

Don't be so Vanilla! Decoding the Sociolinguistic Alchemy of Algerian's Gen Z Identities in Digital Spaces

Plus de vanille ! Décryptage de l'alchimie sociolinguistique des identités de la Génération Z Algérienne dans les espaces numériques

Amina BABOU 
University of Hassiba Benbouali Chlef / ALGERIA
a.babou@univ-chlef.dz

Received: 10/04/2025,

Accepted: 09/09/2025,

Published: 25/12/2025

Abstract:

This article examines the linguistic innovations of Generation Z through an analysis of slang terms such as "delulu," "cooked," "vanilla," "glow-up," and "looksmaxxing." Through a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative and quantitative research techniques, the study canvasses how these terms function as tools for identity construction, social critique, and community building in digital spaces. As digital natives, Gen Z's linguistic practices reflect their position to redefine resilience, authenticity and belonging in an era defined by swift technological shift and global uncertainty. By dissecting the duality, irony, and contextual adaptability embedded in these terms, the scrutiny spells out Gen Z's sui-generis approach to communication – one that intermingles humor, self-awareness, and social commentary. The analysis further probes appearance-focused terms like "glow-up" and "looksmaxxing" which demonstrate Gen Z's paradoxical relationship with visual culture. Their language often employs hyperbolic humor and self-deprecation as mechanisms to navigate existential challenges, such as anxiety or economic instability. Ultimately, the findings disseminate the complex interplay between online communication, identity construction, and cultural representation among Algerian Arab youth. These insights illuminate how language adapts within digital spaces to negotiate multiple identities in a rapidly changing world.

Key words: Algerian youth- digital communication- Generation Z- identity construction- linguistic innovation

Résumé :

Cet article examine les innovations linguistiques de la Génération Z à travers une analyse de termes argotiques tels que *delulu*, *cooked*, *vanilla*, *glow-up* et *looksmaxxing*. En adoptant une approche méthodologique mixte combinant techniques qualitatives et quantitatives, l'étude explore comment ces termes servent d'outils pour la construction identitaire, la critique sociale et le renforcement communautaire dans les espaces numériques. En tant que natifs numériques, les pratiques linguistiques de la Génération Z reflètent leur capacité à redéfinir la résilience, l'authenticité et l'appartenance dans une ère marquée par des transformations technologiques rapides et des incertitudes mondiales. En décortiquant la dualité, l'ironie et l'adaptabilité contextuelle inhérentes à ces termes, l'analyse révèle l'approche singulière de la communication chez les Gen Z – une fusion d'humour, de conscience de soi

et de commentaire social. L'étude explore également comment des termes axés sur l'apparence, comme *glow-up* et *looksmaxxing*, illustrent le rapport paradoxal de cette génération à la culture visuelle. Leur langage emploie souvent l'humour hyperbolique et l'autodérision comme mécanismes pour naviguer les défis existentiels, tels que l'anxiété ou l'instabilité économique. Enfin, les résultats mettent en lumière le jeu complexe entre communication en ligne, construction identitaire et représentation culturelle chez les jeunes arabes algériens. Ces insights éclairent la manière dont le langage s'adapte aux espaces numériques pour négocier des identités multiples dans un monde en mutation accélérée.

Mots- clés : Communication numérique- Construction identitaire- Génération Z- Innovation - linguistique- Jeunesse algérienne.

* **Corresponding author: Amina BABOU**

Langues & Cultures / © 2025 The Authors. Published by the University of Adrar, Algeria.

This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

Introduction

The linguistic landscape of the Arab world is proliferating so widely and rapidly, especially with the rise of Generation Z (Gen Z). This generation is blending traditional Arabic with global slang, particularly from English and other languages, spawning a fascinating fusion of linguistic and cultural expressions. In an endeavour to express themselves in novel ways, they adopt different slangs and navigate cultural changes with the rise of social media. People throughout the world are hugely influenced by technology's swift development, particularly those who belong to generation Z (from now on Gen Z), born between 1997 and 2013 (Dolot, 2018). Generation Z is the first truly digital-native generation, and they are intimately linked to digital technologies that are imbedded in their lives. By this token, their knowledge about the internet, smartphones, and social media tends to shape how they interact with each other and the world. According to Katz (2022), Generation Z is the first generation which cannot find their unique identities without Internet. This evolution sketches more than just linguistic innovation; it reveals cultural alterations, technological integration, and the dynamic nature of communication among Arab youth. This generation, born between the late 1990s and early 2010s, has urged a peculiar speech style that echoes both their digital nativity and cultural identity. Their language innovations are rapidly spreading across social media platforms, creating new forms of expression that sometimes baffle older generations while reinforcing the bonds of connections among peers across the Arab region.

