

From "Cringe" to "Toxic": English-Inspired Youth Slang, Social Judgement, and Identity Construction in Indonesian Digital Discourse

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Abstract:

This study examines how English-inspired youth slang in Indonesian digital discourse functions as evaluative language, enabling social judgment and identity construction, and considers implications for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) pedagogy. Grounded in sociolinguistic identity theory, Appraisal Theory, and Critical Discourse Analysis, it conceptualizes slang as an ideologically loaded evaluative practice. Using a qualitative corpus-informed approach, data were collected from TikTok, Twitter/X, and Instagram through purposive sampling. The analysis focuses on expressions such as *cringe*, *insecure*, *toxic*, and *pick me*, examining their evaluative roles and contexts. Findings show that English-inspired slang enables users to label, evaluate, and regulate behavior while constructing in-group and out-group identities. These practices reflect globalized ideologies and power relations, indicating that slang is socially embedded. The study argues for viewing slang as an evaluative resource and highlights the need to integrate critical digital literacy into EFL classrooms.

Keywords: Digital discourse; Youth slang; Evaluative language; Identity construction; Critical digital literacy

Abstrak:

Penelitian ini menginvestigasi fungsi slang remaja berbasis bahasa Inggris dalam wacana digital Indonesia sebagai bentuk bahasa evaluatif yang memfasilitasi penilaian sosial dan konstruksi identitas, serta implikasinya bagi pedagogi Bahasa Inggris sebagai Bahasa Asing (EFL). Berpijak pada teori identitas sosiolinguistik, Teori Appraisal, dan Analisis Wacana Kritis, penelitian ini memposisikan slang sebagai praktik evaluatif yang sarat muatan ideologis. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif berbasis korpus. Data diperoleh dari TikTok, Twitter/X, dan Instagram melalui purposive sampling. Analisis difokuskan pada ekspresi seperti *cringe*, *insecure*, *toxic*, dan *pick me*, dengan menelaah fungsi evaluatif dan konteks diskursif penggunaannya. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa slang berbasis bahasa Inggris berfungsi sebagai mekanisme penilaian sosial yang memungkinkan pengguna melabeli, mengevaluasi, dan meregulasi perilaku, sekaligus membangun batas identitas antara in-group dan out-group. Praktik ini merefleksikan sirkulasi ideologi global dan relasi kuasa, sehingga slang tidak bersifat netral secara linguistik, melainkan terikat secara sosial dan ideologis. Penelitian ini menegaskan pentingnya integrasi literasi digital kritis dalam pembelajaran EFL.

Kata kunci: Wacana digital; Slang remaja; Bahasa evaluatif; Konstruksi identitas; Literasi digital kritis

INTRODUCTION

The proliferation of digital communication has fundamentally reshaped linguistic practices among youth, positioning social media as a central site for language innovation, circulation, and ideological negotiation. Platforms such as TikTok, Twitter/X, and Instagram enable rapid meaning-making processes in which linguistic forms, particularly slang, are continuously recontextualized within dynamic social interactions. In these environments, language functions not only as a communicative tool but also as a resource for constructing meaning, stance, and social positioning. Recent scholarship highlights that digital discourse accelerates lexical innovation while embedding language use within broader sociocultural and ideological frameworks, reinforcing the inseparability of language, identity, and power (Zappavigna, 2015)

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Within this context, English-inspired slang has become increasingly prominent in non-English-speaking settings, including Indonesia. Expressions such as *cringe*, *toxic*, *insecure*, and *pick me* are widely used among youth and often extend beyond literal meanings. These expressions function as evaluative semiotic resources through which users construct social meanings, position themselves and others, and negotiate group boundaries. Their widespread use reflects the global circulation of English as symbolic capital associated with modernity and prestige (Androutsopoulos, 2006). Although such slang may contribute to vocabulary expansion and pragmatic awareness, its highly context-dependent nature can

result in superficial or inappropriate use when adopted without critical understanding.

This phenomenon must be understood within Indonesia's broader educational context, which continues to face challenges in English proficiency. Data from the Tes Kemampuan Akademik (TKA) 2025 show that the national average score for English (24.93/100) remains significantly lower than other subjects, indicating a gap between expected competencies and actual outcomes (Kemendikdasmen, 2025). Supporting reports highlight that many students fall into low achievement categories, reflecting systemic issues in English instruction (Jaelani & Zabidi, 2020). This reveals a paradox: despite increased exposure to English through digital media, such exposure does not necessarily improve formal proficiency. Learners often engage with fragmented, informal, and evaluative language, leading to surface-level familiarity rather than deeper competence.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, this issue is closely tied to identity construction. Identity is not fixed but emerges through interaction and is continuously negotiated in discourse (Hall, 2005). In digital contexts, slang plays a key role in indexing social meanings, enabling users to signal affiliation, negotiate belonging, and construct boundaries between in-groups and out-groups. Research shows that youth use digital language strategically to perform identity and align socially within online communities (Fransisca et al., 2025). However, identity-focused approaches often overlook the evaluative mechanisms through which identities are constructed.

