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FROM 'RIZZ' TO ROUTINE: A CONCEPTUAL PAPER ON THE ACQUISITION, DIGITAL DISSEMINATION, AND NORMALIZATION TRAJECTORIES OF MODERN ENGLISH-BASED SLANG AMONG MALAYSIAN YOUTH

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Abstract:

The prevalence of modern English slang among Malaysian youth, particularly on digital platforms, reflects significant shifts in language use, identity construction, and communication practices. However, despite its growing prevalence, there remains limited theoretical understanding of how such informal expressions are acquired, disseminated, and normalized within multilingual societies like Malaysia. This conceptual paper aims to examine the sociolinguistic, technological, and psychological factors that contribute to the life cycle of these linguistic forms among Malaysian youth. Using a narrative review methodology, relevant literature was collected from the Scopus database and synthesized through integrative thematic analysis. The review identified four key trajectories: the acquisition of slang driven by bilingual peer interaction and global media; its dissemination accelerated by social media and digital communication platforms; its normalization through repeated usage and integration into Malaysian English; and its cognitive and psychological impacts, which include identity expression and increased communicative complexity. The study proposes a conceptual framework and four propositions that illustrate these interrelated processes. Theoretically,

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this study contributes to sociolinguistics and digital discourse studies by offering an interdisciplinary model that explains how slang evolves within digitally mediated environments. Practically, the findings highlight the importance of acknowledging youth language practices in educational settings and suggest more culturally responsive approaches to language instruction. Although conceptual in nature, this study lays a foundation for future empirical research and encourages a deeper examination of informal linguistic innovation within Malaysia's evolving digital landscape.

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Keyword:

Digital Slang Acquisition, English-Based Slang Normalization, Language Innovation in Malaysia, Malaysian Youth Language, Sociolinguistics of Social Media



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Introduction – Background and Context of The Study

In the age of accelerated digital communication, language is evolving rapidly. One notable outcome is the emergence of new slang terms—concise and often playful expressions that reflect social identities, attitudes, and cultural shifts (Abdrakhmanova & Mubarakshina, 2022). Terms such as rizz, drip, cap, and yeet have moved beyond niche communities to gain widespread recognition, largely through their viral use on social media platforms (Salieva et al., 2025). For Malaysian youth, who are increasingly immersed in global digital cultures, these lexical innovations function not merely as linguistic novelties but as tools of self-expression, social connection, and identity negotiation within bilingual or multilingual contexts (Abdullah & Ghazali, 2022).

The Malaysian linguistic landscape, characterised by diversity and fluidity, provides fertile ground for the adoption and adaptation of modern English-based slang (Stapa & Shaari, 2013). With English widely used as a second language, such expressions are often creatively integrated into everyday communication, particularly among urban, digitally engaged youth (Shing, 2025). As communication shifts from formal face-to-face interaction to informal, instantaneous digital messaging, understanding how slang is acquired, shared, and normalised becomes both academically significant and socially relevant (Herring, 2007).

Statement Of the Problem

Despite the observable proliferation of slang in Malaysian digital discourse, empirical and conceptual work that maps out the full process—from acquisition to normalization—remains scarce. While existing studies have explored specific aspects of internet colloquialism (e.g., usage frequency, social functions, or cultural references), few have offered an integrative view

of how these linguistic forms become entrenched in youth language practices over time. This gap in the literature is particularly notable given the increasing dominance of digital communication platforms in shaping linguistic preferences and behaviors among young Malaysians.

Consequently, there is a lack of a comprehensive understanding of the lifecycle of modern linguistic form: how it is initially encountered, socially disseminated through platforms like TikTok or X (formerly Twitter), and eventually absorbed into the fabric of everyday language. Without this conceptual clarity, educators, sociolinguists, and digital communication scholars are left with a fragmented understanding of a phenomenon that has real implications for language education, youth identity, and cultural hybridity.