In their seminal work, Andersson and Trudgill (1990) consider how slang can be seen as more than just informal or vernacular language, emphasizing that it often draws from multiple sources, incorporating elements from foreign vocabulary and extraneous informal regional dialects. This point highlights that slang is not confined to a single social group or subculture, but rather it is a built-up construction of various linguistic influences. Frazer and Eble (1997) define slang as a dynamic collection of informal words and phrases employed by individuals to negotiate or reinforce social identities within a group or to align with fast-paced trends of internet culture and societal fashion. Slang serves as a super pathway to communicate in ways that negotiate belonging to a specific group or to reflect a particular social attitude. Thus, slangs

can be used as a tool to craft unique ways to interact online and offline. They serve to reflect broader social landscape and societal issues, such as inclusivity and technology's influence on communication. This swift adaptation to the new cultural phenomena and technological innovations permit individual speakers to cater to the needs of the pulse of popular culture (Allan, 2001). Yet, slangs are not static because of its continual transformation. Because of their ephemeral nature, new linguistic innovations may briskly fall out of use, replaced by new, trendier terms. Andersson & Trudgill (1990: 21) endorse this by stating that "*Slang is like a living organism; it grows, adapts, and dies with the times. What is considered 'cool' today may be outdated tomorrow, but it is precisely this changeability that keeps slang fresh and relevant*". Continuing on this path, it is hypothesized that the adoption of English slang by Arab Gen Z speakers is influenced by social and digital media trends to develop new forms of 'virtual' communities and construct their identities. Young people are not simply passive consumers of digital content; they are active agents in the creation and dissemination of media (Buckingham, 2008).

Regarding young Algerians' use of English slangs, this scrutiny is an attempt to sketch out

- How do Gen Z individuals use slang to negotiate and perform multiple (online) identities?
- How do social media platforms (e.g., TikTok, Instagram) accelerate the adoption of Gen Z slang as markers of group identity and belonging?

1. Generation Z

Generation Z (Gen Z), typically defined as those born between the mid-1990s and the early 2010s, represents a demographic that has witnessed the most significant technological and social transformations of the 21st century. As digital natives, Gen Z has grown up with the internet, smartphones, laptops, and social media, creating unique hybrid identities shaped by their immersion in digital spaces. Unlike previous generations, who experienced the internet as a tool that gradually infiltrated their daily lives, Gen Z's existence is inextricably linked to technology, social media, and global connectivity. The discrepancy between Gen Z's and older generations lies in the fact that they have never known a world without constant connectivity and digital interaction. For Gen Z, digital spaces are integral to both socializing and self-definition, allowing them to create hybrid identities that blend local and global influences, particularly through their use of platforms such as TikTok and YouTube (Leung & Lee, 2020). According to Prensky (2001), while prior generations had to adapt to the surge of digital facilities, Gen Z was born into a world where digital technologies were already ingrained in daily life. The proliferation of the internet, smartphones, and social media networks has dramatically sculpted the experiences of Gen Z. Katz (2022) states that Generation Z is the first to have experienced social media as a norm in their social lives. They grew up with platforms that allowed them to interact, share, and form relationships not only locally but globally. Expanding on this thought, this generation becomes able to curate their online existence, molding digital personas that often reflect a bundle of their identities. Generation Z's historical context is shaped by technological advancements, economic changes where technology is not just an accessory (Twenge, 2017), but a central monitor of their identities and social norms. This

shift in social norms has led to Gen Z's rejection of rigid, binary notions of gender and their encompassing of more fluid and overlapping identities.

2. The Role of Digital Platforms in Slang Propagation

Social media platforms serve as powerful catalysts for the emergence and spread of Gen Z slang across the Arab world. They become the breeding bedrock for language innovation, especially for Gen Z. Recent studies and observations highlight the significant impact of platforms like X (formerly Twitter), TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook on the evolution of Arabic language usage among younger generations. For Generation Z in the Arab world, the digital environment has played an influential role in shaping their linguistic identity, giving birth to new slang that blends traditional Arabic with digital expressions and foreign influences. In the context of the Arab world, social media platforms have become the breeding spaces where young people explore, express, and articulate their social identities. Drawing from this idea, Khouri (2021) states that social media is where contemporary Arab youth create and recreate their identities, and language is a key element of this digital transformation. The evolution of language quickens the constant flow of information and trends to generate a hybridized form of communication that echoes both their regional roots and their global outlook. This malleable linguistic constructions leave room for young people to negotiate their identities, often oscillating between local and global influences. Digital platforms enable Arab youth to experiment with language, allowing them to generate a language that reflects their collective experiences and their unique position in a rapidly globalizing world (Kora, 2020). This permits them to navigate and negotiate collective identities that challenge the boundaries of social norms and traditional communication practices.

