

## Semantic shifts of pejorative terms on Instagram: A study of university students' online language

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### Abstract

*Language meaning is dynamic and often changes according to social and cultural contexts, particularly in digital communication. This study investigates the semantic shifts of pejorative terms used by university students on Instagram. It aims to identify frequently used pejorative terms and analyze how their meanings have shifted within online interactions. Employing a qualitative descriptive design with purposive sampling, the study involved ten students from the English Education Department (PBI) who actively use Instagram. Data were collected through observation of Instagram captions and comments, screenshots of relevant posts, and semi-structured interviews. The analysis was guided by semantic change theory, particularly the concept of pejoration, and applied a thematic coding procedure to identify semantic shifts based on contextual usage. The findings reveal ten commonly used pejorative terms, namely red flag, ghosting, cringe, toxic, Karen, dry text, trust issue, salty, pick me, and roasting. The analysis indicates that these expressions have undergone semantic shifts, with their meanings extending beyond their original lexical senses to convey negative social evaluations, interpersonal judgments, and identity positioning in online discourse. The findings further demonstrate that digital communication accelerates semantic change by enabling online communities to reshape lexical meanings through repeated contextual use. This study contributes to the understanding of semantic change in digital communication and provides implications for sociolinguistics, semantics instruction, and digital literacy education by highlighting the importance of context-sensitive language use in social media environments.*

**Keywords:** *Instagram; language change; pejorative term; semantic analysis; social media*

### INTRODUCTION

Slurs, often known as pejorative words, have been widely discussed in the field of linguistics for decades. They refer to ethnic and social groups, as explained by Castroviejo et al. (2021). According to Borkowska and Kleparski (2007), pejoration refers to the process in which words or expressions acquire more negative or derogatory meanings over time. These changes are influenced by cultural, social, and historical factors that shape how communities interpret language (Hansen, 2006). Lepore and Stone (2018) further emphasized that

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slurs illustrate the diversity and complexity of the interpretive effects of words. In the digital era, the meanings and functions of pejorative words continue to evolve, particularly through communication on social media platforms such as Instagram.

Semantic change, which refers to the modification of word meanings over time, is a fundamental aspect of language development (Altakhaineh, 2018; Jahan & Irfan, 2021). It can occur through various processes, including broadening, narrowing, amelioration, metaphorical shifts, and pejoration. Among these processes, pejorative change has become increasingly visible in online communication, where interactions are rapid, public, and dynamic (Jahan & Irfan, 2021; Zainal & Rahmat, 2020). The rise of pejorative language on social media reflects broader societal attitudes and biases. Therefore, understanding how certain words become pejorative in online communication is essential for gaining insights into these social dynamics.

Instagram, as one of the most widely used social media platforms, provides a relevant context for examining semantic change. The platform fosters creative expression and identity formation, where language is continuously adapted and reshaped by its users. Instagram is not only a space for sharing images and stories but also a site of linguistic innovation, reflecting contemporary cultural and technological contexts (Karimvand et al., 2021; Natsir et al., 2020). With its growing user base and daily interactions, Instagram offers valuable opportunities to explore how words acquire new meanings or shift in connotation (Putra et al., 2024). As language trends spread rapidly on the platform, pejorative terms can develop new meanings that reflect the attitudes and biases of online communities. Investigating these changes contributes to a broader understanding of language development in the digital era and provides practical insights into how language adapts within online communities.

Several studies have investigated pejorative language and semantic change in digital communication. Hedger (2013) highlighted pejorative words within the broader relationship between semantics and pragmatics, concluding that slurs provide an important test case for semantic theories. Coats (2021) examined language use on social media from both Nordic and English perspectives, revealing gender differences in sensitivity toward language use. Another related study by Pasa et al. (2021) focused on violations of conversational maxims in Instagram comments posted by followers of the Just Jared account. Although these studies have contributed to understanding language use on social media, they have not specifically examined the semantic shifts of pejorative terms used by university students on Instagram.

