

## THE ROLE OF GEN Z SLANG IN SHAPING SOCIAL IDENTITY AND LANGUAGE NORMS IN SELECTED NETFLIX TEEN SERIES

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### ABSTRACT

The emergence of digital media platforms such as Netflix has made the linguistic landscape of teen series an important field to study modern language use, especially among Generation Z (Gen Z) viewers. This paper examines the portrayal and social role of Gen Z slang in popular Netflix teen series such as "On My Block" (2018) and "Never Have I Ever" (2020), to explicate its function in establishing social identity and language norms among young audiences. To investigate the relationship between language variation and the social aspects shown in the stories, we conducted a qualitative content analysis of these series using accommodation theory. The results indicate patterns of linguistic appropriation and negotiation in the stories that reflect the complex linkages between language, social identity, and cultural representation in modern youth culture. Characters in these series demonstrate speech convergence when interacting within their social groups and divergence when engaging with different social groups, highlighting the dynamic nature of Gen Z slang in digital media. Ultimately, this study contributes to larger conversations on language evolution, identity formation, and media influence in the digital era by illuminating the role and significance of Gen Z slang in Netflix teen shows. It offers insightful information for linguists, educators, and media practitioners alike.

**Keywords :** Sociolinguistic Variation, Generation Z, Slangs, Netflix Series, Social Identity

### 1. Introduction

The emergence of digital media platforms such as Netflix has created a new linguistic landscape that significantly influences modern language use, particularly among Generation Z (Gen Z) viewers. This phenomenon is particularly evident in popular teen series like "On My Block" (2018) and "Never Have I Ever" (2020), and where Gen Z slang is prominently featured. The use of slang in these series not only reflects the everyday language of young people but also plays a crucial role in shaping their social identities and establishing language norms.

Gen Z, defined as individuals born between 1997 and 2012, is the first generation to grow up with the internet and social media as integral parts of their daily lives. This digital immersion has led to the development of unique linguistic features that are rapidly evolving and highly influenced by online culture. The use of slang among Gen Z is often motivated by a sense of social conformity and the desire to create a distinct group identity separate from older generations. According to Jeresano and Carretero (2022), the slang used by Gen Z on social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook reflects their need to fit in with the cultural norms of their peers and the specific social dynamics of each platform.

Moreover, the linguistic choices of Gen Z are heavily influenced by the digital environment in which they interact. Mude and Undale (2023) highlight that Gen Z utilizes social media for various purposes,

including education, shopping, entertainment, and socializing, which further shapes their language use. This constant interaction with digital media leads to the creation of new slang terms and the adaptation of existing ones, which are then disseminated rapidly across social networks. This process not only reinforces group identity but also fosters a sense of belonging and solidarity among Gen Z individuals.

The portrayal of Gen Z slang in Netflix teen series serves as a mirror of the real-life language practices of this generation. These series often depict characters using slang to navigate their social worlds, establish relationships, and assert their identities. The use of slang in these contexts is not merely for entertainment but also reflects deeper social and cultural dynamics. For instance, Taber, Dominguez, and Whittaker (2023) found that the use of slang in Gen Z-dominated media such as TikTok is characterized by high levels of abbreviation and references to internet culture, which create semantic barriers for older generations like Millennials.

Furthermore, the interaction between different social groups within these series often involves a negotiation of linguistic norms. Characters may converge their language use to align with their peers or diverge to assert their individuality or group membership. This dynamic is particularly evident in the way Gen Z characters interact with authority figures or individuals from different social backgrounds, where the use of slang can either bridge or widen communication gaps.

In conclusion, the study of Gen Z slang in Netflix teen series provides valuable insights into the role of language in shaping social identity and cultural representation among young people. By examining the linguistic practices of Gen Z characters, we can better understand the evolving nature of language in the digital age and its impact on social interactions and identity formation.

## 2. Literature Review

The proliferation of digital media platforms, especially social media and streaming services like Netflix, has substantially influenced the linguistic practices of Generation Z (Gen Z). This phenomenon is particularly observable in popular teen series such as "On My Block," and "Never Have I Ever," where the use of Gen Z slang is prominent. These linguistic elements serve not only as a form of communication but also play a significant role in the construction of social identity and the establishment of language norms among young audiences.

Gen Z, characterized as individuals born between 1997 and 2012, has grown up in an era dominated by rapid technological advancements and ubiquitous internet access. This exposure has significantly shaped their language, leading to the creation and widespread use of unique slang terms frequently disseminated across various social media platforms. According to Jeresano and Carretero (2022), the slang used by Gen Z on platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook is not merely a form of expression but a means of establishing social norms and maintaining group cohesion. These slang terms often reflect the latest trends and cultural phenomena, emphasizing the dynamic nature of Gen Z's linguistic landscape.