By adopting new terms, emojis, memes, and even internet-specific forms of communication, youth identities are in a constant process of converging and morphing old and new images. Farouk (2020) sheds light on the significant role that globalization plays in devising a new vernacular that aligns with their digital lives and transnational identities. Globalization has led to a substantial transformation in the way language is used across the globe, allowing youth generation to absorb and incorporate foreign linguistic elements into their own vernacular. In connection with this, Kora (2020) states that the inception of the digital age has broken down linguistic barriers, enabling Arab youth to rapidly incorporate global linguistic trends and digital slang into their everyday communication. Crystal (2001) reports that the internet has considerably altered the way in which language is employed new phrases in a matter of days. Following the same train of thought, platforms like TikTok create an ecosystem in which a single post can be shared exponentially, allowing certain slangs to gain traction and go viral (Swisher, 2019). The viral nature of platforms like TikTok develops a feedback loop where prevalent expressions spread faster, often reaching millions of users in mere hours. Each time a slang term or phrase is integrated into an openly viewed post, it has the potential to extend to an even broader audience, arising out the rapid adoption and widespread use of that slangs. Social media, by its very nature, provides a linguistic laboratory where people create new forms of expression, abbreviations, and slangs that might not have been possible in more formal

contexts (Green, 2014). In this "linguistic laboratory", can play with words and expressions and contrive new ways of conveying ideas, emotions, or humor. Green's description of social media as a "linguistic laboratory" accentuates how digital platforms allow individuals to freely experiment with language. Digital platforms, particularly TikTok, have created a fertile ground for the rapid spread of recontextualized slangs that grow and remix across digital spaces.

3. Methodology

The crux of this study is to unveil how Algerian Gen Z users employ slang, the context in which it is used, and the extent to which it shapes their digital communication and construct their social identities. The study will adopt a mixed-methods approach, merging both qualitative and quantitative research techniques. In an attempt to explore the meanings, contexts, and functions of the language used by this group in their natural settings, a qualitative descriptive approach will be employed. It is important to note that this scrutiny begins by systematically observing content on Instagram and TikTok, looking for instances of slang use. Purposive sampling, of 30 Algerian Gen Z users (English students aged 18-24), is adopted to single out active users who frequently post or engage with content containing slang expressions. Then, the quantitative aspect embraces measuring the frequency of slangs use and identifying trends across posts and interactions. Semi-structured interviews are conducted to survey the participants' understanding of the slang terms they use, why they use them, and the social or cultural significance they attribute to these terms.

4. Findings and Discussion

With a total of 473 recorded occurrences across eight distinct slang expressions, the data below provides insights into the usage patterns and preferences in linguistic choices among Gen Z users. The histogram chart provides insights into the occurrence and relative frequency of several Gen Z slang terms, reflecting their popularity and usage trends by Gen Z on platforms like TikTok and Instagram. These terms seem to reflect the evolving language and cultural transformations within online communities, especially among younger generations.

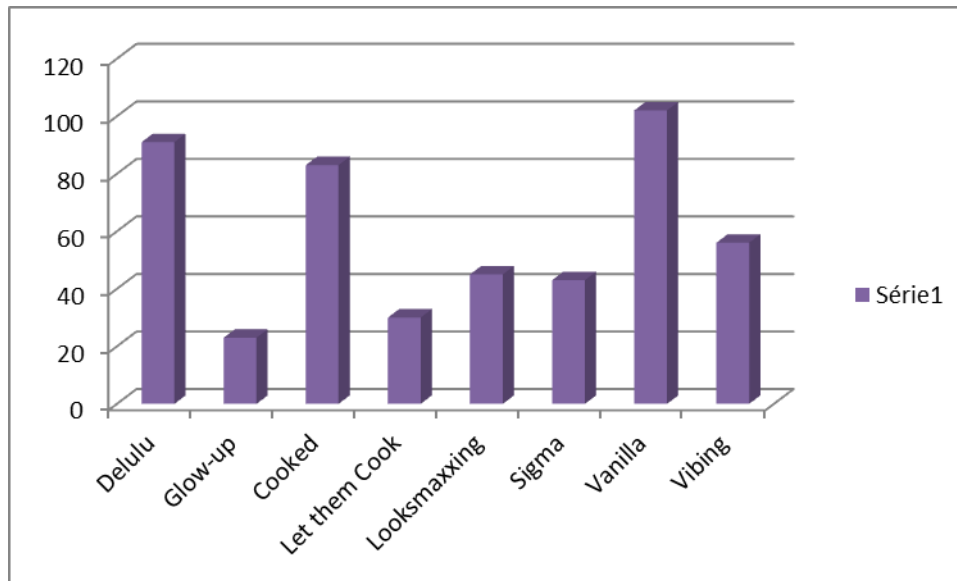


Figure 1: The relative frequency of Gen Z slangs

The data reveals a striking dominance of two slang terms within Gen Z communication patterns: **"Vanilla"** (21.56%) and **"Delulu"** (19.24%) collectively account for **40.8%** of all recorded slang usage. This overwhelming prevalence discloses their centrality to youth expression on visually driven platforms like TikTok and Instagram.

The curve chart below exhibits the relative frequency of usage for the Gen Z slang terms "Delulu" and "Vanilla" across the years 2023 to 2025. This visualization effectively grabs the parallel growth patterns of both expressions over time.