Research Gap And Aim Of The Study

To address this limitation, this conceptual paper proposes a unified framework that captures the trajectories of modern English-based slang among Malaysian youth—focusing on three core dimensions: acquisition, digital dissemination, and normalization. It seeks to consolidate and extend previous findings by outlining how informal, everyday terms travel from digital origins to normalized, routinized expressions in youth discourse. This study does not aim to catalog slang per se, but rather to develop a conceptual map that can serve as a foundation for future empirical inquiry.

In doing so, the paper fills a notable gap in existing literature by framing slang not just as an ephemeral trend, but as a linguistic, cultural, and technological process. This framework will offer a basis for understanding how language innovation emerges in postcolonial, bilingual contexts influenced by global media. By focusing on Malaysian youth—a group at the intersection of tradition, modernity, and globalization—the study positions itself to contribute a unique voice to ongoing discussions in sociolinguistics and digital communication studies.

Significance Of The Study

This paper is significant for several reasons. First, it highlights the evolving nature of Malaysian English in the face of globalization and technological immersion, contributing to broader discussions on English varieties in postcolonial societies. Second, it offers educators and policymakers insight into how digital-native youth engage with language differently, which could inform curriculum development, especially for English language teaching in multilingual contexts. Understanding slang's role in everyday communication allows for more culturally responsive pedagogy and more realistic benchmarks for language proficiency.

Furthermore, the study provides a basis for interdisciplinary dialogue between linguistics, media studies, and youth cultural studies. As slang increasingly shapes informal literacy practices—particularly on digital platforms—researchers and stakeholders alike need models to interpret the significance of these lexical changes. This conceptual paper, by proposing a trajectory-based model, invites future empirical studies to test and expand upon its assumptions and offers a foundation for robust theorizing on language, identity, and communication in digital societies.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical underpinning of this paper draws from Sociolinguistic Theory (Labov, 1972) and Digital Communication Theory (Herring, 2007), both of which consider language as a socially situated, dynamic practice influenced by technological affordances. Labov's work on language variation and change provides a lens through which to understand slang as a form of vernacular innovation, while Herring's perspective highlights the role of computer-mediated communication in shaping discourse norms and linguistic forms.

Additionally, the framework will draw upon Youth Language Theory (Eckert, 2000), which emphasizes the performative nature of language in constructing youth identities. By combining these perspectives, the study conceptualizes slang not merely as a linguistic artifact, but as a symbolic resource that travels across social and digital boundaries. The proposed framework integrates these approaches into a trajectory model that maps out slang's evolution from individual acquisition to widespread normalization in Malaysian youth communities.

Literature Review

The acquisition of modern English-based slang among Malaysian youth is deeply rooted in sociolinguistic dynamics, including identity construction, peer influence, and global media exposure. As Shing (2025) observed, Malaysian bilingual youth increasingly adopt slang terms as markers of creativity, innovation, and informality, often reflecting a departure from standardized linguistic expectations. These youth leverage English-based slang to navigate peer relations and construct digital personas that resonate with global youth culture. The adoption process is shaped not just by passive exposure but by active participation in online communities where slang is both consumed and co-created. Echoing this, Abdrakhmanova and Mubarakshina (2022) emphasized the shift in youth linguistic culture under the pressures of globalization and informatization, noting that slang offers youth a way to differentiate themselves linguistically and socially within fluid multilingual environments.

Digital dissemination serves as a critical mediating factor that accelerates the spread and normalization of English-based slang among Malaysian youth. According to Abaideldanova and Tirado (2024), the internet acts as the primary channel for slang propagation, reshaping the temporal and spatial dynamics of youth communication. Social media platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter) have become powerful vectors through which slang terms are introduced, mimicked, and eventually routinized in daily interactions. This trend is particularly visible in the Malaysian context, where Stapa and Shaari (2013) identified the emergence of Malaysian Online Communicative English—a variety that integrates slang into its structural and functional features. These digital spaces provide fertile ground for linguistic experimentation, where slang is not only circulated rapidly but also imbued with social value and symbolic capital.

