Speak Like Me: How Language Shows Group Identity among Teenagers

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Abstract

This study investigated how language functioned as a marker of group identity among teenagers in contemporary digital and social environments. While many studies discuss youth language variation, few explore how linguistic choices actively construct social belonging. Using a qualitative research design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 high school students aged 15–18. They were selected through purposive sampling based on their active involvement in peer-group communication as well as active daily users of messaging and social media platforms (like Instagram, Tik Tok, and Facebook). Data were analyzed through thematic analysis to identify patterns in how teenagers used spoken, written, and visual language to signal identity. Findings revealed three major themes: slang and exclusive vocabulary as identity markers; emojis, memes, and reaction symbols as visual identity; and code-switching as social positioning and context shifting. The participants identified specific slang used exclusively within their groups, such as "GWS (get well soon)," which is used sarcastically to tease rather than to express concern; "Gw b aja" (an Indonesian abbreviation meaning "I'm just casual/chill"); "bet" (expressing agreement or acceptance of a challenge); "iykyk" ("if you know, you know"); and "skibidi / rizz / sigma" (TikTok-influenced identity slang). The interviews also revealed that participants strategically used code-switching among Indonesian, English, and local dialects to navigate different social contexts and relational distances. In addition, visual digital language—such as emojis, memes, GIFs, and reaction symbols—functions as a form of "visual identity," reinforcing a sense of belonging within online interaction spaces. These linguistic practices demonstrate that language among teenagers is not merely a communication tool, but a deliberate process of *identity performance*, social positioning, and negotiation of membership.

KEYWORDS: *Code-Switching, Digital Communication, Language and Identity, Slang, Teenagers*

Introduction

Language is not just a way to communicate, but it also reveals personal identities and group affiliations. The way people express themselves through speech, word choice, and dialect reflects their background, culture, education, and social connections. This is relevant to what Nasution and Tambunan (2022) stated that language helps convey

identity and naturally varies among different groups, such as professionals, teenagers, and local communities. Teenagers, in particular, have unique ways of speaking, which include slang, shorthand, and mixed languages. This new language establishes their belonging to a peer group and connects them through shared experiences. Words like "slay," "salfok," and phrases like "spill the tea", show their lively identity and ties to digital culture, demonstrating how language evolves with society and technology (Dor, 2017).

Modern teenage slang includes words like "literally" and "no cap," which not only express emotions and friendships but also mark membership within the contemporary teen group. Recent digital ethnographies show that linguistic choices among teenagers, including slang, emojis, meme language, and selective code-switching, are not random, but serve as social strategies to position themselves within peer groups (Eckert, 2018). This language builds a sense of belonging among peers and sets them apart from older generations. Research on language and social identity, especially for adolescents, is essential as it shows how communication shapes identities. Studies reveal that language serves as a tool for expressing identity and fostering group solidarity among teenagers. Language, therefore, is more than information exchange: it performs social identity. Adolescents are particularly active language innovators because adolescence is a life stage marked by identity exploration and intense peer-group orientation (Holmes & Wilson, 2017). Teen linguistic practices, novel slang, playful orthography, and selective multilingual mixing, function as social signals that index membership and stance within peer networks.

The digital landscape intensifies this phenomenon. According to surveys, a significant proportion of teenagers report spending multiple hours per day on social media platforms, with many using apps like Instagram and TikTok routinely, and over half of U.S. teens reporting at least four hours of social media use daily (Rothwell, 2023). Online communication accelerates linguistic innovation: slang that once took months to spread now travels across platforms in hours (Mahardika, 2024). Because digital interaction relies heavily on short-form language, teenagers develop shared codes (abbreviations, emojis, reaction words) that function as identity markers.

Previous research on how language connects to social identity has mainly looked at cultural, ethnic, or bilingual communities (Budiasa et al., 2021; Fisher et al., 2018; Ismail et al., 2021; Trisnawati, 2017). Most of these studies identify that differences in language mean differences in social class, gender, or ethnicity. Budiasa et al. (2021), for example, analyzed Indonesian teens' social media interaction and found that slang was used primarily to maintain group closeness and exclude outsiders. Another study related to this topic was explored by Fisher et al., (2018) focusing on multi-theoretical approach

to the conceptualization and investigation of multilingual identity. However, few research conducted on how teenagers used language to express their group identity, especially in today's digital era. Earlier studies mostly looked at language in formal settings or face to face conversations, but now a number of teenage communications happen online through platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and X (Twitter). In this digital environment, teenage language changes quickly, creating new slang and expressions that help build group unity and set them apart from other groups. Accordingly, this study looks at how modern teenagers use language like slang, tone, and special expressions as ways to show their group identity online. This paper also synthesizes recent theoretical and empirical work to show how language serves as a mechanism of group identity construction among teenagers.