Therefore, this study focuses on analyzing the semantic shifts in pejorative terms used by English Education (PBI) students on Instagram, as well as identifying their literal meanings. The practical value of this research lies in its ability to explain how language changes in the digital age and to provide insights for various groups. For individuals, understanding semantic changes such as pejoration can encourage more mindful and responsible language use on social media (Finkbeiner et al., 2016). Educators may also use these findings to help students understand how word meanings shift in digital contexts. In

addition, marketers and social media developers can benefit from this knowledge in designing more effective and inclusive communication strategies by recognizing how language shapes identity and online communities. Consequently, this study contributes to understanding semantic change, particularly pejoration, in Instagram discourse among university students. From a sociolinguistic perspective, Wardhaugh and Fuller (2015) explain that sociolinguistics examines the relationship between language and society, making it an appropriate framework for understanding semantic shifts in online communication.

### **Semantic Changes in Word Meaning**

Semantic change refers to the evolution or shift in the meaning of words or expressions over time. This process can occur for various reasons, including cultural change, the influence of mass media, and changes in social attitudes (Bahri et al., 2023). Likewise, Harris (2014) explains that semantic change reflects the way word meanings evolve through various social and cultural influences. The study of semantics is concerned not only with the meanings of words but also with the relationships among words that shape how people communicate. As Chaer and Agustina (2021) state, semantics is the study of meaning and constitutes one of the three major levels of language analysis, alongside phonology and grammar. In this context, semantic change involves changes in the concepts associated with words. It may occur when a new meaning is added to an existing lexical item (*innovative semantic change*) or when one of its existing meanings gradually disappears (*reductive semantic change*) (Rahman et al., 2022; Rohbiah, 2020).

Semantic change can be observed through shifts in word meanings or the emergence of new lexical uses. For example, the word *cool* originally referred to a low temperature but is now widely used to describe something fashionable, impressive, or appealing. This example illustrates how language reflects broader cultural developments and changing patterns of communication. From a sociolinguistic perspective, semantic change demonstrates that language is dynamic and continuously adapts to social interaction and the communicative needs of its users.

According to Luján (2010), semantic change can be classified into five main types: narrowing, broadening, amelioration, metaphorical change, and pejoration. Narrowing occurs when a word develops a more specific meaning than it originally had, whereas broadening refers to the expansion of a word's meaning to encompass a wider range of referents. Amelioration involves a shift toward a more positive meaning, while metaphorical change arises when a word acquires a new meaning based on perceived similarities between concepts. In contrast, pejoration refers to the process in which a word develops increasingly negative or derogatory connotations over time. These classifications demonstrate that semantic change is not a random process but is systematically influenced by social, cultural, and communicative contexts.

Among these types, pejoration is particularly relevant to digital communication because the meanings of words are continuously negotiated through online interactions. Unlike other forms of semantic change, pejoration

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is closely associated with social evaluation, group identity, humor, irony, and public attitudes. The rapid exchange of language on social media enables words to acquire negative meanings more quickly than in traditional face-to-face communication. Therefore, understanding pejoration as a form of semantic change provides an important theoretical foundation for examining how the meanings of words evolve in online discourse, particularly on Instagram.

**Pejorative Meaning**

Pejoration, an important phenomenon within the broader field of semantic change, refers to the gradual development of a word or expression toward a more negative or derogatory meaning over time. According to Finkbeiner et al. (2016), pejorative language consists of words or phrases that acquire negative connotations, often reflecting societal prejudices and shared social attitudes. Although this process may occur gradually, its effects are significant because it demonstrates the close relationship between language and society. As words are repeatedly used in different social contexts, they become vehicles for expressing and reinforcing cultural values, stereotypes, and power relations. Consequently, the study of pejoration provides valuable insights into how language evolves in response to changing social environments.

In the digital era, pejoration has become increasingly visible because online communication accelerates the spread and reinterpretation of language. The popularity of pejorative expressions on social media reflects the rapid pace of linguistic change in digital environments (Qizi, 2023). Compared with conventional face-to-face communication, digital platforms allow words to circulate instantly among large audiences through comments, captions, hashtags, memes, and other interactive features. The rapid dissemination of information, together with the emergence of online communities and the continuous creation of slang and internet jargon, enables words to acquire new meanings within a relatively short period. As a result, semantic shifts, particularly pejoration, occur more rapidly because meanings are constantly negotiated, repeated, and reinforced through online interaction.

