

FROM LITERAL MEANING TO EMOTIONAL EXPRESSIONS: A SEMANTIC CHANGE OF EMOTIONAL SLANGS IN TIKTOK COMMENTS

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Abstract

This study examines the meaning changes and emotional functions of slang expressions related to emotion in TikTok comments from 2024 to 2025. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, five TikTok comments were analyzed using Ullmann's semantic change theory and Martin and White's Evaluation Theory. The results show that slang undergoes systematic semantic processes, such as amelioration, pejoration, and widening, which transform literal meanings into emotional expressions. These emotional meanings function in the domains of Affect, Judgment, and Appreciation, enabling users to express personal feelings, evaluate behavior, and convey admiration. This study concludes that meaning change in slang expression is a socially driven process that strengthens emotional expression and interpersonal communication in digital discourse.

Keywords: digital communication, emotion-related slang, meaning change, TikTok comments

I INTRODUCTION

Language is inherently dynamic, adapting continuously to technological, social, and cultural changes. The dynamic nature of language can be seen in the digital environment. The rapid growth of the internet as a means of communication has significantly changed the way people interact and communicate in their daily lives (Al-kadi & Ahmed, 2018). Androutsopoulos (2016), in the Handbook of Language and Digital Communication, states that digital communication changes linguistic practices by introducing new forms of interaction and accelerating the spread of meaning in everyday language use. In line with this view, Herring (2015) explains that computer-mediated communication gives rise to new patterns of language use shaped by social interaction and online discourse practices.

In the digital era, social media has become one of the most powerful drivers of linguistic practices worldwide. Platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Reddit function not only as channels of communication but also as catalysts of linguistic innovation (Hartina & Rivia, 2024). The speed of adaptation in digital communication allows language changes to occur more quickly than in traditional face-to-face interactions, enabling new meanings and usage patterns to spread to a wide audience in a short period of time. In this context, Firmansyah (2018) argues that language change and development are influenced by environmental factors, particularly technological advancements that shape communication patterns within society. These language changes that continue to develop from generation to generation create a distinctive slang language that is often used by generation Z or gen Z (Gemintang et al., 2025).

Slang is considered as informal interaction and is socially, culturally, and geographically restricted, functioning as a marker of subcultural identity and reflecting creativity, and playfulness in communication (Alawiyah et al., 2021). In online conversations, the use of slang further reflects the phenomenon of ongoing linguistic innovation, caused by the unique communication environment on the internet. Crystal (2011) states that the internet functions as a new linguistic medium that changes the way language is used and accelerates the process of language change. The characteristics of online interaction encourage creativity, informality, and experimentation with linguistic forms, allowing speakers to build identities and express emotions in flexible ways. Dealing with this context, slang emerges as a natural and systematic component of digital communication, rather than as a deviation from linguistic norms. Fitri (2025) explains that, slang becomes a form of linguistic performance that reflects broader social dynamics, including identity construction, power relations, and cultural trends. Similarly, Saputra et al. (2023) states that The use of slang can also be used to show oneself as a member of a community group that is different from other community groups. In digital communication, these social and interactional functions also play a role in the emergence of new meanings in slang expressions. Hutapea (2025) explains that the word "ghost", which originally referred to a supernatural spirit, has developed a new meaning describing the act of suddenly cutting off communication with someone, particularly in romantic or social contexts. Likewise, The word Feed generally means "memberi makan". but if this word is used in the context of social media, it has another meaning. A feed

is a central section of your home page that displays an ever-updated collection of items (Bahri et al., 2023). This meaning change illustrates how slang expressions are used to convey emotions and opinions in digital communication, including TikTok comments. This development highlights how slang expressions acquire new meanings and function as slang related to emotion in digital communication, which becomes the main focus of this study.

Despite the abundance of research on meaning change and slang in social media, little attention has been paid to the systematic integration of semantic change classification and its emotional function in digital communication, such as TikTok comments. Based on this gap, this study examines how slang expressions develop new meanings and how these meanings function emotionally in digital communication. This study explores the types of meaning change in slang expressions used in TikTok comments, the process through which their meanings shift from literal interpretations into emotionally expressive forms, and the emotional functions that emerge from these new meanings in online interaction.

Research on meaning change has explored shifts in meaning in slang and particularly slang related to emotion, but no one has systematically analyzed the integration of types of semantic change and the mechanisms of change based on Ullmann's (1962) theory and their emotional functions based on Martin and White's (2005) theory in TikTok comments. This study aims to fill the gap in existing research on meaning change.