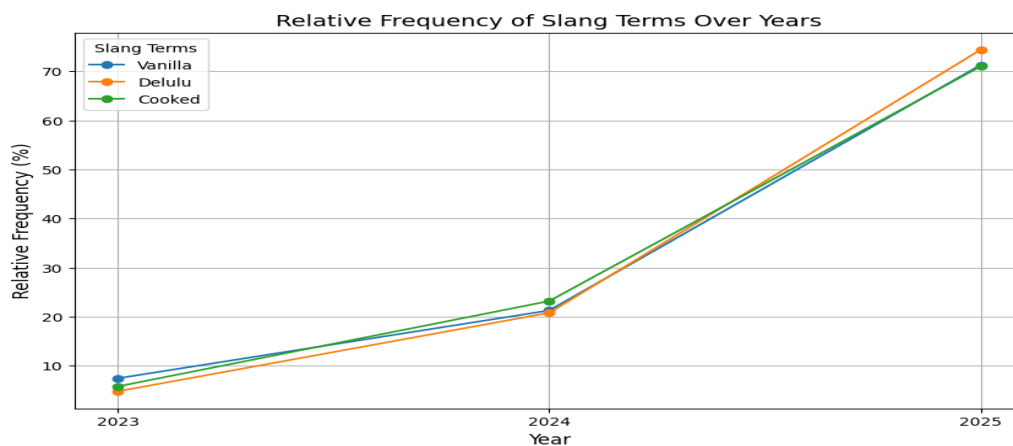


Figure 2: Relative Frequency of "Vanilla", "Delulu" & "Cooked" Usage by Year

The provided chart illustrates the relative frequency of three popular Gen Z slang terms – "Vanilla," "Delulu," and "Cooked" – over a three-year period from 2023 to 2025. Relative frequency represents the percentage of each term's total usage distributed across these years.

The lines follow nearly parallel paths, revealing that the three terms built up popularity at comparable rates during this timeframe, with "Delulu" slightly surpassing "Vanilla" in relative frequency by 2025. "Delulu" demonstrates the most dramatic growth curve, starting with the lowest relative frequency in 2023 (4.8%) but reaching the highest in 2025 (74.4%). This references a snowball effect in adoption, where vogue gathers momentum over time. Vanilla begins with the highest relative frequency in 2023 (7.45%) but ends with a slightly lower position than "Delulu" by 2025 (71.28%). Then, "Cooked" follows a similar trajectory to the others and had the highest relative frequency in 2024 (23.19%).

4.1. Gen Z Slangs Connotations

Here is a structured table of Gen Z slang terms and their connotations based on the semi-structured interview data:

Slang Term	Part of Speech	Connotation	Definition	Example Sentence
Vanilla	Adjective	Negative/Neutral	Basic, ordinary, lacking uniqueness; implies boredom or conventionality.	"I tried talking to her, but she's so vanilla." -"How do you say this in a cool way? Don't be so vanilla". Try something new.
Delulu	Adjective/ Noun	Playful/Negative	Delusional, unrealistic beliefs; often used humorously in relationships or fandom contexts.	"I'm delulu – I think he's into me because he smiled once."
Cooked	Adjective/ Verb	Context-Dependent	Negative: Exhausted/humiliated. Positive: Achieving something impressive.	"After the exam, I'm cooked." / "That person is cooking "

Don't be so Vanilla! Decoding the Sociolinguistic Alchemy of Algerian's Gen Z Identities in Digital Spaces

Sigma	Noun	Neutral/Negative	A man who ignores social norms (esp. women) or a self-reliant, introverted "lone wolf."	"He's such a sigma – doesn't care what anyone thinks."
Cap	Noun/Verb	Negative	A lie or exaggeration.	"Stop capping!"
Green Flag	Noun	Positive	Positive trait in a person (often dating).	"Punctuality is a green flag."
Red Flag	Noun	Negative	Warning sign of problematic behavior.	"He never texts back – total red flag."
Tea	Noun	Neutral	Gossip or secret information.	"Are you going to spill the tea or what?"
Vibing	Verb	Positive	Enjoying or resonating with something.	"I'm vibing with this music."
Soft Girl	Noun	Positive	A sensitive, kind, and emotionally open person.	"She's such a soft girl – always so sweet."
Boujee	Adjective	Neutral/Positive	Luxurious, fancy, or elitist (can be aspirational or mocking).	"Their apartment is so boujee."
Glow-up	Noun	Positive	A dramatic physical/mental improvement.	"Did you see her glow-up? She's unrecognizable!"
High Key	Adverb	Neutral	Openly or intensely.	"I high key love olives on pizza."
Let Them Cook	Phrase	Positive/Encouraging	Trusting someone's process or talent.	"Don't interrupt – let them cook!"
Looksmaxxing	Verb/Noun	Positive	Maximizing physical attractiveness through grooming,	"He's looksmaxxing hard – new

			fashion, or fitness.	haircut and gym routine."
Mogging	Verb	Competitive/Neutral	Outshining others in appearance or status.	"He is mogging everyone at the party."
Rizz	Noun	Positive	Charisma or ability to attract others romantically.	"He's got insane rizz – everyone's obsessed with him."
Salty	Adjective	Negative	Bitter, resentful, or irritated.	"He's salty because I won the game."
Slay	Verb	Positive	Excelling at something; often celebratory.	"You slayed that presentation!"
Wallflower	Noun	Neutral/Negative	An introvert who avoids attention.	"She's a wallflower – always in the corner at parties."