Appraisal Theory provides a framework for addressing this gap by analyzing how speakers express attitudes, judgments, and emotions (Martin & White, 2005). Digital discourse is highly evaluative, with users frequently employing language to position themselves and others within moral and social frameworks (Zappavigna, 2015). Slang expressions such as *cringe* and *toxic* function as condensed evaluative labels that enable rapid judgment and alignment. Despite its relevance, the application of Appraisal Theory to youth slang in digital contexts remains limited, particularly in non-Western settings.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) further extends this perspective by examining the ideological dimensions of language. CDA conceptualizes discourse as both shaped by and constitutive of power relations, highlighting how language reproduces social norms and inequalities (Fairclough, 1997). In digital environments, discourse has been shown to

normalize dominant values and marginalize alternative voices (Khosravinik, 2017). Within this framework, slang can be understood not only as linguistic innovation but also as a mechanism of social regulation and ideological circulation. However, integrative studies combining CDA with Appraisal Theory to analyze evaluative slang remain limited.

These gaps have important implications for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) pedagogy. As learners increasingly encounter English through digital media, their linguistic development is shaped by informal and socially loaded language practices. While exposure to slang may enhance vocabulary, it does not necessarily foster critical awareness or deeper linguistic competence (Priyatmojo, 2026; Santosa & Pratama, 2025). The concept of critical digital literacy emphasizes the ability to interpret digital texts and their ideological meanings (Pebriyan et al., 2025) yet existing approaches rarely focus on specific linguistic forms such as slang.

Taken together, these studies reveal a gap at the intersection of sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, and pedagogy. There is limited research integrating identity, evaluation, and ideology to examine how English-inspired slang functions as a linguistic, evaluative, and ideological resource in digital discourse, particularly in Indonesia.

In response, this study integrates sociolinguistic identity theory, Appraisal Theory, and Critical Discourse Analysis to investigate English-inspired youth slang in Indonesian digital discourse. It argues that such slang operates as an ideologically loaded evaluative practice through which users enact social judgment, regulate behavior, and construct identities. This study contributes by reconceptualizing slang as a mechanism of social judgment and by advancing critical digital literacy in EFL contexts.

METHOD

Building on sociolinguistic identity construction, Appraisal Theory, and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), this study employs a qualitative, corpus-informed approach to examine English-inspired youth slang in Indonesian digital discourse. This design allows for in-depth analysis of slang as an evaluative and ideological practice in online interaction.

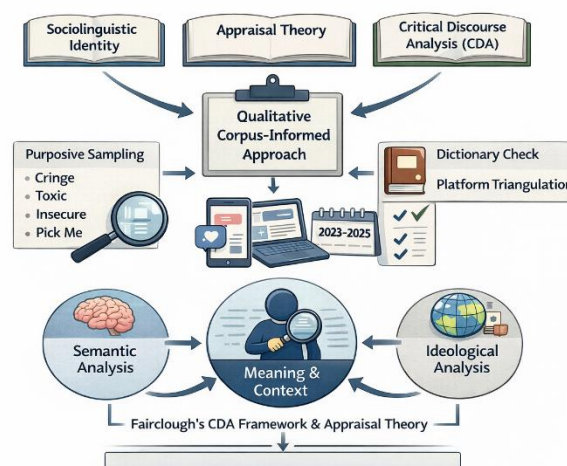
The data consist of 68 slang expressions used by Indonesian youth (2023–2025), documented with their forms, meanings, contexts, platforms, and timeframes. Rather than focusing on frequency, the study emphasizes meaning-making and contextual

interpretation (Jespersen, 2012).

Purposive sampling was used to select socially salient terms such as *cringe*, *toxic*, *insecure*, and *pick me*. Data were collected through non-participant observation and discourse sampling from public posts to ensure ecological validity (Tajik et al., 2024).

Reliability was ensured through dictionary verification and platform triangulation. Analysis integrates semantic, discourse, and ideological approaches using Fairclough's CDA framework and Appraisal Theory to examine evaluation, identity construction, and social meaning.

Figure 1. Research Design for the Analysis



RESULT & DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of the corpus analysis and demonstrates that English-inspired youth slang in Indonesian digital discourse functions as an evaluative and ideologically embedded linguistic resource. Based on a corpus of 68 lexical items collected from multiple digital platforms (2023–2025), the analysis shows that these expressions extend beyond lexical borrowing and linguistic innovation. Rather, they operate as discursive tools through which users construct evaluation, enact social judgment, negotiate identities, and reproduce ideological meanings. The discussion proceeds from semantic patterns to evaluative functions, and subsequently to broader sociocultural and pedagogical implications.