The linguistic features of Gen Z slang are heavily influenced by the digital environments in which they are used. As Mude and Undale (2023) note, Gen Z's interactions on social media are multifaceted, encompassing education, entertainment, and socializing, all of which contribute to the development and evolution of their slang. This constant interaction with digital media fosters a continuous cycle of slang creation and adaptation, reinforcing group identities and social bonds within

the Gen Z community. The rapid dissemination of these terms across social networks underscores the interconnectedness of modern youth culture.

In addition to reflecting contemporary cultural trends, the use of slang in Netflix teen series illustrates the complex social dynamics within Gen Z. Taber, Dominguez, and Whittaker (2023) found that the use of slang in Gen Z-dominated media, such as TikTok, is characterized by high levels of abbreviation and references to internet culture. This creates semantic barriers for older generations like Millennials, who may find it challenging to keep up with the rapidly evolving linguistic landscape. These barriers are not merely linguistic but also cultural, reflecting the broader generational divide.

Moreover, the interaction between different social groups within these series often involves a negotiation of linguistic norms. Characters may converge their language use to align with their peers or diverge to assert their individuality or group membership. This dynamic is particularly evident in the way Gen Z characters interact with authority figures or individuals from different social backgrounds. For example, in "On My Block," the use of slang varies significantly when characters interact within their peer group compared to when they engage with adults or individuals outside their social circle.

The role of slang in shaping social identity among Gen Z is further highlighted by its use as a tool for inclusion and exclusion. Slang terms often serve as markers of group membership, signaling who is an insider and who is not. This linguistic practice not only reinforces group boundaries but also allows individuals to navigate complex social hierarchies. As Jeresano and Carretero (2022) point out, the strategic use of slang can enhance social cohesion within groups, while its misuse or non-use can lead to social ostracism.

Despite the growing body of research on the use of Gen Z slang in digital media, there remains a significant gap in understanding how this linguistic phenomenon shapes social identity and language norms specifically within the context of popular Netflix teen series. Current studies primarily focus on the general use of slang on social media platforms (Taber et al., 2023; Jeresano & Carretero, 2022) or in different media contexts (Mude & Undale, 2023). However, there is limited research that delves into the specific linguistic behaviors and social interactions depicted in teen series, which are influential in shaping the language practices of young viewers.

Addressing this gap is crucial for several reasons. Firstly, Netflix teen series are highly popular among Gen Z audiences and serve as a significant medium for socialization and cultural transmission. These series often reflect and reinforce contemporary youth culture, including the use of slang, which is an essential component of their social identity. By focusing on the linguistic practices in these series, we can gain a deeper understanding of how media content influences language use and social norms among young people.

Secondly, examining the specific context of Netflix teen series allows for a more nuanced analysis of linguistic convergence and divergence within peer groups and across different social interactions. This can reveal how language use varies in different social settings and the factors that drive these variations. Such insights are valuable for educators, linguists, and media practitioners aiming to understand and engage with Gen Z effectively.

The significance of addressing these gaps extends to multiple domains. In the field of sociolinguistics, it contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of language evolution in the digital age,

highlighting the role of media in shaping linguistic practices. For educators, understanding the linguistic dynamics within Netflix teen series can inform the development of more relevant and engaging language education curricula that resonate with Gen Z students.

Finally, for media practitioners and content creators, insights into the use of Gen Z slang can enhance the authenticity and relatability of media content, fostering a stronger connection with the target audience. By addressing these gaps, we also contribute to broader discussions on cultural representation and identity formation, emphasizing the importance of media in reflecting and shaping societal values and norms.

### 3. Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative content analysis to explore the use of Gen Z slang in the dialogues of specific Netflix teen series: "On My Block," and "Never Have I Ever." Content analysis is chosen due to its effectiveness in systematically examining communication patterns within media content (Krippendorff, 2018).

The data for this study will consist of the complete dialogues from selected episodes of the aforementioned series. Episodes will be transcribed to create a comprehensive dataset of spoken content. The selection of episodes will be based on their popularity and relevance to Gen Z viewers, as indicated by viewership ratings and social media engagement.

#### Sampling

A purposive sampling method will be used to select episodes that are representative of typical interactions within each series. This ensures that the analysis captures a wide range of slang usage and social interactions among characters.

#### Analytical Framework

The analysis will be guided by Accommodation Theory, proposed by Howard Giles (Giles, 1973). This theory posits that individuals adjust their speech patterns to either converge or diverge from their conversational partner's language, depending on social motivations.