Several empirical studies show evidence that English vocabulary undergoes systematic meaning changes across various social media platforms. For instance, Jahan and Irfan (2021), who analyzed semantic changes on Facebook and Twitter, found that everyday English words such as post, follow, and friend have undergone semantic expansion, shifting from their original meanings in the offline world to new meanings specific to the digital realm. Qizi (2025) further shows that on social networking sites, words such as stream, viral, and tag have developed new meanings related to technological practices, reflecting how repeated digital usage reshapes lexical semantics. Similarly, as Gulzodabegim (2026) explains, the term "word cloud" has shifted in meaning from simply referring to a cloud of water vapor in the sky to an internet-based storage and computing service, while "hashtag" has shifted from simply being a symbol (#) to a tool for categorizing topics and trends on social media. Accordingly, Fawzy (2025) shows that on Instagram and YouTube, expressions such as subscribe and share no longer function as general verbs, but carry specific communicative meanings in digital interactions. Ovalia and Astuti (2025) reinforce these findings by indicating that English words in digital communication often acquire new semantic values as users negotiate meaning in rapidly evolving communication environments. Collectively, these studies prove that meaning changes in digital media are systematic, widespread, and driven by the communicative context of online platforms.

More focused research investigates meaning changes in slang words, explaining that slang serves as a productive place for systematic meaning development. Chinedu (2025) reveals that youth slang undergoes semantic change primarily through amelioration, as seen in the expression "Bad," which has changed from "poor quality" to "cool, impressive," reflecting a positive social assessment. Similarly, Dahlia and Siti Waroh (2025) states that the word "dope" has undergone a semantic shift through a process of amelioration, evolving from its original meaning "drugs" or "fool" to positive connotations such as "cool," "impressive," or "amazing". In a TikTok-based study, Marpaung (2025) identifies various types of semantic changes in slang, including amelioration (FOMO), pejoration (SUS from "suspicious" to 'untrustworthy'), and metaphorical shifts (vibe check from "mood checking" to "social assessment of environments or people"). As stated by, Rahman et al. (2022) reported that British internet slang on social media platforms shows similar patterns of broadening and narrowing, for example in terms such as rubbish (from "broken stones" to "unwanted things") and crap (from 'dirt' to "something useless"). According to Sitohang (2025), the word "healing" has also undergone a shift in meaning, moving from its original definition of "recovery from physical or emotional injury" to a broader meaning associated with traveling or relaxing to relieve stress, as seen in social media usage. These mutually supportive findings are in line with Ullmann's (1962) classification of semantic change, namely amelioration, pejoration, narrowing, and broadening, which shows that meaning change in slang follows a systematic and theory-based process, rather than random lexical innovation.

Recent studies increasingly highlight emotional expression and the emotional function of meaning changes in slang in digital communication. Gemintang et al. (2025) show that TikTok users employ slang containing emotional expressions such as slay, simp and salty to express admiration, criticizing or judging behaviour and expressing annoyance or irritation. Adhiyana and Djuharie (2025), in their analysis of YouTube comments, found that expressions such as "devoured," "rn," and "y'all" function

as emotional appreciation and affectation that convey strong admiration, showing emotional urgency and increase opinion. In addition, according to Siregar (2025), The word “crazy” on social media is now used as an emotional expression in a positive sense to convey admiration and excitement. These findings show that meaning changes in slang expressions not only alter lexical meaning but also direct words toward affective and evaluative functions in digital communication.

Building on these empirical findings, Ullmann's (1962) classification of semantic change explains meaning changes through four major types, including amelioration, pejoration, widening, and narrowing. Behind these changes, Ullmann also explains that new meanings often emerge through metaphorical association, a mechanism whereby a word evolves into a new meaning due to perceived similarities between its original meaning and its new meaning. Through this process, slang expressions in TikTok comments systematically develop meanings that differ from their original literal meanings. From a cognitive perspective, Koch (1999) states that new meanings emerge in response to communicative needs such as expressiveness, emotional emphasis, and social evaluation in the functions that dominate online interaction users. In line with this context, Burrige (2006) show that emotional attitudes, social values, and affective motivations strongly influence the direction of meaning change, especially in the use of informal and expressive language. In digital discourse, the interpretation of slang expressions is not limited to lexical meaning alone, but is also shaped by contextual and interpersonal functions in communication. This perspective reflects a pragmatic dimension of meaning, particularly through Dasher's (2001) concept of subjectivization, which explains how linguistic expressions gradually develop more speaker-oriented, evaluative, and emotionally expressive meanings through repeated interaction. This process of subjectivization is particularly evident in TikTok comments, where users adapt existing words to express emotions.