Table 1: Gen Z slangs connotations

4.2. Analysis of Gen Z Terminology

4.2.1. The Dominance of Identity and Social Critique Terms

"Vanilla" (21.56%) and "Delulu" (19.24%) seem to dominate the dataset, collectively accounting for 40.8% of all occurrences. These slangs represent Gen Z's focus on individuality, self-aware humor, critique of societal norms and negotiating social identities. The word "vanilla" has indeed evolved over time, switching from simply a descriptor for a flavor to a critique of dullness or conventionality. This transformation is substantially intertwined with cultural movements and generational attitudes, particularly those seen with Gen Z. Its popularity stems from Gen Z's rejection of blandness in favor of originality, as seen in phrases like "Don't be so vanilla". Its popularity reflects Gen Z's emphasis on uniqueness and rejection of mainstream norms. In an endeavor to construct uniqueness and craving authenticity, this generation champions the rejection of conformity. On this note, Gen Z considers authenticity as a form of rebellion in a world oversaturated with consumerism, branding, and curated content. The younger generation corroborates truth over polish, preferring raw and unfiltered content over highly-produced, mainstream media. (The New York Times, 2020). For Gen Z, anything that feels 'mainstream' or overdone is immediately marked as 'vanilla.' (Vox, 2020). It is not just about a specific flavor of ice cream or any other product, but about a broader cultural critique. Gen Z gravitates toward niche subcultures that are more *sui generis*, less refined, and less

predictable. This makes the traditional – what they might consider ‘vanilla’ – seem inadequate, even boring. (The Guardian, 2021). This scenario aligns with broader societal trends emphasizing niche identities and self-expression.

In connection with this, the term "delulu" has become a crucial component of Gen Z's vocabulary, reflecting a unique admixture of humor, self-awareness, and vulnerability in their approach to identity. In contrast to the earlier generations' tendencies to curate a highly polished version of them online, Gen Z strives to challenge traditional notions of polished perfection often seen on social media. This shift fosters empathy and connection in digital spaces. The terms they use are often deliberately novel or repurposed from earlier internet cultures, such as TikTok or memes, indicating that Gen Z is not only culturally distinct but also tech-savvy and twisted in global digital trends. This endorses Eckert's assertion that language can be used to mark differences between age groups (Eckert, 2000). For Gen Z, "delulu" serves as both a coping mechanism and a cultural marker, reflecting their unique approach to societal pressures. Eckert (2000) pinpoints that slang is a social tool employed to signal group membership, define boundaries, and construct identity. The use of "delulu" creates a shared cultural understanding among Gen Z. By adopting this term, individuals align themselves with peers who value humor, self-awareness, and optimism in confronting challenges like societal expectations or personal insecurities. Instead of striving for unattainable standards in career success, relationships, or beauty, "delulu" reflects their resilience in navigating societal pressures while fostering community in digital spaces. Slang often resists mainstream or traditional norms, and "delulu" exemplifies this by transgressing rigid societal ideals of realism or perfection. Instead of striving for unrealizable ideals, they embrace imperfection and share their struggles palpably. This shift fosters empathy and connection in digital spaces. As a demonstration, Gen Z's linguistic creativity serves as a powerful mechanism for creating in-group solidarity and a badge of group membership. When young people use terms like "delulu" or "cooked," they tend to signal belonging to a specific cultural moment while constructing shared reference points.

With this in mind, Gen Z idea of 'perfection' is rapidly becoming obsolete. They revamped it by the notion that 'imperfection' is actually an asset, one that can make you more relatable and human (Alvarez, 2024). “Delulu” is part of this movement, where embracing flaws – rather than hiding them – is becoming an act of resistance against the refined, often unattainable ideals of perfection displayed on social media.

4.2.2. Irony and Self-Deprecation

The terms "Delulu" and "Cooked" exemplify how Gen Z has revolutionized language to both critique society and reflect on their own digital existence. These slang terms showcase the generation's distinctive humor style that blends self-awareness, absurdity, and cultural commentary.

The term "Delulu," derived from "delusional," originated in K-pop fandom which is employed by Gen Z to humorously delineate unrealistic optimism or outlandish beliefs. The term gained a huge traction through viral TikTok trends, reflecting Gen Z's tendency to embrace irony and

humor as coping mechanisms for societal pressures. By adopting the 'Delulu' label, Gen Z is simultaneously poking fun at themselves and embracing the absurdity of their dreams in a world that often feels out of their control" (New York Times, 2023). This mindset reflects Gen Z's ability to laugh at their own realities over-the-top online personas. This can be considered as a coping mechanism which allows them to emotionally distance themselves from overwhelming societal challenges while resisting absurdities in modern life. In a lighthearted way, they tend to construct aplomb and self-awareness to express vulnerability without fear of judgment. Perhaps most significantly, this humor serves not only as entertainment but also as a tool for coping with the complexities of modern life and fostering connections in the digital realm. As one Gen Z speaker reports *"we all know that we struggle in life, nothing is perfect, don't take everything too seriously"*. In an endeavour to blur the line between fantasy and reality, another one claims that *"even if you cannot reach something, you can dream it, make you happy just to imagine"*.