#### Coding Process

1. **Initial Coding:** Transcribed dialogues will be reviewed to identify instances of Gen Z slang. Each slang term will be coded based on its meaning, context, and the characters involved.
2. **Pattern Coding:** The initial codes will be grouped into categories that reflect broader patterns of language use, such as convergence (adapting language to fit in with peers) and divergence (using distinct language to stand out or signify group boundaries).
3. **Thematic Analysis:** The coded data will be analyzed thematically to uncover underlying themes related to social identity, group dynamics, and cultural representation.

#### Validity and Reliability

To ensure the validity and reliability of the coding process, inter-coder reliability will be assessed. Two independent researchers will code a sample of the dialogues, and Cohen's Kappa will be calculated to measure agreement. Discrepancies will be resolved through discussion until consensus is reached.

### Data Analysis

The data will be analyzed using a combination of qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis. The analysis will focus on:

- **Frequency Analysis:** Counting the occurrences of specific slang terms to identify the most commonly used terms.
- **Contextual Analysis:** Examining the context in which slang is used to understand its social functions.
- **Interaction Analysis:** Analyzing how characters' use of slang changes depending on their interlocutor to assess patterns of convergence and divergence.

### Ethical Considerations

As the study involves analysis of publicly available media content, there are minimal ethical concerns. However, the research will ensure that the analysis is respectful and does not misinterpret or misrepresent the characters or the series.

## 4. Findings

This finding presents the qualitative content analysis of Gen Z slang used in the Netflix teen series "On My Block" and "Never Have I Ever." The analysis focuses on how slang functions in shaping social identity and language norms among young audiences, guided by Howard Giles' Accommodation Theory. The data collected includes instances of slang, their meanings, contexts of use, and the characters involved. Additionally, the analysis examines whether characters converge or diverge in their language use when interacting with different social groups.

### 4.1 Prevalence and Context of Slang Use

The analysis identified numerous instances of Gen Z slang across the episodes, highlighting the widespread use of informal and contemporary language among the characters. These slang terms were used to express emotions, describe relationships, and comment on situations, making them integral to the characters' interactions and serving as markers of their social identity within the high school setting.

**Table 1: List of Slangs Found in Never Have I Ever**

No.	Episode	Total of Slangs	Total of Situations When Speech Converges
1.	1	27	27
2.	2	11	11
3.	3	11	11
4.	4	3	3
5.	5	17	17
6.	6	13	12

**Table 2: List of Slangs Found in On My Block**

No.	Episode	Total of Slangs	Total of Situations When Speech Converges
1.	1	18	18
2.	2	0	0
3.	3	5	5
4.	4	3	3
5.	5	12	12
6.	6	7	7

#### 4.2 Social Identity and Group Dynamics

The use of slang was closely tied to the characters' social identities and group affiliations. Characters like Jamal, Monse, and Devi frequently used slang to bond with their friends, express frustrations, and navigate social challenges. Terms like "fam" and "squad" emphasized their strong connections with close friends, while phrases like "savage burn" highlighted their ability to engage in playful banter and assert themselves in social situations.

**Table 3: List of Slangs Closely Tied to the Characters' Social Identities and Group Affiliations.**

Character	Show	Slang	Meaning	Context	Social Group	Converge	Diverge
Devi	Never Have I Ever	What's a-poppin'?	What's happening?	Addressing the gods at the start of the episode	High school students	True	False
Devi	Never Have I Ever	Fam	Close friends or family	Expressing deep bond with close friends	High school students	True	False
Devi	Never Have I Ever	Savage	Bold or ruthless	Praising her mom's harsh comment about Ben	High school students	True	False
Devi	Never Have I Ever	Squad	Group of friends	Referring to her close group of friends	High school students	True	False
Devi	Never Have I Ever	Snatched	Stylish or well-dressed	Complimenting Fabiola's natural style	High school students	True	False
Jamal	On My Block	Yo	Informal greeting	Calling out to friends	Friends	True	False

Jamal	On My Block	Boo	Term of endearment	Addressing a friend affectionately	Friends	True	False
Jamal	On My Block	Pop a zannie	Take a Xanax (calm down)	Calming down a friend	Friends	True	False
Jamal	On My Block	Compa	Friend or buddy (Spanish)	Expressing loyalty among friends	Friends	True	False
Jamal	On My Block	Huerita	Light-skinned girl	Describing a girl seen by the characters	Friends	True	False

### 4.3 Convergence and Divergence in Language Use

The data in Table 3 revealed patterns of linguistic convergence and divergence among the characters. Convergence occurred in *Never Have I Ever* when characters adjusted their language to fit in with their peers or align with the social norms of their group. For instance, Devi often used slang that was popular among her friends, demonstrating her desire to maintain group cohesion and solidarity. In contrast, divergence was evident when characters used slang to assert their individuality or differentiate themselves from others. Ben, for example, used terms like "UN" and "pwned" to mock Devi and her friends, highlighting his attempt to assert intellectual superiority and social dominance. Similarly, in *On My Block*, convergence occurred when characters adjusted their language to fit in with their peers, such as Jamal using popular slang among his friends. Divergence was evident when characters used slang to assert individuality or differentiate themselves, like Latrelle using aggressive slang during confrontations.