To understand how newly developed meanings function emotionally in discourse, this study adopts Martin and White (2005) Appraisal Theory, which classifies expressive meanings into three domains: Affect, Judgment, and Appreciation. This framework provides an analytical basis for analyzing the emotional function of slang expressions in digital communication.

In this study, slang is understood as informal and non-standard words that emerge in specific social groups and communication contexts, particularly among young communities and online interactions, and their meanings often differ from standard dictionary definitions. The words discussed in previous studies (e.g., slay, simp, SUS, FOMO, and vibe check) are categorized as slang because they display innovative meanings that depend on context, functioning as markers of group identity, emotional expression, and social evaluation in digital interactions.

II MATERIALS AND METHOD

This study uses a qualitative descriptive approach. Qualitative research is an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem (Creswell., 2014). Its purpose is to analyze the meaning changes of slang expressions and their emotional functions in TikTok comments. A qualitative approach was chosen because this study focuses on interpreting meaning, identifying types of meaning changes, and explaining the emotional function of a word in natural digital communication, rather than on measuring numerical variables.

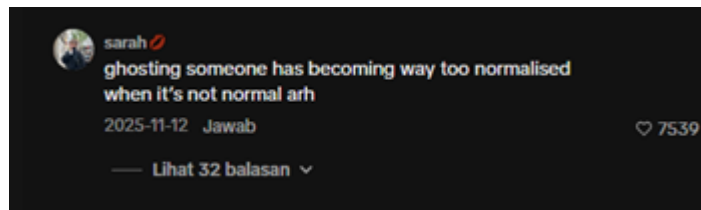
The data in this study was collected from publicly accessible English-language TikTok comments posted between 2024 and 2025. Data was collected from TikTok's public search results through keyword-based exploration of evaluative expressions commonly found in digital interactions. The focus of this data collection was not on specific users, accounts, or algorithmic recommendation systems, but rather on publicly accessible comment sections where slang related to emotions is used naturally within the context of interaction.

Purposive sampling was employed in this study. In this context, purposive sampling refers to the deliberate selection of data based on predefined linguistic criteria relevant to the research focus: shifts in meaning within emotion-related slang and its emotional functions in TikTok comments. Data were selected based on the following criteria: (1) comments containing emotion-related slang, (2) expressions indicating a shift in meaning from their literal definitions, (3) comments reflecting emotional or evaluative functions such as admiration, criticism, frustration, disappointment, or social judgment, and (4) comments with sufficient contextual clarity for interpretation. Ambiguous comments or those with unclear context were excluded.

In the initial stage, approximately 52 comments were collected from public TikTok posts using keyword-based searches. Selected lexical items (e.g., “slay,” “salty,” “ghosting,” “mid,” and “insane”) were used as entry points to identify slang related to emotions in TikTok discourse, as these words

frequently appear in evaluative and emotional interactions within digital communication. The dataset was then filtered through the application of selection criteria, resulting in five representative comments selected for in-depth qualitative analysis.

The selected TikTok comments were documented as screenshots, preserving the original context of the interaction and linguistic usage within the TikTok comments section.



Picture 1. TikTok Comment Screenshot

Data analysis was conducted in several steps. First, slang expressions related to emotion were identified from selected TikTok comments. Second, the literal meanings of these words were determined based on definitions from the Cambridge Dictionary. Third, new meaning refers to the contextually interpreted meaning of slang words in TikTok comments, and supported by slang meanings in the Cambridge dictionary. The term “new meaning” is adopted from a previous study by Siregar (2025). Next, each word was classified based on the type of meaning change using Ullmann's (1962) framework. Then, the emotional function of each slang expression was analyzed using the categories of Affect, Judgment, and Appreciation from Appraisal Theory by Martin and White (2005). The operational interpretation of these categories is based on previous studies that have applied the same framework, as discussed further in the Discussion section, which reveal consistent patterns in the use of the three domains of Evaluation to express evaluative and emotional meaning in discourse. In this study, the term of “emotional function” constructed as an operational category based on this framework to describe evaluative meanings expressed in slang usage.

Ullmann (1962) classifies meaning change into several categories, including widening, narrowing, amelioration, and pejoration. Widening refers to a process in which a word develops a broader or more general meaning over time, while narrowing occurs when a word acquires a more specific or restricted meaning. Amelioration describes a shift toward a more positive evaluative meaning, whereas pejoration refers to a shift toward a more negative or degraded meaning. These categories were used in this study to identify changes between the literal and contextual meanings of slang expressions found in TikTok comments.