Continuing in this direction, the term "cooked" exemplifies Gen Z's distinctive humor style that simultaneously critiques societal norms while reflecting on their own digital behaviours and experiences. This slang's dual nature and contextual flexibility underscores several key aspects of Gen Z communication. The term "cooked" perfectly encapsulates Gen Z's multifaceted humor style, functioning as both a critique of social expectations and a reflection on their own digital experiences. These terms highlight their endeavour to employ humor as a way to manage serious issues without succumbing to despair. What we glean from this is that ironic optimism in Gen Z humor intimately affects their perception of reality by providing a means to surmount challenges, critique societal norms, build resilience, and maintain hope in the face of distress.

Drawing from the interviewees' replies, the term "cooked" carries two contrasting connotations that highlight its versatility in Gen Z slang. When used negatively ("we're cooked" or "this situation is cooked"), it expresses a resigned acknowledgment of overwhelming circumstances such as *"After that workout, I'm totally cooked"* or *"We played against a team and we cooked them"*. This expression perfectly illustrates the evolving nature of "cooked" in Gen Z slang, particularly in its competitive context. Here, "cooked" functions as a verb denoting dominance or humiliation of an opponent—a usage that has become increasingly common in gaming, sports, and other competitive domains. The cooking metaphor in competitive contexts like gaming or sports captures a nuanced form of dominance that transcends mere victory. What distinguishes "cooking" from simply "winning", reflecting the responses of the interviewees, is the fact that the opponent was rendered helpless—metaphorically "overheated" or "burnt" by the intensity of the defeat. One of the respondent reports that *"we you cook someone, it is not just about winning the game, you break them and you are in their head"*. Conversely, its positive usage (*"let them cook"* or *"she's cooking"*) celebrates excellence and achievement against those same odds. It encourages someone to continue their efforts without interference, anticipating success or creativity. The duality of "cooked" epitomizes Gen Z's adaptive communication style, which merges humor, relatability, and linguistic innovation to navigate modern challenges.

Most significantly, Gen Z humor frequently employs irony to create ambiguity, which can leave others uncertain about whether statements are meant to be serious or sarcastic. This style of

humor is deeply rooted in the generation's cultural context and reflects their innovative strategies to communication and social interaction. Gen Z's linguistic innovations reveal a generation that has developed sophisticated tools for navigating uncertainty. This can echo the sense of maintaining social and psychological resilience in the ebb and flow of digital complexity. Thus, navigating societal pressures may create ambiguity, leaving others uncertain whether statements are serious or sarcastic. Terms like "delulu" and "cooked" elucidate this ambiguity. In accordance with the interviewees' feedback, saying "*I'm delulu if I think I'll get noticed*" can be both a genuine expression of hope and a sarcastic acknowledgment of its improbability. Similarly, "she is cooking" might mean someone who is excelling or that they are in trouble, depending on the context.

McCulloch (2019) argues that ambiguity in language makes available a tool for speakers to navigate uncertainty and manage social interactions, especially when the stakes are high. According to her, the ability to communicate with ambiguity allows speakers to "hedge their bets emotionally," which mean they can voice their opinions in a way that leaves room for flexibility, avoiding the potential risk of being too direct or assertive.

4.2.3. Appearance and Self-Improvement

Terms like "Glow-up" and "Looksmaxxing" indicate an evolving enthusiasm in personal transformation and appearance enhancement. This aligns with broader societal trends emphasizing self-improvement and the visual culture of platforms like TikTok and Instagram. This complex relationship with self-improvement seems to blend aspirational personal growth with the pressures of digital visual culture. These terms reflect broader cultural trends where appearance enhancement is not just about beauty standards but is increasingly intertwined with self-esteem, success, and identity. The rise of such terms is a reflection of the way online spaces provide a platform for personal reinvention and the desire for self-validation through physical transformation (McCulloch, 2019). The glow-up trend on TikTok involves more than just physical transformation – it represents a form of digital emotional labor. Digital emotional labor can be defined the process by which individuals are expected to manage and often suppress their emotions to fulfill the emotional requirements of a job or role (Hochschild 1983). The glow-up trend cultivates a sense of community and backing among users who seek to make positive changes in their lives, inspiring many individuals to embark on their own transformative journeys. As indicated by the interviewees, TikTok has indeed become a prominent platform for "glow-up" transformation content, where users regularly share their before-and-after journeys alongside practical advice. "Glow-ups" thus represent a blending of self-expression and emotional validation, as users seek external approval through their aesthetic shifts. It can be deemed as a form of visual storytelling about one's identity and growth. By sharing their transformations, users are often seeking affirmation and support from their audience. This can boost self-esteem and provide a sense of community.