Pejoration frequently arises through the metaphorical transfer of negative connotations. The negative associations attached to a word can often be traced to its underlying metaphorical structure, illustrating how people's perceptions of the world shape their language use. In digital communication, metaphors, metonymy, irony, and humor are widely employed to express opinions, emotions, and social identities. These communicative strategies not only enrich online interaction but also contribute to the development of pejorative meanings, as words are repeatedly used in negative or sarcastic contexts until their new meanings become widely recognized within online communities.

Nevertheless, pejoration on social media should be understood as more than a simple process of semantic change (Khalil & Shah, 2025). Online communities actively participate in constructing, negotiating, and transforming word meanings through continuous interaction. The rapid adoption of language, together with the emergence of online slang and digital subcultures, significantly accelerates pejorative processes. Furthermore, words that are initially used positively or affectionately within a particular online group may gradually acquire negative meanings when they are adopted by other communities and

used sarcastically or to ridicule the original group (Ismail et al., 2022). This demonstrates that semantic change in digital communication is shaped not only by linguistic factors but also by social relationships, group identity, and patterns of online interaction.

Therefore, pejoration in social media should be viewed as a dynamic linguistic process resulting from the interaction between language, technology, and society. Digital communication does not merely provide a platform for linguistic innovation; it also accelerates the spread, reinterpretation, and normalization of pejorative meanings. This perspective is particularly relevant to Instagram, where frequent user interactions through captions and comment sections enable words to develop new connotations rapidly. Consequently, examining pejorative terms on Instagram offers valuable insights into how semantic change occurs within contemporary digital discourse.

### **Popularizing Terms through Instagram**

The use of social media as a kind of technology has dramatically increased and it presented everywhere in the form of several websites and smartphone applications. The majority of social media users around the world communicate in English, which has led to the creation of new words and phrases. Because social media connects so many people globally, these new terms have a great chance to spread beyond their original communities. As a result, the rise of social media has not only expanded the vocabulary of English but has also facilitated the incorporation of new terminology into a variety of languages, showcasing the interconnections of our linguistic landscapes (Purnama & Asdlori, 2023).

Among various social media platforms, Instagram has become one of the most influential spaces for online communication. As a platform centered on captions, comments, hashtags, reels, and interactive content, Instagram encourages users to exchange ideas and expressions rapidly. From a sociolinguistic perspective, technology and digitalization are important external factors driving language change. Unlike traditional communication, Instagram enables words and expressions to be repeatedly used, shared, and reinterpreted by large audiences within a short period of time. This continuous interaction accelerates semantic change, allowing existing words to acquire new meanings or connotations more quickly than in offline communication.

Castells (2009) argues that social media, particularly Instagram, functions as a platform for global interaction and content creation where language connects users through captions and comments. These interactive features encourage users not only to adopt emerging expressions but also to reshape their meanings according to specific social contexts. As words are repeatedly used in humorous, ironic, sarcastic, or evaluative contexts, their meanings gradually shift and become normalized within online communities. Consequently, Instagram serves not only as a medium for communication but also as an environment that accelerates semantic change, particularly the development of pejorative meanings. This is an example of the pejorative phenomenon that is often found in the caption or comments column of posts on Instagram:



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1. The use of the word "slay" in the comment on Instagram: "I just found out he's slay." "Slay" is an English slang term that means cool, fantastic, astounding, very impressive, or entertaining. The word is generally used to express admiration or praise for someone or something. However, on social media, some people may misinterpret or use the word "slay" in a negative context, associating it with negative traits or behaviors. In this context, the meaning of "slay" may shift from expressing admiration to referring to something considered inappropriate or shameful.

2. The use of the word "salty" in the Instagram post caption: "I don't know why she's acting salty." "Salty" is a word that expresses the feeling of tasting foods containing or preserved with salt. However, on social media, this salty meaning is changed to a very different meaning. It is often used as slang to describe someone who is perceived as being irritable, angry, or resentful, especially in response to a perceived slight or criticism. Words, in short, that once had only one meaning now have multiple meanings.

