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THE PRAGMATIC FUNCTIONS OF TIKTOK SLANG IN ADOLESCENT IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AND PEER RELATIONSHIPS

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Abstract: TikTok slang has become a rapidly evolving linguistic resource that plays a central role in the everyday communication of adolescents. As social media increasingly shapes youth interactions, understanding the pragmatic functions of digital slang is essential for examining how young people negotiate identity, express emotions, and navigate peer relationships. This study explores how adolescents in grades 5-9 (aged 10 to 15) from a public school in Bitola, North Macedonia, use TikTok slang as a sociolinguistic tool within their school and online environments. Based on survey data from 119 participants, the research investigates familiarity with common slang terms, frequency of use, meaning interpretation, and attitudes toward slang within both informal and educational contexts. The findings reveal that adolescents employ slang strategically to build rapport, signal group belonging, and perform identity in ways that align with the fast-changing norms of digital culture. Slang terms such as *cringe*, *rizz*, and *flex* serve important interpersonal roles, from expressing humor and admiration to regulating social boundaries and managing peer evaluation. Moreover, the study highlights how multi-platform engagement enhances pragmatic competence, as adolescents learn to cope with shifting contextual cues across TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and Snapchat. While most slang is used positively or playfully, a smaller portion reflects socially sensitive or harmful language, emphasizing the need for critical digital literacy. Overall, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how TikTok slang functions as both a linguistic and social mechanism that shapes adolescent identity, peer dynamics, and communicative development.

Keywords: *TikTok slang; pragmatic functions; adolescent identity; peer dynamics; social media language.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Communication among youngsters is changing rapidly, largely due to the rise of social media platforms like TikTok, which has emerged as a particularly potent site for youth slang innovation (Josea et al., 2025). As one of the most popular platforms among Generation Z, TikTok offers a fertile environment for linguistic creativity, rapid slang diffusion, and pragmatic experimentation. Through short video formats and interactive communication, users invent and propagate novel

lexical items that functionally serve to establish social identity, signal group membership, and manage peer relationships. Slang on TikTok is not merely lexical novelty but represents a complex sociolinguistic resource, operating as an effective tool for managing emotions, peer evaluation, and identity construction (Siddique et al., 2025; Variable Research Journal, 2025). Moreover, TikTok slang exemplifies the informal, fast-evolving, and multimodal nature of digital communication, blending textual, visual, and auditory elements (Gita Nashrudina et al., 2025). This transformation positions youth as active agents who semiotically construct their identities within complex digital ecologies (Noor et al., 2024). Adolescents typically use multiple platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and Snapchat simultaneously, which enriches their pragmatic competence by requiring cross-contextual flexibility and multimodal communication skills (Jones & Lee, 2023; Meyers et al., 2013). This multi-platform use facilitates the swift spread of terms such as “rizz” and “cringe,” illustrating the dynamic linguistic marketplace central to youth peer cultures (Liew et al., 2025). Within this context, slang serves critical roles that extend far beyond introducing new words, acting as a socio-pragmatic tool for emotional expression, peer evaluation, and group alignment (Garcia, 2024). Pragmatic competence involves strategic code-switching and contextual adaptation, reflecting increasing sociolinguistic empowerment among youth (Kumar, 2025). However, formal educational recognition of slang remains limited, highlighting a tension between institutional language ideologies and youth creativity (Lee & Martin, 2022). Understanding the pragmatic functions and adaptive use of such slang is therefore essential for educators and linguists seeking to engage with contemporary youth language. This study aims to investigate the pragmatic competence and linguistic creativity of adolescents through their use of TikTok slang, focusing on multi-platform social media usage, word recognition, meaning attribution, and attitudes toward slang. The research builds on prior findings of slang’s role in peer communication and identity work (Angelis et al., 2021), aiming to illuminate developmental paths and sociocultural tensions surrounding slang in formal education. This study is set within the North Macedonian context, offering a valuable perspective on how youth in a culturally specific, non-Anglophone environment cope with language innovation. It examines how global digital trends, primarily spread through English-language media on platforms like TikTok, are adopted, adapted, and integrated into the local linguistic practices of adolescents in one Primary School in Bitola. This focus highlights the complex relationship between global digital culture and local identity formation in the Western Balkans.