4.1 Corpus Overview and Semantic Shift Distribution

The corpus reveals a range of semantic transformations, with broadening (29.4%) and amelioration (26.5%) emerging as the most frequent processes, followed by pejoration (19.1%) and semantic shift (19.1%). Less frequent categories, including intensification and idiomatic shift, play a more marginal role.

Table 1. Semantic Shift Distribution

Type of Semantic Shift	Frequency	Percentage
Amelioration	18	26.5%
Pejoration	13	19.1%
Broadening	20	29.4%
Narrowing	1	1.5%
Shift (Neutral Shift)	13	19.1%
Intensifier	3	4.4%
Hyperbole	1	1.5%
Polarization	1	1.5%
Idiomatic Shift	1	1.5%
Pejoration → Amelioration	1	1.5%
Total	68	100%

The predominance of broadening suggests that youth slang in digital discourse is inherently flexible and context-sensitive, enabling users to extend meanings in response to dynamic communicative needs (Stefanowitsch, 2020). Expressions such as *vibe*, *mood*, and *core* exemplify how lexical items move beyond their original referential meanings to encode affective alignment and relational positioning. Similarly, the high proportion of ameliorative forms, such as *slay*, *serve*, *ate*, and *goated*, reflects the increasing importance of positive evaluation and performative identity in digitally mediated environments. These expressions are particularly salient in visually oriented platforms, where language is closely tied to self-presentation, aesthetic display, and visibility.

Nevertheless, the presence of pejorative expressions, including *cringe*, *toxic*, *simp*, and *pick-m*, is analytically significant. Although less dominant in frequency, these forms carry substantial discursive force, as they are frequently used to classify behavior and regulate social norms. Thus, while semantic broadening and amelioration characterize the overall flexibility of digital slang, pejorative expressions play a crucial role in structuring social

evaluation and normative boundaries within online interaction.

4.2 Slang as Evaluative Language: Appraisal Patterns

From the perspective of Appraisal Theory, language serves as a system for encoding evaluation, encompassing judgment, affect, and appreciation (Martin & White, 2005). The findings indicate that English-inspired slang constitutes a rich evaluative repertoire, with judgment emerging as the most socially consequential dimension.

4.2.1 Judgment as Discursive Social Evaluation

Judgment is the most prominent evaluative resource in the corpus, particularly in expressions that assess individuals and their behavior against socially recognized norms. Terms such as *cringe*, *toxic*, *simp*, *pick-me*, *mid*, and NPC function as condensed evaluative labels, allowing users to categorize others in morally and socially meaningful ways.

For instance, in the utterance "That video is so cringe," the term *cringe* operates not merely as a descriptor of awkwardness, but as a form of normative evaluation, positioning the content as socially inappropriate. In this sense, such expressions act as discursive shortcuts, enabling rapid and widely recognizable judgments without the need for explicit elaboration. Beyond their descriptive function, these labels contribute to the regulation of social norms, defining what is acceptable, authentic, or excessive within digital communities. As such, slang operates as a mechanism of informal social control, reinforcing shared expectations through repeated evaluative use (Fairclough, 1997).

4.2.2 Affect as Emotional Grounding of Evaluation

Affective expressions also play a significant role in the corpus, particularly in encoding emotional responses and interpersonal stance. Terms such as *shook*, *dead*, *salty*, and *insecure* capture a range of emotional states, from surprise and overwhelm to irritation and vulnerability. These forms enable users to position themselves quickly within interaction, contributing to the immediacy and efficiency of digital communication. However, affect rarely operates in isolation. More frequently, it serves as the emotional foundation for judgment, where feelings such as discomfort or irritation are transformed into evaluative labels. For example, an initial affective response may subsequently be articulated through terms such as *cringe* or *toxic*. This interaction reflects the inherently evaluative nature of discourse, in which emotional responses are mobilized to support and legitimize social

judgment

4.2.3 Appreciation and Aesthetic Validation

The third evaluative dimension, appreciation, is closely associated with the assessment of aesthetic value, performance, and style. Expressions such as *slay*, *serve*, *ate*, *snatched*, *fire*, and *aura* are frequently used to validate appearance and digital performance, particularly within visually driven platforms such as TikTok and Instagram. These expressions reflect the growing importance of aesthetic capital in digital environments, where visibility, style, and charisma are central to identity construction (Barizi, 2025). While predominantly positive, such evaluations also contribute to the normalization of specific standards of desirability, thereby embedding language within broader ideological frameworks.