Martin and White's (2005) Appraisal Theory was used to analyze the emotional and evaluative functions of slang expressions in TikTok comments. The theory consists of three main domains: Affect, Judgment, and Appreciation. Affect refers to language used to express personal feelings and emotional states. Judgment concerns the evaluation of people's behavior, morality, or character, while Appreciation relates to the evaluation of things, events, or situations. These categories were applied to interpret how slang expressions function as carriers of emotional and evaluative meaning in digital communication.

Finally, the results were interpreted to explain how meaning changes contribute to emotional expression in TikTok communication. In presenting the data, each expression is marked with code (3-1), (3-2), and so forth. The existence of the code is useful for showing the emotional expressions that appear in TikTok comments.

III RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 FINDINGS

An analysis of five TikTok comments from 2024–2025 shows that slang expressions related to emotion undergo systematic meaning changes and function primarily as a means of expressing emotion. Table 3 below shows the types of meaning changes.

Table 1. Types of Meaning Change

Slang word	Literal meaning	New Meaning	Types of meaning change
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Slay	To kill someone violently	To be extremely good or nice	Amelioration
Ghosting	The activity of writing books, articles, etc. for another person to publish under their own name	A way of ending a relationship with someone suddenly by stopping all communication with them	Widening
Salty	Tasting of salt	Annoyed or upset	Pejoration
Mid	In the middle of something	Not very good or attractive	Pejoration
Insane	Extremely unreasonable, or mentally ill	Extremely good or impressive	Amelioration

From the table classifying meaning changes in Table 3, this study further explains how the emotional functions contained in the slang words above are based on Appraisal Theory by Martin and White (2005), as follows:

Table 2. Appraisal Analysis of Slang Expressions

Slang Word	New Meaning	Appraisal Domain	Emotional Function (Appraisal-Based Interpretation)
Slay	To be extremely good or nice	Appreciation	Showing admiration
Ghosting	A way of ending a relationship with someone suddenly by stopping all communication with them	Affect	Expressing disappointment
Salty	Annoyed or upset	Affect	Expressing annoyance
Mid	Not very good or attractive	Judgment	Expressing negative evaluation or criticism
Insane	Extremely good or impressive	Appreciation	Showing amazement

3.2 DISCUSSION

Findings show that slang expressions in TikTok comments has a systematic emotional function that can be grouped into three domains of assessment: Affect, Judgment, and Appreciation. Each domain shows how meaning changes allow words to shift from their original literal meanings to emotional expressions that serve as interpersonal goals in digital communication.

3.2.1 AFFECT: EXPRESSING PERSONAL FEELINGS

Slang words that represent the Affection Domain are slang words such as ghosting and salty, as shown in the following example of their use in a TikTok comment:

- (3-1) Ghosting someone has becoming way too normalised when it's not normal arh.
- (3-2) Don't be salty!

In comment (3–1), “Ghosting someone has become too normalised when it’s not normal,” the speaker expresses emotional discomfort and frustration at the experience of suddenly losing communication in a relationship. The phrase “too normalized” shows that “ghosting” functions not only as a description of an action but also as an expression of the speaker’s personal emotional response. Semantically, the term has undergone widening, from its original meaning as a professional writing activity to interpersonal behavior in relationships through metaphorical associations, linking the absence of visible authorship in ghostwriting to the absence of communicative presence in social interactions. This slang expression functions to express disappointment and emotional pain.

Similarly, in comment (3–2), the expression “salty” appears in the sentence “Don’t be salty!” directed at someone perceived as reacting negatively in minor disagreements or socially tense situations. In this context, the speaker uses “salty” to evaluate and discourage responses characterized by irritation, defensiveness, or excessive sensitivity. Rather than expressing a general emotional state, the term specifically targets reactions to unfavorable situations, indicating that its use depends on the context and typically limited to mild conflict or perceived overreaction. Here, “salty” no longer denotes the physical taste of salt but has undergone pejoration, shifting from a neutral sensory meaning to a negative emotional meaning through metaphorical association, where physical sensations are mapped onto emotional attitudes, both of which indicate discomfort. Through this meaning change, “salty” functions as an explicit marker of affect, enabling speakers to convey emotional annoyance in digital communication.

These findings indicate that slang expression involves meaning change, consistent with previous studies by Rahman et al. (2022) and Marpaung (2025). The main types identified are semantic widening and pejoration. For example, “crap” originally meant “dirty,” but now refers to something useless. Similarly, “sus,” derived from “suspicious,” is used to describe someone as untrustworthy. Furthermore, the emotional function of slang expression for conveying personal feelings in the affect domain is in accordance with research by Gemintang et al. (2025), whose research shows findings in the affect domain for the word “salty,” whose emotional function is to express annoyance.