Normalization trajectories, which describe how slang becomes entrenched in everyday discourse, are influenced by both linguistic borrowing and psychological mechanisms. Tsibizova and Galankina (2021) showed how English loanwords penetrate youth slang systems globally, reflecting broader cultural shifts. This aligns with findings from Dilanova (2019), who emphasized that slang operates within a metaphorical and associative network shaped by youth perceptions and socio-cultural associations. In the Malaysian context, these normalization processes are further reinforced by cognitive and affective factors. Charkova (2007) revealed

that youth not only view slang as a linguistic tool but as a social device to signal group belonging and emotional resonance. More recently, Liew et al. (2025) demonstrated that integrating Gen-Z slang into educational technologies significantly alters learners' affective and cognitive responses—highlighting slang's dual role in shaping both emotional engagement and perceived linguistic difficulty. Collectively, these insights illustrate that the acquisition, spread, and routine use of slang are complex, multi-layered processes shaped by digital culture, linguistic contact, and youth psychology.

Methodology

Research Design – Narrative Review Methodology

This study is grounded in a narrative review methodology, which is particularly suited for exploring complex, emerging phenomena that intersect multiple disciplines—such as the acquisition, digital dissemination, and normalization of English-based slang among Malaysian youth. Unlike systematic reviews that prioritize exhaustive coverage and strict inclusion criteria, the narrative review allows for a flexible, interpretive approach to organizing, evaluating, and synthesizing diverse forms of knowledge (Baumeister & Leary, 1997). This methodology is advantageous when the aim is not merely to summarize existing findings, but to construct a conceptual framework that can explain thematic trajectories across sociolinguistic, technological, and psychological domains.

In the context of this study, the narrative review facilitates an integrative approach to understanding how slang develops in digitally mediated, multilingual societies. It enables the incorporation of theoretical discussions, empirical case studies, and cultural commentaries that individually contribute to a more comprehensive picture. Through a thematic organization of findings, the review draws connections between disparate strands of literature, building toward a conceptual model that captures slang's movement from acquisition, through digital dissemination, to normalization. This method supports the development of a framework that is not only grounded in existing scholarship but also adaptable to future empirical testing and cross-cultural applications. The subsequent data collection and review strategy, detailed in Sections 3.2 and 3.3, operationalize this design through targeted database searches and a structured thematic analysis.

Key Steps in Conducting a Narrative Review – Data Collection via Scopus

The data for this narrative review was collected using the Scopus database, selected for its extensive indexing of peer-reviewed journals across linguistics, education, communication studies, and cultural research. The goal was to gather a representative set of scholarly works that discuss the acquisition, dissemination, and normalization of English-based slang, particularly among Malaysian or Southeast Asian youth. A carefully constructed Boolean search string was used to refine the query and ensure the retrieval of relevant studies. The search string employed was:

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("slang" OR "colloquial" OR "informal language" OR "vernacular") AND  
("acquisition" OR "learning" OR "adoption" OR "assimilation") AND  
("dissemination" OR "distribution" OR "spread" OR "communication") AND  
("English" OR "Malaysian English" OR "Manglish" OR "pidgin") AND  
("Malaysia" OR "Malaysian" OR "Southeast Asia" OR "ASEAN")
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This combination was applied to titles, abstracts, and keywords to ensure thematic alignment. The search yielded an initial pool of 112 documents, from which duplicates, non-relevant studies (e.g., studies on unrelated slang or language communities), and articles without full-text access were excluded. After screening, a total of 25 articles were shortlisted, out of which 12 were selected for deeper thematic synthesis due to their strong relevance to the conceptual focus of this study.

The selected studies were diverse in methodological approach, ranging from empirical studies to conceptual analyses and sociolinguistic commentaries. Each article was read in full and annotated, with notes made on the authors' treatment of slang acquisition, mechanisms of dissemination through digital platforms, and processes of normalization within youth communities. This allowed for a wide-ranging, yet focused narrative synthesis that was not only descriptive but also interpretive—identifying latent connections and theoretical implications across the body of work.