4.3 Slang as a Mechanism of Social Judgment

A central finding of this study is that English-inspired slang functions as a mechanism of social judgment and behavioral regulation. Through repeated use in digital interactions, evaluative expressions become normalized tools for labeling and categorizing behavior. Terms such as cringe, toxic, and pick-me do not merely describe actions; they actively shape social perception by defining what is considered acceptable or unacceptable. This process aligns with the view of discourse as social practice, where language both reflects and constructs social norms (Fairclough, 1997). Slang labels operate as forms of symbolic sanction, enabling users to discipline behavior without formal authority. For instance, labeling someone as cringe publicly delegitimizes their actions, while describing behavior as toxic frames it as harmful and socially undesirable.

Moreover, the widespread circulation of these expressions contributes to the normalization of evaluative practices. As these terms are repeatedly used across platforms, their judgmental force becomes taken for granted, reducing the need for explicit justification. In this way, digital discourse transforms evaluation into a routine linguistic practice, reinforcing norms through repetition and visibility.

4.4 Identity Construction and Boundary-Making

The findings further demonstrate that slang plays a central role in identity construction. Consistent with (Hall, 2005). Identity is understood as an emergent and interactional process rather than a fixed attribute. In digital discourse, slang functions as a key resource for

indexing social meanings and positioning users within particular communities.

Users who employ expressions such as *slay*, *bet*, *no cap*, and *based* signal affiliation with digitally literate and globally connected youth culture, thereby constructing an in-group identity. Conversely, expressions such as *cringe*, *NPC*, and *mid* contribute to the construction of out-group identities, positioning others as socially inadequate or norm-deviant. This dual process highlights that identity is constructed not only through self-presentation but also through evaluative exclusion. Language thus becomes a means of drawing boundaries between those who belong and those who do not, reinforcing social distinctions within digital communities.

4.5 Ideology, Power, and Platform Culture

From a Critical Discourse Analysis perspective, the findings indicate that English-inspired slang is deeply embedded in ideological and power structures. First, the use of English functions as symbolic capital, associated with modernity, global connectivity, and cultural prestige (Androutsopoulos, 2006).

Second, many slang expressions encode gendered and moral ideologies. For example, *simp* reflects expectations surrounding masculinity, while *pick-me* often operates as a gendered label that polices female-coded behavior. Similarly, *toxic* introduces a moralizing framework that frames behavior in terms of harm and dysfunction. These patterns demonstrate how language contributes to the reproduction of social norms and power relations (Fairclough, 1997). Finally, platform affordances shape the circulation and impact of slang. TikTok facilitates rapid lexical innovation, Instagram reinforces aesthetic evaluation, and X/Twitter enables the rapid spread of evaluative discourse. These findings suggest that meaning in digital contexts is not only socially constructed but also technologically mediated (Zappavigna, 2015).

4.6 Implications for EFL Pedagogy

The findings have important implications for EFL pedagogy, particularly in relation to critical digital literacy. While English-inspired slang provides authentic material for language learning, it should not be treated as neutral vocabulary. Instead, it must be understood as evaluative and ideologically loaded language. Incorporating slang into EFL classrooms offers opportunities to explore semantic change, pragmatic meaning, and digital

discourse practices. However, learners must also be guided to critically examine how such expressions construct identity, encode judgment, and reproduce social norms

In this regard, EFL instruction should move beyond functional competence toward fostering critical awareness of language use in digital environments. Such an approach enables learners to engage with contemporary English not only as a system of communication, but also as a socially and ideologically meaningful practice.

CONCLUSION(S)

The conclusion should not merely summarize the main topics covered or re-state the research problem, but it should be a synthesis of key points and, if applicable, a recommendation of new areas for future research.

This study has demonstrated that English-inspired youth slang in Indonesian digital discourse is not merely a form of linguistic creativity or lexical borrowing, but an evaluative and ideologically embedded practice. Drawing on a corpus of 68 slang expressions, the findings show that these forms function as resources for social judgment, identity construction, and normative regulation. Expressions such as *cringe*, *toxic*, *simp*, and *pick-me* operate as condensed evaluative labels through which users classify behavior, negotiate belonging, and reproduce social boundaries. At the same time, positive forms such as *slay*, *serve*, and *ate* reinforce aesthetic validation and in-group affiliation. These patterns confirm that slang in digital environments is deeply connected to power, ideology, and platform-mediated interaction.

The study also carries important implications for EFL pedagogy in Indonesia. In a context where learners are increasingly exposed to English through social media, digital input should not be treated as peripheral, yet it should not be adopted uncritically. This study therefore advocates the integration of critical digital literacy into EFL classrooms. Learners need to understand not only the meanings of contemporary slang, but also how such expressions encode judgment, regulate behavior, and shape identities. A critically informed pedagogy would better connect everyday digital language practices with deeper linguistic competence, pragmatic awareness, and social understanding.

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