3.2.2 JUDGMENT: SOCIAL AND MORAL EVALUATION

The Judgment domain is represented by the slang word “mid”. In comment (3–1), the speaker encourages others to stop labeling themselves and others by saying, “you are not mid.. you are just you.” The term “mid” is used in online discourse to assess a person’s appearance or value as mediocre or unattractive. Literally meaning “middle,” it originally referred to a neutral spatial position between two extremes. Both meanings are linked by the idea of inconspicuousness, i.e., something in the middle is neither high nor low, just as something called “mid” is evaluated as neither impressive nor extraordinary. This similarity in perception allows the meaning to shift from a spatial description to a social evaluation through metaphorical association. As a result, this change represents pejoration, where a neutral term develops a negative meaning. This expression is used to express negative evaluation or criticism.

(3-3) stop labeling yourself and other people your not mid or chopped your just you

Through this meaning change, the word becomes a tool for criticizing behavior and moral character, allowing the speaker to evaluate others based on social and interpersonal standards. This type of meaning change in pejorative meaning is in line with research by Marpaung (2025), which shows a shift in meaning that has become more negative. Furthermore, regarding the emotional function of the word “toxic,” these findings support research by Gemintang et al. (2025), as shown in the word “simp” in domain of judgment, which functions to express social disapproval.

3.2.3 APPRECIATION: POSITIVE EVALUATION AND ADMIRATION

The Award Domain is embodied by the words “slay” and “insane.”

(3-4) Ow yes gurl IM so slay and Im diva.

(3-5) They don’t know how insanely cool Iam.

In comment (3–4), “Ow yes gurl IM so slay and Im diva,” in the TikTok comment interaction, the speaker uses the word ‘slay’ to positively evaluate their own appearance or performance, describing themselves as impressive and exemplary. Originally meaning “to kill ruthlessly,” the word “slay” is now used in online interactions to convey praise and excellence. This meaning change reflects amelioration and is driven by metaphorical associations, where the intensity and power associated with physical domination are conceptually transferred to the realm of social success and emotional excellence. because

both have great power, both in killing cruelly and in being very impressive, therefore the word “slay” is chosen so that the speaker appears very impressive like a diva. Through this mapping, the word acquires a very positive evaluative meaning and functions as an expression of admiration in interactions.

Similarly, in comment (3–5), “They don't know how insanely cool I am,” the word “insane,” which originally refers to irrationality or mental disorder, but in the TikTok comment, the word “insane” is used to interpret something that is very impressive or extraordinary. The context of the sentence above shows that the speaker wants to show that he is very extraordinary and cool by combining the words ‘insane’ and “cool.” This change also represents amelioration, driven by metaphorical associations, where the concept of extreme mental states is mapped to expressions of extreme excellence and high positive evaluation, both meanings having similarities that indicate the same extreme point. Through this meaning change, both expressions operate in the realm of Appreciation, with these emotional expressions serving to convey admiration, approval, and positive evaluation in digital communication.

Findings on this type of meaning change complement research by Chinedu (2025), for example on the word “Bad,” which has changed from “poor quality” to “cool, impressive.” Regarding the emotional function of the slang words above, this agrees with research by Adhiyana and Djuharie (2025) and Gemintang et al. (2025), such as the words “slay” and “devoured” in the domain of appreciation, which both function to express admiration.

Overall, this discussion shows that meaning change is not merely a lexical phenomenon, but a functional process that equips speakers with emotional expressive tools. Through types of meaning change such as amelioration, pejoration, and widening, along with the metaphorical association mechanism, slang words evolve from literal meanings into powerful emotional expressions that fulfil interpersonal functions in Affect, Judgment, and Appreciation in TikTok discourse interactions.

IV CONCLUSION

The study concludes that slang expressions related to emotion in TikTok comments undergoes systematic meaning changes and plays an important role in expressing emotions in digital communication. These findings confirm that slang words undergo predictable semantic processes, such as amelioration, pejoration, and widening, which allow them to shift from literal meanings to emotionally expressive forms. However, in this study, no instances of narrowing were observed, indicating a limitation in capturing all types of meaning change. In addition, the metaphorical association mechanism was found to facilitate the development of new meanings, allowing words to acquire expressive and evaluative nuances. Using Evaluation Theory, this study also reveals that the emotional meaning of slang functions in three domains: Affect (expressing personal feelings), Judgment (evaluating behavior), and Appreciation (expressing admiration). These results indicate that meaning changes in slang are not random, but are shaped by the emotional, social, and interpersonal needs of users in digital communication. Therefore, meaning changes serve as an important linguistic mechanism that strengthens emotional expression and social connections in TikTok discourse.

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