Data Collection and Review Strategy

To systematically analyze the literature and construct a robust conceptual understanding, this study employed an integrative thematic analysis approach. This qualitative synthesis technique enabled the identification and interpretation of recurring themes, patterns, and theoretical orientations present in the selected studies. After the article pool was finalized, each document was imported into a coding matrix, where the key content related to slang acquisition, digital dissemination, and normalization was extracted. Through this process, conceptual overlaps and divergences were analyzed and categorized into emergent themes. These themes were not predefined, but rather inductively derived based on the narrative flow of the literature, ensuring that the analysis remained grounded in the data while being sensitive to broader sociolinguistic theory.

The thematic analysis focused on five overarching categories: (1) sociolinguistic factors in slang acquisition, (2) digital affordances influencing slang spread, (3) identity and group membership, (4) linguistic borrowing and normalization, and (5) cognitive and affective responses to slang. These themes were iteratively refined and mapped against the study's conceptual framework. This integrative strategy facilitated a multidimensional synthesis of existing literature, bridging empirical findings with theoretical insights from sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, and digital media studies. The final outcome was a cohesive narrative that supports the proposed acquisition-dissemination-normalization trajectory model and reveals how language innovation among Malaysian youth is shaped by digital globalization and identity performance.

This approach was particularly suitable given the interdisciplinary nature of the topic. By using integrative thematic analysis, the study ensures that diverse perspectives—ranging from the structural evolution of Malaysian English to the cognitive processing of slang in social contexts—are synthesized into a coherent conceptual argument. The review thus not only documents what is known but also articulates how the interplay between youth culture, language, and technology manifests uniquely in the Malaysian sociolinguistic landscape.

Key Findings from the Narrative Review

The key themes and findings from the narrative review are summarized in Table 1, highlighting the sociolinguistic, digital, normalization, and cognitive dimensions of modern English-based slang usage among Malaysian youth.

Table 1: Key Findings from the Narrative Review

Theme	Key Findings	Key References
Sociolinguistic Factors in Slang Acquisition	Malaysian youth use slang to express creativity and identity, showing a departure from formal linguistic norms; driven by globalization and multilingual contexts.	Shing (2025); Abdrakhmanova & Mubarakshina (2022)
Digital Dissemination through Online Platforms	Slang spreads through social media and messaging apps, reshaping communication styles and forming identity through shared language on digital platforms.	Abaideldanova & Tirado (2024); Stapa & Shaari (2013)
Normalization and Linguistic Integration	English-based slang becomes normalized in Malaysian English, especially through Malaysian Online Communicative English, marked by consistent usage across media.	Tsibizova & Galankina (2021); Dilanova (2019)
Cognitive and Psychological Influences	Slang usage is tied to youth's sense of belonging and engagement; it enhances emotional resonance, social bonding, and influences learning environments.	Charkova (2007); Liew et al. (2025)

From the table, the narrative review identified four major themes that shape the acquisition, dissemination, and normalization of modern English-based slang among Malaysian youth. First, the sociolinguistic factors influencing slang acquisition reveal that youth adopt slang to express creativity, social affiliation, and informality. This is particularly prominent in bilingual contexts where Malaysian youth navigate between local and global linguistic influences (Shing, 2025; Abdrakhmanova & Mubarakshina, 2022). These expressions serve as linguistic markers of generational identity and innovation, illustrating how language functions as a performative and sociocultural tool.

Second, the role of digital platforms is central to the widespread dissemination of slang. Social media applications such as Facebook, TikTok, and messaging apps provide real-time, interactive spaces where slang is circulated, contextualized, and redefined. These digital environments contribute not only to the spread of slang but to its normalization as part of users' communicative routines (Abaideldanova & Tirado, 2024; Stapa & Shaari, 2013). Third, the linguistic normalization process highlights how slang terms transition from novel or niche expressions to recognized features of Malaysian English. Consistent use across contexts and the emergence of digital sub-varieties of Malaysian English underscore slang's integration into everyday linguistic practice (Tsibizova & Galankina, 2021; Dilanova, 2019).