While "delulu" and "glow-up" offer ways for Gen Z to navigate life's challenges with optimism and self-improvement, they also display paradoxes related to reality, authenticity, and emotional validation. They highlight the tension between idealized aspirations and real-world challenges, as well as the need for authenticity and self-acceptance. These trends underscore the

complexities of Gen Z's approach to identity, self-expression, and emotional validation in the digital age. With this in mind, there is a notable contradiction which lies in their tendency to drastically shift how they appear based on the network they are accessing. This fluidity in identity reflects a sophisticated understanding of digital environments and audience expectations but also raises questions about the true nature of authenticity in the digital age. Papacharissi (2010) argues that while social media users may refine their identity to fit platform norms, they are still negotiating an "authentic" version of themselves, just in a more contextually appropriate way. In other words, authenticity in the digital age may not mean consistency across all platforms, but rather, the ability to tailor and adapt one's identity fluidly based on audience expectations.

Unlike the generally positive reception of "glow-up," looksmaxxing has generated controversy due to its origins and some extreme manifestations. "looksmaxxing" represents a more recent and primarily male-oriented approach to appearance enhancement. Rooted in rigid beauty standards and amplified by social media, it reflects the pressures to conform to unattainable ideals, particularly among young men. This trend unveils how digital platforms can exacerbate insecurities by rewarding dramatic transformations and perpetuating narrow definitions of attractiveness. As noted in research by Tiggemann and Slater (2014), the rise of these social media platforms has significantly altered how individuals, especially young people, recognize their bodies and their worth. "Looksmaxxing" is thus a direct response to the visual culture upgraded by social media, where physical attractiveness is often rewarded, and deviation from these ideals can lead to marginalization or exclusion. While some aspects of looksmaxxing, such as fitness routines or improved hygiene, tally with general self-improvement, the trend is deeply coupled with toxic ideals of masculinity and unattainable beauty standards. The connection between looksmaxxing, toxic masculinity, and gendered pressures about appearance, especially among men, has been increasingly explored in academic research. The phenomenon of looksmaxxing often intersects with the amplified expectations of masculinity, particularly in the digital age, where social media plays a significant role in shaping perceptions of attractiveness and self-worth.

In support of this, Griffiths & Murray (2020) explore convergence of toxic masculinity, traditional gender norms, and social media trends, revealing how these forces collectively shape young men's focus on optimizing their bodies to meet unrealistic standards. Social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram amplify these pressures by rewarding highly stylized versions of masculinity and attractiveness, creating an environment where physical ideals are not only normalized but incentivized. Studies indeed confirm that male influencers and fitness content frequently promote "ideal" male bodies that are associated with strength, dominance, and success. Research has consistently documented how social media platforms, particularly Instagram, reinforce narrow definitions of male attractiveness through both content and engagement patterns. Dixon (2017) explores how fitness influencers promote a specific vision of masculinity that includes physical strength, dominance, and aesthetic perfection. Similarly, Gough and Edwards (2017) delve into how societal standards of masculinity, particularly the emphasis on muscularity, are perpetuated through various media channels, with a strong focus on the role of social media. They highlight that fitness influencers play a pivotal role in

reinforcing these muscular ideals, effectively shaping the perception of male attractiveness in the digital age. Gough and Edwards' research illuminates how muscularity has become a prominent feature of masculinity in modern media, especially on social platforms. Their analysis reveals that the muscular ideal transcends physical appearance, embodying broader masculine traits like strength and dominance. Social media platforms, with their visual focus and engagement-based rewards, have amplified this trend. Fitness influencers are central to this phenomenon, consistently promoting sculpted physiques through carefully curate content that establishes a clear visual and narrative connection between muscular physiques and notions of success, desirability, and social status.

Conclusion

As has been demonstrated, the linguistic innovations of Gen Z in the Arab world, particularly their adoption and adaptation of slang terms like "Delulu," "Vanilla," and "Cooked," symbolize far more than mere linguistic trends. These terms function as innovative tools for identity construction, social critique, and community building in digital spaces. The data analysis reveals clear patterns of usage, with terms related to identity negotiation and social critique dominating the discourse. These terms function not merely as casual vocabulary but as nuanced mechanisms to demarcate themselves in digitally mediated spaces. The data presented demonstrates clear patterns in slang adoption, with terms like "vanilla" and "delulu" dominating usage frequencies and showing consistent growth from 2023 to 2025. This linguistic evolution reflects Gen Z's position as digital natives who skillfully blend local cultural elements with global influences, generating exclusive hybrid language forms that serve multiple social functions simultaneously.

The popularity of terms like "Delulu" and "Cooked" highlights Gen Z's predilection for humor that simultaneously critiques societal norms while reflecting on their own digital behaviours. This mirrors broader trends in communication where self-deprecation, irony, and ambiguity serve as key tools for navigating complex social landscapes. The duality inherent in many of these terms—particularly "cooked" with its contrasting positive and negative connotations—displays Gen Z's comfort with opacity and their rejection of binary thinking. This linguistic flexibility is interwoven with a broader approach to identity construction, where rigidity is replaced by fluidity and contextual adaptation.