2. MATERIAL AND METHOD

The study involved 119 adolescent respondents aged between 10 and 15 years (50.4% aged 13–15, 50.4% aged 10–12). The survey included 54.6% males and 45.4% females, representing a balanced gender composition. The participants were students from St. Cyril and Methodius, a public primary school in Bitola, North Macedonia, serving a diverse population from both the urban and rural areas. This age group was specifically selected as it represents a critical period

where adolescents aged 10-15 are actively building and developing their linguistic register, a process nowadays heavily influenced by digital platforms and global media. Notably, although these students are not native English speakers, they are frequent consumers of English-language digital content and often integrate English slang into their daily communication, sometimes using it to express themselves easier and better than in their native Macedonian. This paper presents a secondary analysis of a larger survey conducted in the second semester of the 2024/2025 school year, focusing specifically on the sociolinguistic and pragmatic functions of slang. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire comprising demographic questions, social media usage frequency, slang word recognition, meaning identification, and open-ended questions about slang use. The content was designed by preliminary discussions with local adolescents and a review of online resources, including popular slang glossaries and parent-guide websites. This instrument, comprising 30 questions, is divided into sections on demographics, slang recognition and meaning, usage familiarity, and personal experiences with slang words. The participants completed the questionnaire online under supervised conditions by their EFL teachers in class to ensure clarity and completeness. Data anonymity and confidentiality were maintained. Responses were exported for statistical analysis, and the quantitative data were analysed using SPSS for descriptive and comparative statistics, including frequencies and percentages. The author used thematic coding to analyse the open-ended question in order to identify prevalent slang words and their pragmatic functions. The overall analysis focused on pragmatic competence, linguistic creativity, social media usage, and identity-related language patterns.

2.1. DATA ANALYSIS

The data were examined using a mixed-methods approach to capture both the scale and the social nuance of slang use. The quantitative analysis involved calculating descriptive statistics, such as primarily frequencies and percentages in order to record the prevalence of social media use and the recognition rates of specific slang terms across the participants' responses. This provided a clear, overarching view of popular platforms and vocabulary. Simultaneously, a qualitative thematic analysis was conducted on the participants' open-ended responses. This process focused on identifying recurring patterns in how students explained and used slang, leading to the emergence of core categories based on social function, such as affirmation, social regulation, and identity expression. By merging these statistical patterns with the qualitative themes, the analysis offers a layered understanding of TikTok slang as a vital tool for social use and identity construction among adolescents.

3. RESULTS

3.1. MULTI-PLATFORM SOCIAL MEDIA USE

Adolescents in the sample demonstrated high engagement with a variety of social media platforms, as detailed in Table 1. This multi-platform exposure fosters a hybrid digital culture that requires and cultivates pragmatic adaptability.

Table 1: Multi-Platform Social Media Use and Digital Ecologies of Adolescents

Platform	% Use	Interpretive Insight
Instagram	76.5%	Hybrid digital cultures foster pragmatic language adaptability across multiple platforms.
YouTube	71.4%	Multimedia exposure promotes the development of multimodal communication and peer identity work.
Snapchat	40.3%	Ephemeral communication solidifies in-group discourse and pragmatic signalling.
Facebook	23.5%	Low adolescent engagement marks generational linguistic and social boundary formation.
Other	18.5%	Diversity of platforms leads to sociolinguistic hybridity and complexity in youth cultures.

3.2. PRAGMATIC FUNCTIONS OF RECOGNIZED SLANG

The recognition rates and interpreted pragmatic functions of key slang terms are presented in Table 2. These terms are instrumental in managing social relationships and expressing identity.

Table 2. Affective and Relational Functions of Recognized Slang

Slang Term	Recognition %	Pragmatic Interpretation
Cringe	87.4%	A tool for managing embarrassment and social sanction, regulating peer boundaries.
Glow Up	80.7%	Embodies aspirational identity and peer affirmation through positive transformation.
Flex	88.2%	Signals social status and self-presentation crucial within peer hierarchies.
Sus	88.2%	Pragmatic marker for distrust and social judgment, key in peer monitoring.
Rizz	86.6%	Indexes social capital in flirtatious or relational peer interactions.