The rapid dissemination of expressions on Instagram accelerates the process of semantic change by exposing users to repeated and widespread language use. As users adopt and reproduce trending expressions in captions, comments, and other forms of online interaction, the newly developed meanings become increasingly conventionalized within digital communities. Consequently, these newer, often pejorative, meanings may gradually replace or overshadow the original lexical meanings of the words, increasing the potential for misunderstanding and misinterpretation in online communication.

**METHOD****Respondents**

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach to explore the semantic shifts of pejorative terms used by English Education Department (PBI) students on Instagram. According to Creswell and Creswell (2023), qualitative research enables researchers to obtain an in-depth understanding of social and linguistic phenomena through the interpretation of naturally occurring data.

The respondents consisted of ten undergraduate students (P1–P10) from the English Education Department who actively used Instagram. Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on the following criteria: (1) actively using Instagram, (2) frequently uploading posts or stories, (3) regularly writing captions or interacting through comments, and (4) using at least one pejorative term in their Instagram interactions during the observation period. All participants voluntarily agreed to participate in the study and signed informed consent forms before data collection. Participants' identities were anonymized by assigning codes (P1–P10) to maintain confidentiality.

**Instruments**

Three research instruments were employed in this study: documentation, semi-structured interviews, and a coding sheet. Documentation was used to collect Instagram screenshots containing captions and comments with pejorative terms. Following Ary (2010), screenshots were taken as authentic records of language use in participants' natural online interactions. To protect

participants' privacy, usernames, profile photographs, and other identifying information were anonymized.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to obtain a deeper understanding of participants' intentions when using pejorative terms. The interview guide included questions concerning the reasons for using particular terms, the intended meanings, perceived emotional connotations, and whether the expressions were interpreted as offensive, humorous, or expressions of solidarity in online communication. A coding sheet, in addition, was developed to systematically classify the collected data. Each entry included the participant code, the pejorative term, its dictionary meaning, contextual meaning, type of semantic change, contextual evidence from Instagram, and supporting explanations obtained from the interviews.

For the purpose of this study, a pejorative term is defined as a lexical item that conventionally carries a negative or derogatory meaning but may acquire different meanings depending on the social context of online communication. Semantic change refers to the shift between the conventional dictionary meaning of a lexical item and its contextual meaning in Instagram interactions. A term was identified as a pejorative expression when it possessed a negative meaning in standard usage, appeared in participants' Instagram captions or comments, and functioned as interpersonal communication rather than quotation. Indicators of semantic change included meaning amelioration, weakened derogatory force, metaphorical extension, or changes in pragmatic function.

## **Procedures**

Data collection began by observing participants' Instagram accounts to identify captions and comments containing pejorative terms. Instagram screenshots were documented as primary data because they represented authentic language use in digital communication. The collected screenshots were then organized according to participant codes and types of pejorative expressions. Sample Instagram posts included in the study were anonymized by removing usernames, profile photographs, dates, and other identifiable information.

After the documentation stage, semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant (P1–P10). The interviews aimed to explore participants' motivations for using pejorative terms, their intended meanings, and their perceptions of the expressions within Instagram communication. The interview findings also served to verify the contextual meanings identified from the documented Instagram posts.

## **Data analysis**

The data were analyzed using the interactive model proposed by Miles and Saldaña (2014), consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. During the data condensation stage, all documented Instagram posts and comments were examined to identify pejorative terms. Each identified term was coded using the prepared coding sheet by comparing its conventional dictionary meaning with its contextual meaning on Instagram. The analysis focused on identifying indicators of semantic change, such as shifts from

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negative to positive meanings, reduced derogatory force, or changes in pragmatic function.

The coded data were subsequently organized into tables and representative screenshots to facilitate comparison between original and contextual meanings. Finally, conclusions were drawn by integrating the documentation data with interview responses. This triangulation enabled the researchers to validate the interpretation of semantic shifts and provided a more comprehensive explanation of the social and cultural factors influencing the changing meanings of pejorative terms in Instagram communication.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Identification of Pejorative Terms Used on Instagram**

The analysis identified ten frequently used pejorative terms in Instagram captions, comments, and stories produced by PBI students: red flag, cringe, ghosting, toxic, Karen, dry text, trust issue, salty, pick me, and roasting. These terms were repeatedly used to criticize behavior, express dissatisfaction, create humor, or evaluate interpersonal relationships in online interactions.