Literature Review

Teenagers have their own special way of talking that is different from other age groups. They often use slang, short forms, and new words to show they belong to a group and feel connected to others. According to Eckert (2000), how teenagers speak helps them express who they are and how they see themselves in front of their friends. The way they choose words, speak, and interact shows what group they are part of and who they hang out with. This shows that language does more than just help people talk. It also helps them present themselves to others. Tagliamonte (2016) found that teenage language changes quickly as new trends appear. These changes show how relationships and social groups among teens are always changing. Words like "salty," "slay," "no cap," or "salfok" are examples of how teens use language to show their group identity.

Using slang is very important for teenagers to feel connected to each other. This kind of language acts like a sign that shows someone is part of the group. When people share the same slang, it shows they are close friends and understand each other (Situmorang et al., 2024). On the other hand, if someone does not know the slang, they might be seen as someone who does not belong or is not part of the group. Also, this way of speaking shows how power and exclusivity work in teenage groups. As Bucholtz (2002) said, teenagers use specific ways of talking to show who they are and to say no to what adults or formal speech usually uses. Therefore, the way teenagers speak is a way to stand up against strict language rules and show they want to express themselves freely.

In this digital era, social media play an essential role in spreading and speeding up the use of common teenage slang. Social media like TikTok, Instagram, and X (Twitter) are where teens mainly create and personalize their way of speaking. Social media platforms play a significant influence on changing the way people communicate, and

they also create unique forms of slang and jargon within online communities (Herlina et al., 2024; Syahfitri et al., 2025). Androutsopoulos (2014), similarly, said that the internet helps form new language groups, where people build their identity through the way they talk and how they interact online. New words that come up on social media often become popular and travel across different areas and cultures. For example, words like "rizz," "based," or "savage" gain attention because they are used a lot by online teen groups. This shows that how teens speak is influenced not just by what is happening around them, but also by global online conversations.

In multilingual contexts, in addition, linguistic identity becomes even more complex (Trisnawati, 2017). Khalilli (2025) found that adolescents intentionally code-switched between languages to negotiate multiple identities as students, friends, or members of online fan communities. Code-switching allowed them to show solidarity and shared social identity. Algharabali et al. (2015) also reported that many middle school students in Kuwait have already learned how to use linguistic resources as tools not only to simplify the process of communication with their peers and teachers, but also to negotiate language choices in a socially meaningful way, especially in multilingual and bilingual situations. Because teenagers commonly style-shifted, they adopted one persona in formal educational contexts and another when interacting with peers.

In multilingual and multicultural contexts, adolescents use code-switching strategically to mark solidarity, humor, or social distance as mentioned by Khalilli (2025). Recent studies document how adolescents alternate registers and languages in online and face-to-face contexts to index shifting social roles and to manage identities across different social spheres. This flexibility demonstrates that teen language is an active site of identity negotiation rather than passive reflection of background. These findings highlight that language among teenagers does not merely express communication; it performs identity. Words, emojis, and stylistic choices (lowercase typography, deliberate "chaotic capitalization") act as identity badges that differentiate "us" from "them." Understanding teen linguistic practices thus requires examining social meaning, not just vocabulary.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopted a qualitative research design using semi-structured interviews to explore how language reflected group identity among teenagers. Qualitative research enables an in-depth understanding of symbolic meanings and identity construction (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Participants were 10 teenagers aged 15–18, all of them were females (labelled as P1-P10), recruited through purposive sampling based on their

active involvement in peer-group communication as well as Active daily users of messaging and social media platforms (e.g., Instagram, Tik Tok, and Facebook).

Data were collected through individual interviews (20–30 minutes each) and optional conversation artifacts (e.g., chat screenshots). Interview data were transcribed and analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis framework. To ensure credibility, member checking and peer debriefing were conducted. Ethical approval was obtained, and pseudonyms were used to protect participant identity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
RESULTS

After conducting the interview with the participants, the thematic analysis generated three major themes: Slang and exclusive vocabulary as identity markers; Emojis, memes, and reaction symbols as visual identity; Code-switching as social positioning and context shifting. These themes demonstrate that teenagers use language intentionally to construct identity, differentiate in-groups from outsiders, and signal belonging within peer communities.

