracking of whether observed semantic shifts persist beyond trend lifecycles. Third, the reliance on publicly available comments prevented verification of commenters' ages, meaning adolescent status was inferred from linguistic markers rather than demographic data. Fourth, the sentiment analysis tool (VADER) may not adequately capture platform-specific pragmatic nuances, particularly ironic or sarcastic usages common in adolescent digital communication (Sattar, 2025).

Future Directions

Future research should employ longitudinal designs to track whether meme-driven lexical innovations persist beyond their originating trends or fade as age-graded phenomena. Cross-platform comparative studies examining TikTok alongside Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts would illuminate how different algorithmic architectures shape linguistic diffusion. Researchers should also investigate multilingual TikTok communities to understand how platform affordances interact with code-switching and translingual practices (Nashrudina et al., 2025). Finally, ethnographic approaches combining comment analysis with interviews could elucidate the metapragmatic awareness underlying intertextual policing, revealing how adolescents conceptualize their own role in semantic negotiation and community norm enforcement (Eckert, 2000).

V.conclusions

This study investigated lexical and semantic variations in adolescent digital communication through a systematic analysis of TikTok comments, addressing three research questions concerning lexical innovations, semantic shifts, and platform affordances. The findings demonstrate that TikTok functions as an accelerated laboratory for language change, where adolescents deploy multiple mechanisms of linguistic innovation simultaneously. Lexical analysis revealed three primary categories of innovation, neologisms and blends (fr, bestie, delulu), graphical variations (tryna, cuz, ion), and platform-specific acronyms (pov, fyp, ijbol), each serving dual functions of communicative efficiency and identity performance. Semantic analysis documented concurrent processes of broadening, narrowing, metaphoric extension, and pejoration/amelioration operating within the same lexical ecosystem. Terms like slay and fire underwent ameliorative broadening, while basic and cringe exhibited pejoration, and era demonstrated metaphoric compression from historical periods to personal phases. The reclamatory potential of ghetto illustrated how semantic change operates within power dynamics, enabling marginalized in-group usage while retaining pejorative force in out-group contexts.

Platform affordances analysis revealed that TikTok's viral architecture fundamentally shapes linguistic innovation. Meme-driven language generated nearly 3,000 occurrences across four trends, with phrases functioning as indexical markers of trend participation rather than primarily evaluative expressions. The high prevalence of intertextual policing (12.2% of comments) demonstrated that semantic norms are actively negotiated through metapragmatic discourse, particularly during rising and peak trend phases. These findings extend communities of practice framework to algorithmically-mediated digital environments, showing how platform features accelerate and reshape traditional processes of language variation and change. The study contributes empirical evidence to understanding how digital communication among adolescents is systematically restructuring contemporary language evolution.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, several recommendations emerge for educators, lexicographers, and platform designers.

Educators should recognize adolescent digital language not as linguistic deficit but as systematic innovation, incorporating metalanguage awareness into curricula to help students navigate register differences between digital and academic contexts.

Lexicographers should establish protocols for documenting ephemeral digital terms, attending to the platform-specific contexts that generate meaning rather than treating viral phrases as isolated lexical items.

Platform designers should consider how algorithmic amplification accelerates semantic drift and develop transparent moderation policies that account for in-group reclamation practices (e.g., ghetto) rather than applying rigid content filters.

Future researchers should prioritize cross-platform comparative studies and longitudinal designs to track whether observed innovations represent enduring language change or age-graded phenomena that recede with maturation.

Finally, interdisciplinary collaboration between linguists, computer scientists, and anthropologists is essential for developing methodologies adequate to the multimodal, algorithmically-mediated nature of contemporary digital communication.

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