### 4.4 Cultural Trend

The use of slang in both *"On My Block"* and *"Never Have I Ever"* reflected broader cultural trends and the characters' engagement with digital culture. In *"On My Block,"* terms like "lit," "dope," and "neg" were commonly used to comment on social media behavior, music, and fashion, indicating the characters' immersion in contemporary youth culture. Similarly, in *"Never Have I Ever,"* terms like "thirsty," "slaps," and "flex" were frequently used to discuss social media, music, and fashion, underscoring the role of media in shaping linguistic practices and cultural norms among Gen Z.

### 4.5 Emotional Expression and Humor

Slang was often used to express emotions and add humor to the dialogue in both series. Characters like Jamal and his friends in *"On My Block"* used slang to convey excitement, surprise, and admiration, enhancing the relatability and entertainment value of the series. Similarly, in *"Never Have I Ever,"* characters like Devi and her friends used slang terms to express emotions and inject humor into their interactions. For example, Devi's use of "savage burn" to praise a harsh comment by her mom or "gagged" to compliment a friend's outfit added a playful and humorous tone to the conversations.

### 4.6 Summary

The findings from this study highlight the multifaceted role of Gen Z slang in both *"On My Block"* and *"Never Have I Ever."* Slang serves as a crucial tool for social interaction, identity formation, and cultural representation among the characters. The analysis demonstrates how characters use slang to

navigate their social worlds, align with peers, and engage with contemporary cultural trends. Patterns of convergence and divergence in language use reflect complex social dynamics, providing insights into the linguistic behavior of Gen Z. The alignment with digital trends underscores the role of media in shaping linguistic practices and cultural norms among Gen Z. This use of slang not only enhances the relatability of the characters but also increases the entertainment value of the series.

## 5. Conclusion

This study explored the use of Gen Z slang in popular Netflix teen series such as "On My Block," and "Never Have I Ever." By employing qualitative content analysis and guided by Accommodation Theory, the research focused on how slang functions in shaping social identity and language norms among young audiences. The analysis revealed that the use of slang in these series is a reflection of contemporary youth culture and serves as a crucial tool for social interaction and identity formation. Characters frequently adjust their language to either converge with their peers or diverge to assert their individuality, highlighting the dynamic nature of linguistic practices in digital media contexts (Krippendorff, 2018; Giles, 1973).

This research significantly contributes to the field of sociolinguistics by providing insights into the role of digital media in shaping language use among Gen Z. It underscores the importance of media content in reflecting and reinforcing contemporary slang and social norms. The application of Accommodation Theory to media analysis offers a novel perspective on how linguistic convergence and divergence operate in scripted dialogues. Furthermore, the study bridges a gap in existing literature by focusing specifically on the linguistic behaviors depicted in Netflix teen series, which are influential in the socialization of young viewers (Jeresano & Carretero, 2022; Taber et al., 2023).

To build on the findings of this study, future research could consider the following avenues:

**Longitudinal Studies:** Conduct longitudinal studies to examine how the use of Gen Z slang evolves over time in media and how it impacts language use in real-life social interactions among young people. This approach would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the temporal dynamics of slang usage and its long-term effects on language and identity (Krippendorff, 2018).

**Cross-Cultural Analysis:** Investigate the use of slang in teen series from different cultural contexts to understand the global influence of media on language norms and social identity. Comparing how slang is used and perceived in various cultural settings can offer insights into the universality and variability of linguistic practices among Gen Z (Mude & Undale, 2023).

**Audience Reception Studies:** Explore how different demographics of viewers perceive and adopt the slang used in these series, providing a deeper understanding of media's role in language change. Audience reception studies can shed light on how viewers interact with media content and incorporate new linguistic elements into their everyday speech (Jeresano & Carretero, 2022).

**Technological Influence:** Analyze the impact of emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence and virtual reality, on the development and dissemination of slang among Gen Z. Understanding the role of technology in shaping language practices can inform the creation of more effective communication strategies and educational tools (Taber et al., 2023).

By addressing these areas, future research can further elucidate the complex relationship between media, language, and social identity, offering valuable insights for educators, linguists, and media practitioners.



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