1. SLANG AND EXCLUSIVE VOCABULARY AS IDENTITY MARKERS

Under this theme, the participants consistently described slang as a "password" to their social group. They reported that slang is a key feature of group belonging. Slang is viewed not merely as a linguistic shortcut, but as a *social password*. Teenagers intentionally adopt and modify slang to express shared identity and distinguish their peer group from others. When the participants were asked why certain phrases matter, P2 answered: "If someone uses our slang, we feel they are one of us. If not, it feels awkward." Similarly, P1 said that: "If you don't get our slang, you just don't get us". The participants listed specific slang used only inside their group, such as:

- "GWS (get well soon)" used sarcastically to tease, not to wish well
- "WKWK / LOL"
- "Bestie / bestieee" elongated to express closeness
- "Gw b aja" (Indonesian abbreviation meaning "I'm just casual/chill")
- "fr / frfr" (for real)
- "bet" (agreement / accepting a challenge)
- "iykyk" (if you know, you know)
- "skibidi / rizz / sigma" (TikTok-influenced identity slang)

P6 shared how slang used in their group signals emotional tone: "We don't say 'yes.' We say 'bet.' If someone says 'yes,' it sounds formal. Like... are you okay?". P3 highlighted how slang functions to differentiate between social contexts: "With

teachers I speak properly, but with my friends it's like: 'Bro, gila sih, slayy!' It feels like I show my real side."

Slang evolves quickly, and teens feel pressure to keep up. P7 expressed anxiety when they did not understand newly trending slang: "When my friends say something new and I don't get it, I google it. I don't want to look old-fashioned." P5 mentioned the pressure to keep up: "If you don't understand the newest slang, people think you're outdated. It's embarrassing."

The pressure to adopt slang is linked to group acceptance. Backing this, Budiasa et al. (2021) emphasize that slang reinforces in-group solidarity and excludes outsiders. Many participants also revealed that slang varies between groups. P4 them shared: "I have two friend groups. My online gaming group uses English slang like 'gg' or 'noob.' In school we use Indonesian slang." Therefore, slang is not just a linguistic choice, it is a symbolic identity badge that teenagers use to negotiate belonging and maintain group boundaries. Additionally, new slang often emerges from digital platforms (TikTok, gaming, fandom communities). P8 added: "My gaming group uses English slang like 'no cap,' 'gg,' or 'push.' My school friends don't use those words."

Slang also functions as a tool to recognize group hierarchies. P9 responded: "The ones who introduce new slang are always seen as trendsetters." This expands Eckert's (2018) notion of identity performance that teens are actively shaping their social positioning through language choices. Through this interview, it is identified that slang is: a) An identity badge: "Speak like us to be one of us."; b) A gatekeeper tool: If you don't understand slang, you're not part of the group; and c) A marker of social expertise: Those who introduce new slang gain status. These findings confirm that slang is used not only for communication but also for performing belonging, creating boundaries, and maintaining group exclusivity.

2. *EMOJIS, MEMES, AND REACTION SYMBOLS AS VISUAL IDENTITY*

Participants shared that emojis and memes have group-specific meanings. While emojis are universally available, their meaning is localized within the group. "If I use with my friends, it means 'that's so funny,' not sad" (P5). P2 explained that the use of lowercase typing plus emojis (e.g., "ok") signals closeness and emotional alignment.

Beyond words, as a result, teenagers use visual elements, emojis, memes, uppercase/lowercase patterns to signal shared identity. P7 explained: "Typing 'ok.' with a period means you're angry. But typing 'okk' means you're fine." P10 described meme-

based expressions: "Sometimes we just send a meme instead of typing. The meme already says what we feel."

All participants confirmed that emojis and memes are *not neutral*. Instead, they carry meanings specific to different friend groups. "We don't just reply with words. A single emoji can say everything" (P6). This indicates that emojis are generational identity labels, that teenagers attach *social meanings* to emojis, distinguishing their identity from adults, teachers, or younger users. Since memes serve as digital inside jokes, participants also referenced memes without explanation because the shared context already carries the meaning: "If something funny happens, we just send the emojis or 'I'm literally an NPC.' No need to explain. They already get it" (P10).