Finally, cognitive and psychological aspects of slang usage among youth indicate that slang plays a pivotal role in emotional connection, group belonging, and learning motivation. Youth report higher engagement when slang is used in educational or social communication tools, though it may also introduce challenges such as increased cognitive load (Charkova, 2007; Liew et al., 2025). These findings point to the multifaceted nature of slang, not just as a linguistic trend, but as a socio-cognitive and cultural phenomenon embedded in the lived experiences of Malaysian youth.

Understanding the stages of slang integration in Malaysian youth.

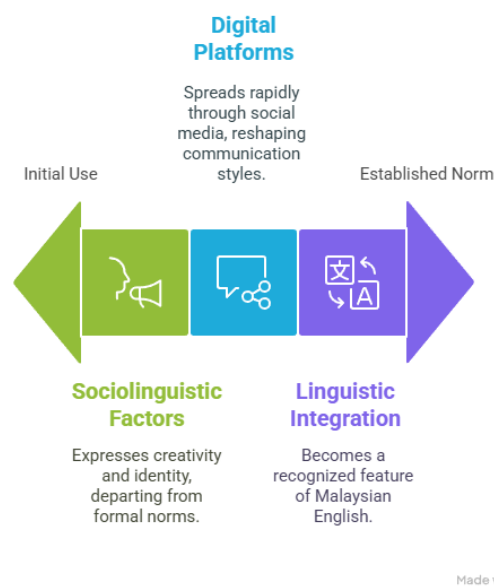


Figure 1: The Stages of Slang Integration in Malaysian Youth

Drawing upon the key findings synthesized in Table 1, a conceptual framework has been developed to illustrate the trajectories of slang integration among Malaysian youth (see Figure 1). The framework maps the progression from initial use, influenced by sociolinguistic factors such as identity expression and linguistic innovation, to widespread dissemination facilitated by digital platforms that reshape communicative norms. Finally, the slang reaches a stage of linguistic integration, where it becomes a recognized and routinized feature of Malaysian English. This staged model captures the interplay between cultural expression, digital media affordances, and language normalization processes—offering a structured lens through which future studies can analyze the lifecycle of slang in digital, multilingual societies.

Theoretical Framework Development

The theoretical framework for this study is anchored in an interdisciplinary synthesis of Sociolinguistic Theory (Labov, 1972), Digital Communication Theory (Herring, 2007), and Youth Language and Identity Theory (Eckert, 2000). These perspectives collectively account for the social, technological, and identity-driven dimensions of slang acquisition and usage among Malaysian youth. Sociolinguistic theory provides the foundation for understanding how

language varies and evolves in response to social variables such as age, peer group dynamics, and cultural belonging. Digital Communication Theory introduces the idea that online environments fundamentally alter discourse norms, enabling linguistic innovation and peer validation through participatory culture. Meanwhile, Youth Language and Identity Theory emphasize how slang serves as a performative and symbolic tool for constructing identity and resisting dominant linguistic norms. Together, these theories provide a multidimensional lens through which the acquisition, digital dissemination, and normalization of modern English-based slang can be conceptually framed.

In the context of this study, the theoretical framework is operationalized through a three-stage conceptual model: (1) Initial Acquisition, (2) Digital Dissemination, and (3) Linguistic Integration. At the acquisition stage, youth engage with slang through socialization, digital exposure, and transnational media influences, where sociolinguistic theory explains variation and informal language adoption (Shing, 2025; Charkova, 2007). During the digital dissemination phase, slang travels across platforms such as TikTok and Twitter, reshaping communication practices and achieving viral status, as elaborated in digital discourse studies (Abaideldanova & Tirado, 2024). Finally, normalization or integration occurs when slang becomes institutionalized within Malaysian English discourse, a process supported by studies on Malaysian Online Communicative English (Stapa & Shaari, 2013). These stages are not linear but cyclical and recursive, reflecting the continuous evolution of language as new expressions emerge and fade.