The findings indicate that these expressions no longer function according to their original literal meanings. Instead, they have become part of the shared online vocabulary through which users interpret and evaluate social behavior. Their frequent appearance demonstrates that Instagram has become an important platform for the circulation and normalization of newly emerging pejorative expressions among university students.

### **Semantic Shifts of Pejorative Terms**

The semantic analysis demonstrates that all ten expressions have experienced semantic change. Most belong to the categories of metaphorical extension, semantic shift, and pejoration, where words acquire broader or more negative meanings in digital communication.

The term *red flag*, originally referring to a physical warning signal, has undergone metaphorical extension and now denotes undesirable personality traits or behaviours that indicate potential problems in relationships. Likewise, *cringe*, originally describing a physical reaction of discomfort, has broadened its meaning to refer to socially embarrassing or awkward behaviour.

Similarly, *ghosting* has shifted from its literal association with ghosts to describing the sudden termination of communication without explanation (Kay & Courtice, 2022). This represents a semantic shift from a supernatural concept to interpersonal behaviour. The word *toxic* has also expanded from describing poisonous substances to characterizing emotionally harmful people or environments.

The expression *Karen* illustrates pejoration because a personal name has developed into a negative social label referring to individuals perceived as entitled or rude. Likewise, *pick me* has evolved from its literal meaning into a derogatory expression describing individuals who seek validation by portraying themselves as different from others.



Another example include *dry text*, which has broadened from describing plain written language to emotionally unresponsive online messages; *trust issue*, which now commonly refers to emotional difficulty in forming interpersonal trust; *salty*, which shifted from describing taste to expressing bitterness or resentment; and *roasting*, which metaphorically changed from cooking food over fire to harshly mocking or criticizing someone.

These findings demonstrate that semantic change on Instagram is primarily driven by metaphorical reinterpretation and social evaluation, allowing existing words to acquire new meanings relevant to online interaction.

### **Factors Influencing Semantic Shifts on Instagram Communication**

The findings indicate that semantic shifts occur because Instagram users continuously adapt language to express social evaluation, humour, interpersonal relationships, and group identity. Rather than creating entirely new vocabulary, users reinterpret existing words and expressions to communicate meanings that resonate with digital culture.

The widespread use of these terms among PBI students suggests that Instagram functions as a space where linguistic innovation spreads rapidly through repeated interaction. As users adopt expressions popularized by internet culture, the meanings become conventionalized within their online community. Consequently, semantic change is influenced not only by linguistic processes but also by the communicative practices and cultural norms of social media users.

### **Interview Results**

Varieties of responses were shown by the participants in the interview session related to the use of pejorative terms on their Instagram accounts. They were asked to reflect on their familiarity with specific terms such as *red flag*, *cringe*, *ghosting*, *toxic*, *Karen*, *dry text*, *trust issue*, *salty*, *pick me*, and *roasting*. Participants commonly defined these terms in ways that aligned with their widespread usage on social media platforms. For instance, *red flag* was often understood as a warning sign in relationships, *cringe* referred to feelings of secondhand humiliation, and *ghosting* described the immediate end of communication without explanation. Terms like *toxic* and *Karen* were frequently associated with negative or entitled behavior, while *dry text* and *trust issue* pointed to specific interpersonal dynamics, such as disengagement in communication or difficulty in trusting others. This is similar to what P1 said: “I’m very familiar with all of these terms, like ‘Trust issue’ is when someone has difficulty trusting others”. Another term like *salty* was commonly understood to signify bitterness, *pick me* described individuals seeking validation by appealing to others, and *roasting* was viewed as playful teasing, albeit with the potential for harm.