P3 further acknowledged memes as markers for belonging: "If someone doesn't understand the meme, they're not from our online world." This reinforces earlier findings that memes act as *cultural currency* within youth digital interactions. Emojis and memes also help teenagers regulate intimacy and tone**.** For example, when messaging new acquaintances, they use more "soft emojis," but with close friends, they use dark humor emojis. P9 explained: "I have different emoji vibes. And I will use different type of them when I chat with close friends or someone new."

These explanations confirm that emojis strengthen online relationships and allow users to control emotional expression. Visual language, therefore, signals who belongs inside the social circle, creates shared humor and collective identity, shows emotional closeness and relationship boundaries and acts as a faster and more expressive alternative to text. Through this interview, it is also identified that teens are not just using emojis, they are performing identity through digital symbols. The specific selection of emojis and memes separates teenagers from other age groups, contributing to a unique linguistic culture. Visual language elements are shared symbolic codes that reinforce identity, emotional alignment, and friendship dynamics. This supports Fisher et al. (2018), who argues that multilingual youth use language strategically to navigate multiple social identities.

3. CODE-SWITCHING AS SOCIAL POSITIONING AND CONTEXT SHIFTING

Some participants reported that they intentionally switch languages (Indonesian–English or dialects) depending on their audience, as mentioned by P4: "With friends I mix English and Indonesian. With teachers, I use formal Indonesian." Similarly, P7 stated: "With teachers I speak formal Indonesian. With my friends I mix everything, Indonesian, English, slang." P8 then explained: "I use English because it sounds cooler. If I speak full Indonesian, the vibe is different."

Others code-switched to reflect online identities. P5 highlighted: "In gaming we always speak English, 'push mid,' 'cover me.' But in real life we don't talk like that." These teenagers, as a consequence, frequently shifted between Indonesian, English, and local dialects depending on whom they were interacting with. Code-switching was not random, it was strategic, serving to maintain relationships and adapt to different social settings. P3 mentioned: "If I talk to my best friends, I mix Bahasa and English, like 'Lu serius? That's so embarrassing.' But with my parents, I switch to full Indonesian. It feels more respectful". P1 also explained how code-switching signaled group belonging: "When my group talks, we mix English because we watch the same YouTubers. If someone speaks full Indonesian, it feels like they're not part of our vibe." Some examples of typical code-switching used by participants include: Sumpah, that was crazy! Bro, gue speechless sih, and Guys, deadline-nya kapan?

In line with these findings, several participants reported that English gives a sense of maturity or intellectual positioning. P2 said: "English makes me sound smarter. It's not showing off — it's just how we talk." This aligns with findings by Khalilli (2025), who noted that teens use code-switching to negotiate identity, express confidence, and align themselves with global youth culture. P1 also recognized that code-switching could reduce social distance: "If I speak English to my teacher, it sounds formal. But if I mix, teachers feel I'm friendly but still respectful." P9 stated that they avoided code-switching around older relatives: "My grandma doesn't like English mixing. She says, 'What language is that?' So, I speak more Indonesian." Thus, code-switching reflects sensitivity to power dynamics. For this reason, code-switching allows teenagers to:
- Adapt to different social contexts
- Show alignment with certain communities (school friends, gaming friends, online fandoms)
- Manage social distance and maintain harmony
- Present themselves as trendy, confident, global
- Show closeness with peers
- Show respect to adults
- Present different identities (student vs. friend)

These findings reinforce the idea that language choice is a performance of social identity, not merely a communication tool (Eckert, 2018). William et al. (2024) also describe this as visual slang, where emojis represent shared emotional codes and they function as relational tools to express intimacy or humor in digital interaction as well as community belonging. Moreover, code-switching is a conscious social strategy that allows teenagers to adopt the identity most suitable for the space they are in digital or physical. In line with this, pronunciation and accent emerged as powerful indicators of how teens project who they are, or who they aspire to be. Teens consciously alter their pronunciation depending on the persona they want to portray. For instance, some

adopted an "Americanized" pronunciation: "When I say *'literally'*, I don't say 'lit-e-ral-ly.' I say **'**lih-truh-lee.**'** That's how influencers say it" (P1. Others imitated the accent of their favorite idols (especially K-pop and Western vloggers): "I speak English like K-pop idols. It feels cooler. Like, instead of 'thank you,' I say 'tysm' with a soft tone" (P4).