The development of this framework carries both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, it expands on existing models of language change by incorporating the mediating role of digital technology and identity performance. It also integrates regional perspectives into a largely Western-dominated body of research on digital slang, thus offering insights into how global linguistic trends are localized in bilingual Southeast Asian contexts. Practically, the model has relevance for educators, curriculum designers, and language policy makers by highlighting the realities of contemporary youth language practices. Understanding slang's trajectory allows educators to bridge the gap between formal instruction and authentic communication, making language learning more inclusive and culturally relevant. Ultimately, this framework provides a scaffold for future empirical research on slang's linguistic, cognitive, and pedagogical dimensions. In conceptualizing slang use as a trajectory influenced by both social and technological forces, the study aligns with an interdisciplinary body of theory that captures the lived realities of youth in a globalized, digitally mediated environment. To visualize these theoretical underpinnings and their role in structuring the study's analytical lens, the following framework illustrates how Sociolinguistic Theory, Digital Communication Theory, and Youth Language and Identity Theory converge to inform the processes of slang acquisition, digital dissemination, and normalization within the Malaysian youth context (see Figure 2).

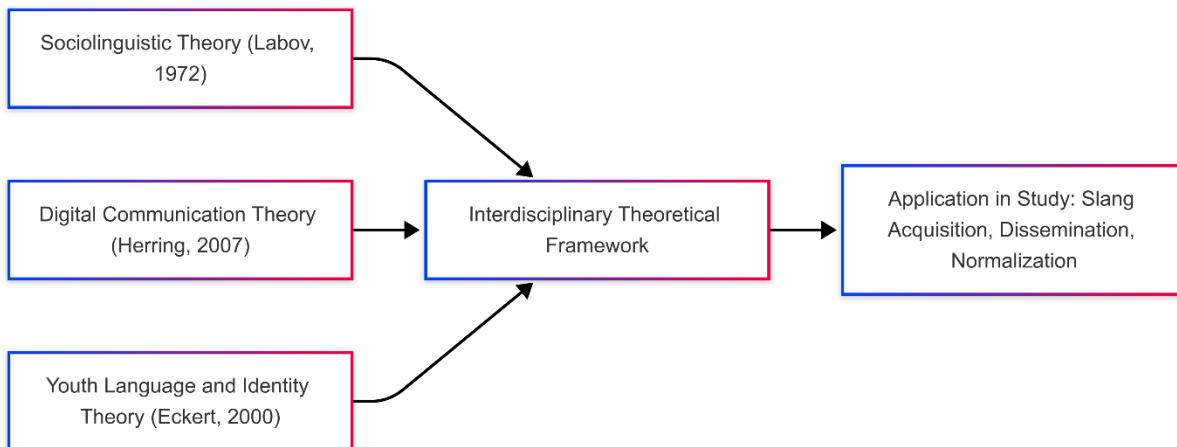


Figure 2. Theoretical Framework of The Study

Proposition Development

Proposition 1

Sociolinguistic factors—such as bilingual peer interaction, informal group discourse, and cultural hybridity—play a central role in shaping how Malaysian youth acquire modern English-based slang. These social conditions create environments where informal and expressive language thrives, fostering the creative use of non-standard vocabulary as a form of identity negotiation and generational distinction. As noted by Shing (2025), slang serves as a socio-pragmatic tool among bilingual Malaysian youth, facilitating group cohesion and informal bonding. Furthermore, Abdrakhmanova and Mubarakshina (2022) highlight that youth language innovation emerges from globalization and informatization, which redefine linguistic norms and increase access to foreign expressions. These studies show that the acquisition of slang is not random but socially constructed within youth subcultures that value linguistic creativity and cultural resistance. **Therefore, sociolinguistic influences positively affect the acquisition of modern English-based slang by Malaysian youth by enabling informal, expressive language practices.**