In terms of the reasons why these terms were used on Instagram, the participants replied that those words are popular among users because they are short, easy to understand and they capture complex emotions or behaviors in one word. Regarding this, P5 added: “. The words seem relatable, especially for

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*a younger audience. It's a way to talk about people and situations quickly without needing to go into a long explanation". Similarly, P2 and P3 stated: "these terms are particularly effective for quick communication, which is essential in the fast-paced environment of platforms like Instagram".*

However, regarding the potential harm or empowerment associated with these terms, most participants generally agreed that the effect depends on the context. When they are used constructively, such as in discussions that exclaim harmful behaviors (e.g., *ghosting* or *toxic*), these terms can be empowering and help establish boundaries. Conversely, when they are used to insult or dismiss others without understanding the underlying situation, they can be damaging, as P8 stated: *"They can be both, depending on the context. If someone's using these terms to call out bad behavior, like 'ghosting,' it can be empowering because they're setting boundaries. But if it's used just to insult someone without understanding the situation, it's definitely harmful."*

In terms of generational differences, younger viewers acknowledged that these terms are part of their online language, with older generations possibly viewing them as overly critical or juvenile. Finally, when reflecting on the future use of these terms, some participants expressed a desire for a shift away from using them solely to criticize and toward more constructive conversations that could lead to better understanding and improvement of interpersonal dynamics. In line with this, P7 commented: *"Definitely! Older generations might not understand these terms, and they might see them as overly judgmental or childish. But for younger people, these terms are part of how we communicate on social media, and they're part of the humor we share."*

In addition, when the participants were asked whether these terms were pejorative, most of them agreed that those words often carry negative connotations, used primarily to criticize or call attention to undesirable behaviors. The usage of these terms typically served to convey frustration or judgment, with some participants suggesting that they may be used in a more humorous or ironic context at times. However, participants also noted that the meanings and usage of these terms have evolved over time. For example, *Karen*, once associated with entitled behaviors in customer service settings, now broadly signifies any perceived individual displaying demanding or unreasonable behavior, while *toxic* has expanded beyond extreme cases to encompass a wide range of negative behaviors, even in seemingly minor situations. What is more, Participants expressed that these terms are predominantly used to describe others, although some recognized using them about themselves, particularly in a self-aware or humorous context. This self-referential usage sometimes served to soften the impact of the term, making it less confrontational. The impact of these terms on relationships and online interactions was viewed with ambiguity. On one hand, they can foster a sense of shared understanding and humor among those using them; on the other hand, they can create division or lead to misunderstandings, especially when the terms are used seriously or without context.

The analysis shows that many of these pejorative terms have significantly diverged from their original definitions. Some terms have experienced a complete change in meaning, while others retain a connection to their literal origins but

have taken on new social or emotional significance. For instance, "red flag," once a literal warning signal, now signifies problematic traits in relationships, reflecting a common understanding of interpersonal complexities within online communities. Similarly, "ghosting," which originally referred to a ghost, now describes the sudden cessation of communication in personal relationships, highlighting modern communication challenges (Sætra, 2019; Zubair & Ahmed, 2023).

Other terms also display this shift. "Cringe," once referring to a physical reaction, now signifies a social phenomenon where behaviors are perceived as awkward or embarrassing (Jesus et al., 2022). "Toxic," previously used for harmful substances, now describes damaging behaviors or environments, indicating a heightened awareness of unhealthy interactions. "Karen," originally a common name, is now a pejorative term for entitled or rude behavior, while "dry text," once referring to uninteresting communication, now highlights the need for engaging and emotionally rich interactions. This evolution aligns with Luján's (2010) framework on language change in digital spaces, which suggests that platforms like Instagram create unique linguistic environments where language evolves rapidly. Luján's theory argues that digital contexts blur formal and informal communication boundaries, leading to specialized vocabularies that reflect the social dynamics of these platforms. The study supports this theory, showing how Instagram contributes to the transformation of pejorative terms through repeated use in specific contexts, often with irony or satire. The interactive nature of Instagram fosters a collective reshaping of language, solidifying new meanings through frequent use and shared understanding.

The study also underlines that the shift in meaning of pejorative terms is not always a simple transition from literal to negative connotations. Instead, changes often involve elements of satire, irony, and social commentary. For example, "roasting," which originally meant cooking, now refers to a form of online criticism that combines humor with disparagement. This evolution demonstrates the flexible nature of online language, where words can acquire multiple meanings based on their usage context. The findings also emphasize the broader implications of language change in digital communication (Savitri & Dewi, 2023). As users engage on platforms like Instagram, word meanings can shift rapidly, reflecting both online community dynamics and broader cultural changes. The research sheds light on how language evolves in digital environments and the importance of understanding these changes for effective online communication.