Accent performance also affects social perception and self-esteem, as P7 emphasized that: "If your accent is too Indonesian, people think you're not good at English. But if your accent is very Western, people say you're trying too hard." This shows that accent is a double-edged identity marker and it can earn admiration or criticism. P10 explained why accent matters: "When I speak English fluently, my friends call me 'bule mode.' I like it. It feels like my other identity." These comments support the idea of identity shifting, where teens adopt different linguistic styles to create desired social impressions. Accent also has group-exclusive elements. P6 shared: "My group says 'bro' and 'dude' a lot. If someone says 'guys,' we joke that they're from another group."

Based on the explanation above, it is clear that code-switching helps teenagers adapt their identity depending on the social context, playful and modern with friends, respectful with adults. Code-switching also allows teenagers to manage multiple identities, student, friend, peer group member, simultaneously. These teenagers revealed deliberate language switching depending on audience and social situation. Fisher et al. (2018) found that multilingual adolescents use language choice to manage multiple identities. Hence, the interviews reaffirm that code-switching is strategic, not accidental. In terms of pronunciation and accent, code-switching functions as: a) A tool for self-expression, b) A form of social performance (identity crafting / identity shifting), and 3) A strategic choice to fit in or stand out. This confirms the Social Identity Theory in which teens seek to present a valued identity by adopting linguistic features associated with certain groups (e.g., global, trendy, educated).

DISCUSSION

Overall, the findings reveal that teenagers use language in intentional and meaningful ways to shape who they are and where they belong. Slang, emojis, memes, and code-switching are not just casual or playful features of teenage talk; they function as social tools that help teenagers signal group membership, manage relationships, and position themselves within different social settings. Slang works as a marker of belonging, where sharing the same expressions creates closeness, while not understanding them can lead to exclusion, supporting previous studies on youth language and identity (Budiasa et al., 2021; Eckert, 2018). In the same way, emojis and memes act as visual identity markers. Their meanings are often shared only within specific groups, allowing

teenagers to express emotions, humor, and intimacy quickly while distinguishing themselves from other age groups.

Code-switching further signifies how teenagers move between identities by adjusting their language, accent, and pronunciation according to context, such as when interacting with friends, teachers, or family members. By doing so, they present themselves as friendly, modern, respectful, or confident, depending on the situation. Therefore, these findings suggest that teenage language use is a form of identity performance rather than a random habit. Language becomes a flexible resource that allows teenagers to negotiate belonging, status, and self-expression across both digital and face-to-face interactions, highlighting the fluid and context-dependent nature of adolescent identity.

CONCLUSIONS

This study examined how teenagers use language to show who they are and where they belong, focusing on slang, code-switching, pronunciation or accent, and digital visual language such as emojis and memes. First, slang functions as a clear marker of group membership. Using shared expressions like "rizz," "bet," or "no cap" helps teenagers identify who is part of the group and who is not. Those who understand and use the slang are seen as insiders, while those who do not are viewed as outsiders. Second, code-switching between Indonesian, English, and local dialects is used intentionally to suit different situations. Teenagers change their language depending on whether they are talking to friends, teachers, or family members. This shows that code-switching helps them manage social relationships, power differences, and levels of closeness. It is not a sign of confusion, but a sign of flexibility and awareness. Third, pronunciation and accent reflect how teenagers want to be seen. Many teenagers imitate Western or K-pop styles to sound more confident, trendy, or global. This suggests that language use is not only shaped by context, but also by personal goals and identity aspirations. Finally, emojis, memes, GIFs, and reaction symbols play an important role in digital communication. These visual elements carry shared meanings within peer groups and work like "visual slang." They help strengthen group belonging and highlight generational identity in online spaces. In general, the study found that teenage language use is a form of identity performance. Through spoken, written, and visual language, teenagers actively express belonging, difference, and aspiration. This supports Social Identity Theory, showing that teenagers use language to distinguish between "us" and "them." In short, language is not just a reflection of teenage identity, but a tool they use to shape who they want to become.

This study further suggests that teenage language practices such as slang, code-switching, and the use of emojis and memes should be understood as meaningful

identity work rather than improper language use, with important implications for education and digital literacy. Educators can use this awareness to foster more inclusive communication and help students develop audience and context sensitivity. Future research could examine real online interactions or compare different age groups to further explore how language-based identity changes across contexts and time

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