Proposition 2

Digital communication platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter) serve as critical mediators in the dissemination of modern English-based slang among Malaysian youth. These platforms not only amplify slang through virality and trend cycles but also facilitate imitation and peer reinforcement in real time. Abaideldanova and Tirado (2024) assert that digital spaces shift traditional boundaries of language transmission by allowing slang to spread across spatial and temporal limits, while Stapa and Shaari (2013) demonstrate how digital discourse in Malaysia has contributed to the emergence of a new, localized form of English that incorporates slang as a communicative norm. Through likes, shares, and algorithmic amplification, slang terms rapidly become visible and desirable within digital youth cultures. **Thus, digital communication platforms significantly influence the widespread dissemination of modern English-based slang by accelerating its adoption and social validation among Malaysian youth.**

Proposition 3

When slang is repeatedly used across digital and face-to-face interactions, it becomes internalized and accepted as part of everyday Malaysian English, marking the process of normalization and linguistic integration. This shift from novelty to routine is enabled by consistent exposure, repeated usage, and mutual intelligibility across youth communities. Tsibizova and Galankina (2021) observed that English slang is increasingly incorporated into the daily language of youth due to the influence of global borrowing, while Dilanova (2019) found that slang gains meaning through associative links formed via cultural and linguistic familiarity. In Malaysia, such integration is evidenced in the emergence of Malaysian Online Communicative English, where slang is not only tolerated but becomes emblematic of youth identity (Stapa & Shaari, 2013). **Consequently, consistent use of slang in informal discourse leads to its normalization by establishing it as a recognized component of Malaysian English.**

Proposition 4

Cognitive and psychological factors, including emotional resonance, peer group belonging, and digital identity construction, shape how Malaysian youth engage with modern slang—affecting both communication outcomes and cognitive load. Charkova (2007) found that slang functions as a social strategy to appear relatable and confident within youth groups, while Liew et al. (2025) revealed that incorporating Gen-Z slang in educational chatbots increases user engagement and affective connection but also raises processing complexity due to non-standard linguistic features. This suggests that while slang enhances interpersonal connection and platform interaction, it may also challenge users cognitively, especially in educational or formal environments. **Accordingly, psychological and cognitive engagement with slang enhances youth identity formation and group bonding, while simultaneously increasing communicative and cognitive complexity in digital settings.**

Conclusion

This conceptual paper has explored the acquisition, digital dissemination, and normalization trajectories of modern English-based slang among Malaysian youth. The review revealed that sociolinguistic influences such as peer interaction and bilingualism significantly shape slang acquisition, while digital platforms act as powerful catalysts for dissemination by enabling real-time sharing and reinforcement. Over time, repeated exposure and social validation contribute to the normalization of slang, embedding it into localized forms of Malaysian English. Additionally, cognitive and psychological factors—such as identity performance, group belonging, and emotional resonance—further influence how slang is used and processed by youth, making it both a social and linguistic phenomenon. The proposed conceptual framework and propositions offer a structured understanding of how slang evolves from informal expression to linguistic routine within digitally mediated youth cultures.

Theoretically, the study contributes to the broader field of sociolinguistics and digital communication by integrating interdisciplinary perspectives that explain the lifecycle of slang in bilingual, globalized contexts. Practically, it highlights the need for educators and policymakers to recognize the linguistic realities of Malaysian youth, especially in designing more inclusive and relevant language instruction. However, the study is limited by its conceptual nature and reliance on secondary data, which calls for future empirical validation.

Further research could explore the actual usage patterns of slang across different social strata and regions in Malaysia or examine its pedagogical potential and challenges in classroom settings. Longitudinal studies could also investigate the durability of slang terms and their transition into formal registers or institutionalized language use.

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Ethics Statement: This study did not involve any human participants, animals, or sensitive data requiring ethical approval. The authors confirm that the research was conducted in accordance with accepted academic integrity and ethical publishing standards.

Author Contribution Statement: All authors contributed significantly to the development of this manuscript. Muhammad Shyazzwan was responsible for the conceptualization, methodology, and overall supervision of the study. Mohammad Faez Izzuddin handled data collection, analysis, and interpretation of results. Najla Shafiqah contributed to the literature review, drafting, and critical revision of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript prior to submission.

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