The appearance-focused terms "glow-up" and "looksmaxxing" highlight the paradoxical relationship Gen Z maintains with visual culture—simultaneously participating in beauty standards while critiquing their unrealistic nature. Ideally, these findings should be replicated to unveil the gendered dimensions of these terms, particularly the masculine focus of "Looksmaxxing". This can expound how digital platforms reinforce traditional gender norms while simultaneously providing spaces to challenge them. Social media platforms emerge as basic incubators for these linguistic innovations, with TikTok and Instagram serving as "linguistic laboratories" where terms can rapidly evolve, gaining new meanings and applications through viral spread.

These linguistic practices reinforce group boundaries and allow individuals to navigate complex social hierarchies. Gen Z's linguistic innovations indeed demonstrate a complex interplay between digital communication, social identity construction, and cultural expression. As these linguistic patterns continue to evolve, they offer valuable insights into how younger generations process and respond to an increasingly digital existence. This research contributes to our understanding of how language evolves in digital spaces and opens windows into how young people adopt linguistic innovations to negotiate the complexities of modern identity construction.

References

- ALLAN, K. (2001), *The Oxford Dictionary of English Slang*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- ALVAREZ, Z. (2024), "The Evolution of Perfection in the Digital Age: Gen Z and the Rise of Authenticity", *Media Perspectives Journal*, 34(2), 45-60.
- ANDERSSON, L., & TRUDGILL, P. (1990), *Bad Language*, London, Penguin Books.
- BUCKINGHAM, D. (Ed.) (2008), *Youth, Identity, and Digital Media*, Cambridge, MIT Press.
- CAMERON, D. (2001), *Working with Spoken Discourse*, London, Sage Publications.
- DIXON, W. W. (2017), "The Masculine Ideal and Fitness Influencers: How Social Media Shapes Masculinity", *Journal of Media and Masculinities Studies*, 4(1), 52-66.
- EBLE, C. (1996), *Slang and Sociability: In-group Language among College Students*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press.
- ECKERT, P. (2000), *Language and Gender*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- FAROUK, L. (2020), "The Future of Arabic Language in a Digital World", *Arabic Language and Society*, 15(2), 44-58.
- FRAZER, J., & EBLE, C. (1997), *Slang and Sociability: In-group Language among College Students*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press.
- GOUGH, B., & EDWARDS, G. (2017), "The Male Body Ideal: A Critical Review of the Evidence and its Implications for Body Image and Gendered Behavior", *Psychology of Men and Masculinity*, 18(1), 71-81.
- GREEN, J. (2014), *The Dictionary of Slang*, London, Collins.
- GRIFFITHS, S., & MURRAY, S. (2020), "Gendered Expectations of Appearance: Masculinity, Social Media, and Body Image", *Social Media + Society*, 6(3), 1-12.
- HOCHSCHILD, A. R. (1983), *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*, Berkeley, University of California Press.

- KATZ, J. E. (2022), *Generation Z: The First Truly Digital Generation*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- KHOURI, Z. (2021), "Language and Identity in the Digital Age: The Role of Social Media in the Arab World", *Journal of Arab Cultural Studies*, 34(2), 56-72.
- KORA, R. (2020), "Hybrid Languages: The Emergence of Digital Slang in the Arab World", *Arabic Linguistics Review*, 18(3), 112-130.
- LEUNG, L., & LEE, P. S. (2020), "Digital Socialization: Understanding Generation Z's Social Media Behavior", *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 25(3), 197-211.
- McCULLOCH, G. (2019), *Because Internet: Understanding the New Rules of Language*, New York, Riverhead Books.
- PAPACHARISSI, Z. (2010), *A Networked Self: Identity, Community, and Culture on Social Network Sites*, New York, Routledge.
- PRENSKY, M. (2001), "Digital natives, digital immigrants", *On the Horizon*, 9(5), 1-6.
- SWISHER, K. (2019), *Revolutions in the Digital Age*, New York, Harper Business.
- THE GUARDIAN (2021), "The End of Cool: Why Gen Z Rejects Mass Culture", Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/>
- THE NEW YORK TIMES (2020), "The Pressure to Be Real: Gen Z's Quest for Authenticity", Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/>
- TIGGEMANN, M., & SLATER, A. (2014), "NetGirls: The Internet, Facebook, and Body Image Concern in Adolescent Girls", *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 47(6), 630-643.

Author's Biography

Amina BABOU is an Associate Professor in the Department of English Language at Hassiba Benbouali University of Chlef, Algeria. She holds her Doctorate in Sociolinguistics from Oran 2 Mohamed Ben Ahmed University, where her research focused on the intersection of language, gender, and societal structures in Algerian contexts. Specializing in sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, and gender studies in education, her research examines how language shapes identity, power dynamics, and social hierarchies in Algerian contexts, with a focus on gendered communication patterns in educational settings and the sociolinguistic construction of youth identities.