In addition, the potential harms or benefits of these terms largely depend on the social context in which they are used. While some participants viewed these terms as empowering—particularly when they were used to set boundaries or called attention to harmful behaviors—others noted that they could be damaging when used to stigmatize or shame individuals without context. This duality echoes the observations of Natsir, et. al., (2023), who argue that digital language, including pejorative terms, is often a double-edged sword: it can foster a sense of solidarity and empowerment when used in supportive contexts, but it can also perpetuate negativity and exclusion when used to marginalize or criticize. Thus, the impact of these terms on social dynamics is highly contingent

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upon their use in specific contexts and the intent of the speaker. Furthermore, the study underscores the impact of social media on communication practices. By analyzing how PBI students use pejorative terms on Instagram, it highlights the need to grasp the evolving connotations of these terms to navigate online interactions effectively. The fast-paced nature of social media fosters a dynamic linguistic environment where language evolves quickly (Junadi & Laili, 2021). To communicate respectfully and meaningfully on these platforms, users must be aware of these changes. Therefore, individuals should use pejorative terms with caution, considering their evolving social and emotional implications.

**DISCUSSION**

The findings demonstrate that semantic shifts on Instagram extend beyond lexical change and reflect broader sociolinguistic processes. Most of the identified expressions have undergone metaphorical extension and pejoration, supporting theories of semantic change that argue word meanings evolve in response to changes in social context and patterns of language use (Traugott & Dasher, 2002, as cited in Natsir, et.al., 2026).

From the perspective of identity construction, PBI students employ these expressions to position themselves socially and communicate particular attitudes. Using terms such as *red flag*, *cringe*, or *pick me* enables users to express personal values while simultaneously signalling their understanding of current online discourse. In this sense, vocabulary functions not only as a communicative tool but also as a marker of identity within digital environments.

The findings also reflect online community membership. The shared understanding of expressions such as *ghosting*, *Karen*, and *salty* indicates that users participate in common linguistic practices characteristic of internet communities. Individuals familiar with these expressions can more easily engage in online conversations, whereas those unfamiliar with them may experience difficulties interpreting intended meanings. This supports the view that digital communities develop distinctive linguistic norms through repeated interaction.

Furthermore, the semantic shifts reveal aspects of language ideology. Many of these expressions encode social judgments regarding acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. Labels such as *Karen* and *pick me* are not merely descriptive but function as evaluative terms that reinforce particular cultural expectations and social values. Consequently, language becomes a mechanism through which online users negotiate social norms and express collective attitudes.

Finally, these findings illustrate the influence of digital culture on language development. Instagram provides an environment where expressions circulate rapidly through comments, captions, memes, and short-form content. Frequent exposure encourages lexical innovation and accelerates semantic change. Rather than remaining stable, word meanings continuously adapt to emerging communicative needs within online interaction. This observation aligns with sociolinguistic perspectives that language change is closely connected to technological development, social interaction, and community practices.

Overall, the study demonstrates that the semantic shifts of pejorative terms are not random lexical changes but socially motivated linguistic innovations shaped by identity construction, online community membership, language ideology, and digital culture. These findings contribute to understanding how social media accelerates semantic change and how university students actively participate in the ongoing evolution of English vocabulary in digital communication.

## CONCLUSION

This research highlights the flexibility of language in digital spaces, particularly on platforms like Instagram. The analysis of pejorative terms used by PBI students shows how word meanings change in response to online community dynamics. Understanding these changes is crucial for facilitating thoughtful and respectful communication in digital environments. The use of pejorative terms on Instagram, in addition, is a complex phenomenon that reflects broader cultural shifts in communication and social interaction. While these terms offer a way to express moral judgment and critique, their meanings are fluid, shaped by context and intent. As social media continues to evolve, it is likely that the meanings of these terms will continue to shift, reflecting changes in societal values and communication norms.

This study contributes to understanding language change in social media by showing how pejorative terms evolve through online interactions. The findings have pedagogical implications for sociolinguistics, semantics, and digital literacy by providing authentic examples of semantic change and promoting responsible language use in digital communication. Future research should investigate pejorative terms across different social media platforms using larger and more diverse datasets to better understand how digital environments influence semantic change.