3.3. CATEGORIZATION AND FREQUENCY OF SLANG USE

A qualitative analysis of the slang words used by participants revealed four distinct categories based on their primary social function:

Neutral / Positive Slang (48.3%): This was the largest category, dominated by terms used for hype, affirmation, and humor. The most frequent terms included slay, rizz, ate (as in “she ate that”), GOAT (Greatest of All Time), and lol.

Coded / Euphemistic Slang (22.7%): This category showed a strong influence from TikTok meme culture and “algospeak” (language used to evade platform algorithms). Prevalent terms included skibidi (from Skibidi Toilet), sigma (e.g., sigma male), gyatt (expressing attraction), and delulu (delusional).

Social Policing Slang (21.4%): Adolescents frequently used slang to judge, approve, shame, or regulate peers. High-frequency terms in this category were cringe, let him cook, cooked (meaning defeated or embarrassed), and roasted.

Explicit Hate Speech (7.6%): Although the smallest category, its presence is serious and concerning. It included racial slurs (e.g., variations of the N-word) and terms used for racial mocking (e.g., Lingling).

3.4. INTERPRETATIVE DISCUSSION

The results indicate that adolescents in Bitola, North Macedonia, are actively developing *sophisticated pragmatic competences* as they engage with multiple social media platforms, each offering distinct linguistic ecologies. The high recognition rates of globally sourced slang (e.g., “rizz,” “cringe”) demonstrate their full participation in the international Gen Z digital milieu. However, the ways these terms are deployed often reflect local social hierarchies and school-based peer dynamics, showing a process of *glocalization*, where global forms are infused with local meaning. Slang here acts not merely as novel vocabulary but as a crucial socio-emotional apparatus through which youth manage group membership, identity affirmation, and peer evaluation within their specific socio-cultural setting. The fact that nearly half of all slang used was *neutral* or *positive* emphasizes its primary role in social bonding and in-group solidarity, serving as linguistic “glue” that connects North Macedonian youth to each other and to a global peer culture. However, the significant prevalence of *social policing slang* (21.4%) highlights its function in establishing and enforcing peer norms specific to their school environment. The division between *slang familiarity* and pragmatic usage further points to the developmental nature of *pragmatic confidence*, linking language skill acquisition to social integration within their immediate community. The multilingual and register-flexible use of slang functions both as a boundary marker and a bridge, connecting varied sociolinguistic identities within North Macedonia’s own diverse landscape. The presence of *coded euphemisms* (22.7%) demonstrates adolescents’ participation in “algospeak”—the practice of using alternate phrases to evade content moderation algorithms—showcasing their adaptability within global digital spaces. Finally, the inconsistency toward institutional slang acceptance, along with the minor but notable presence of *explicit hate speech* (7.6%), articulates ongoing sociolinguistic tensions. In North Macedonia, this shows a society caught between its traditional past and a new, digital culture shaped by young people.

4. CONCLUSION

This study has detailed the complex sociolinguistic landscape of TikTok slang among a varied and mid-sized group of adolescents from a regional urban town in North Macedonia. The findings demonstrate that the adolescent participants from the Primary School St. Cyril and Methodius in Bitola are not passive consumers of global media, but active participants who use the most popular platforms (for adolescent age) to cultivate advanced pragmatic skills and dynamic identities. The interpretive discussion revealed that slang is not a linguistic deficit but a

sophisticated tool for everyday social life within their specific cultural and educational environment. Consequently, these findings call for greater awareness among several concerned parties. For educators, this means bridging the gap between institutional language norms and the reality of youth-led linguistic innovation, potentially fostering more inclusive pedagogical approaches. For parents, these findings highlight that the slang their children use is more than just trendy words; it is a key to their social world and emotional state. A practical way to cope with this reality is to adopt a standpoint of curious observation rather than immediate judgment. Parents are encouraged to periodically ask their children to explain the latest slang, turning it into a conversation about context and nuance, such as when a word is used for joking among friends versus when it might be hurtful. This approach builds an open channel of communication, making a child more likely to confide about online conflicts or concerning content, and it equips parents to spot potential dangers early. Ultimately, understanding the vocabulary is the first step in understanding the world it represents, allowing parents to guide their children from a place of connection rather than control. By acknowledging and incorporating an understanding of this digitally-native pragmatic competence, we can move beyond the dismissal of digital slang as merely informal or deficient while proactively addressing the challenges posed by its harmful forms.

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