## AUTHOR STATEMENTS

Author 1, **Rahmi Fhonna**, contributed to the conceptual development of the study, refined the research framework, developed the research methodology, supervised the overall research process, provided guidance on data analysis and interpretation, critically reviewed and edited the manuscript, and approved the final version for publication. Author 2, **Cut Lala Khatun Qalqasyandi**, initiated the research topic, conducted the data collection, data curation, and data validation, performed the data analysis and interpretation, prepared the original draft of the manuscript, revised the manuscript based on the supervisor's feedback, and approved the final version for publication. During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors also used AI such as ChatGPT to support grammar correction and enhance the overall readability of the text. All AI-assisted output was carefully reviewed, revised, and verified by the authors. The authors accept full responsibility for the accuracy and originality of the content presented in this publication.



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**Conflict of Interest Statement:** The authors declare that the research was conducted without any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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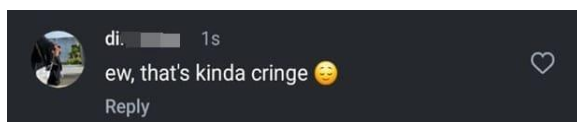
## APPENDICES

**Table 1.** A List of Participants

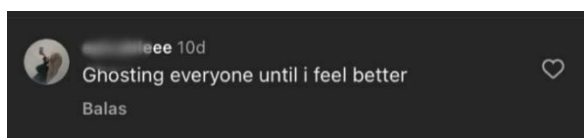
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| 2  | AF      | 2020  | Male   |
| 3  | IA      | 2020  | Female |
| 4  | AZ      | 2020  | Female |
| 5  | HZ      | 2020  | Male   |
| 6  | FM      | 2020  | Female |
| 7  | CR      | 2020  | Female |
| 8  | RK      | 2020  | Female |
| 9  | HA      | 2020  | Male   |
| 10 | IH      | 2020  | Female |



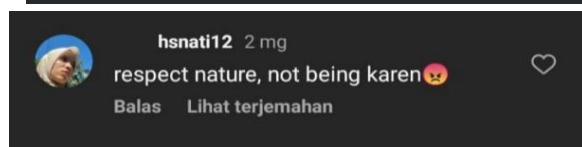
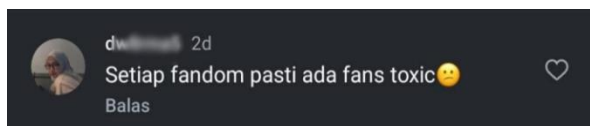
**Figure 1.** The comments made by IA



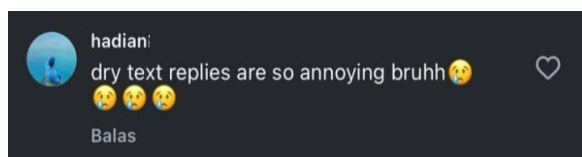
**Figure 2.** The comments made by AZ



**Figure 3.** The comments made by CR



**Figure 5.** The comments made by IH

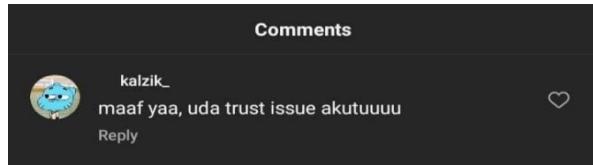


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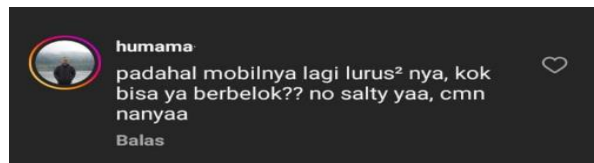
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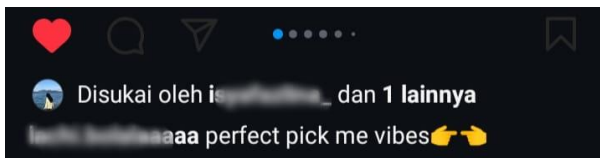
**Figure 6.** The comments made by AF



**Figure 7.** The comments made by HZ



**Figure 8.** The comments made by HA



**Figure 9.** The comments made by FM



**Figure 10.** The comments made by RK