

**ONLINE TO EVERYDAY:
HOW INTERNET SLANG GOES MAINSTREAM
Sohan Balaji S.G.¹ & Megan Fernandes²**

¹Assistant Professor, K.L.E Society’s S. Nijalingappa College,
Bengaluru.

²Assistant Professor, St. Xavier’s College, Goa

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18775586>

ABSTRACT:

This paper investigates the process by which internet slang enters mainstream English, using Gretchen McCulloch’s *Because Internet: Understanding the New Rules of Language* (2019) as its primary text. It tests the hypothesis that slang adoption follows a structured pathway shaped by digital platform design and social validation, rather than occurring randomly. The research paper applies McCulloch’s “spectrum of formality” concept to trace the journey of selected terms such as “selfie,” “ghosting,” and “stan” from online origins to formal acceptance. This analysis is supported by dictionary entry dates, and first appearances in social media. The research paper is trying to indicate that successful adoption depends on a term’s ability to name a new digital-era behavior, gain amplification through influencers or news outlets, and achieve practical utility in everyday communication. The research concludes that the movement of internet slang into common usage is a predictable and legitimized form of contemporary language change, reflecting the deepening integration of digital culture into daily life.

KEYWORDS:

Internet Linguistics, Language Change, Digital Communication, Slang Adoption, Gretchen McCulloch.



Introduction

The trajectory of the English language has historically been charted through conquest, trade, and literature. In the 21st century, however, the primary engine of linguistic evolution is the internet. For decades, linguists and educators viewed Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) with skepticism, often characterizing it as a degradation of standard literacy—a chaotic realm of abbreviations, errors, and ephemeral trends (Crystal, 2001). However, the ubiquity of digital interaction has necessitated a shift from a prescriptive to a descriptive approach. Internet slang is no longer a marginal curiosity; it is a central component of contemporary vernacular, influencing how society labels behaviors, emotions, and identities. This paper explores the mechanism of this linguistic migration. It posits that the movement of slang from niche online subcultures to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) is not random but follows a structured pathway governed by sociolinguistic principles. Using Gretchen McCulloch’s seminal work *Because Internet: Understanding the New Rules of Language* (2019) as a theoretical framework, this study analyzes how specific “affordances” of digital platforms create lexical gaps that new terms must fill. By examining the etymological journeys of “selfie,” “ghosting,” and “stan,” this research demonstrates that successful internet slang achieves mainstream status by solving communicative problems unique to the digital age.

Review of Literature

The Evolution of CMC Studies

Early scholarship on CMC, such as the work of Naomi Baron (2008), focused heavily on the “lean” nature of digital text—the loss of nonverbal cues like tone and body language. Baron and others analyzed how users compensated for this loss through emoticons and acronyms. David Crystal (2011) expanded this by arguing that “Netspeak” represents a new medium entirely, distinct from both spoken and written language.

Gretchen McCulloch and the “Third Genre”

McCulloch (2019) revolutionized this field by reframing internet writing not as “broken” standard English, but as a distinct “third genre” of communication. She introduces the concept of “Typographical Tone of Voice,” arguing that capitalization, punctuation (or lack thereof), and emoji usage function as prosodic markers in a text-based medium. Her work provides a crucial taxonomy of “Internet People”—from “Old Internet People” who grew up with coding to “Post-Internet People” who view the digital and physical worlds as fluidly integrated.

Sociolinguistic Theories of Enregisterment

To understand how slang moves, one must look to Agha’s (2003) theory of “enregisterment”—the process by which a linguistic form becomes linked to a specific social persona. Squires (2010) applied this to “netspeak,” showing how specific spellings become indexical of “internet identity.” However, less research has specifically connected these sociolinguistic theories to the platform-specific mechanics that McCulloch highlights, such as the retweet button or the read receipt.

Research Gap

While extensive research exists on the morphology of internet slang (e.g., “lol,” “brb”) and its impact on student literacy, there is a paucity of academic work that links platform affordances directly to lexical survival. Most studies analyze slang as a static list of terms rather than a dynamic process of natural selection. Furthermore, few studies have rigorously applied McCulloch’s “Spectrum of Formality” to trace specific case studies from their subcultural genesis to their institutional canonization in dictionaries. This paper addresses that gap by treating slang adoption as a measurable, structured lifecycle.

Objectives of the Study

- To validate Gretchen McCulloch’s hypothesis that internet slang

adoption is driven by social networks and “weak ties” rather than top-down mandates.

- To analyze the specific sociolinguistic drivers that propelled “selfie,” “ghosting,” and “stan” from niche usage to the OED.
- To examine the role of technological affordances (e.g., front-facing cameras, read receipts) in creating the need for new lexicon.
- To discuss the educational implications of acknowledging internet slang as a legitimate register of English.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative case study approach, utilizing etymological tracing and sociolinguistic analysis.

Data Collection:

- Primary Text: Because Internet (McCulloch, 2019) serves as the theoretical anchor.
- Lexicographical Data: Entry dates and definitions were sourced from the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), Merriam-Webster, and Collins Dictionary.
- Digital Archaeology: First-usage instances were verified using archived internet forum data (e.g., Usenet, Reddit) and Google Trends historical data.

Selection Criteria:

The terms “selfie,” “ghosting,” and “stan” were selected via purposive sampling to represent three distinct categories of linguistic innovation:

- Selfie: A noun born from technological necessity (Hardware innovation).
- Ghosting: A verb describing a behavioral affordance (Interface design).

- Stan: A term undergoing semantic shift and amelioration (Fandom culture).

Analysis & Discussion

1. “Selfie”: The Morphology of Technological Determinism

McCulloch argues that “internet language changes because the internet changes” (2019). The term “selfie” is the quintessential proof of this technological determinism.

Origin & Morphology: The term famously debuted on September 13, 2002, in an Australian internet forum (Dr. Karl Self-Serve Science Forum), where a user apologized for a blurry photo of a lipinjury, calling it a “selfie”. Morphologically, this follows a standard Australian English hypocoristic pattern (diminutive suffix -ie), seen in words like “barbie” (barbecue) or “sunnies” (sunglasses).[1][2]

The Affordance Gap: For a decade, the term remained dormant. Its explosion in 2012–2013 correlates perfectly with the introduction of the front-facing camera on the iPhone 4 (2010) and the rise of Instagram. The technology created a new behavior-taking a photo of oneself at arm’s length—that “self-portrait” (too formal) and “cameraphone shot” (too clunky) failed to capture.

Mainstream Adoption: “Selfie” succeeded because it was linguistically efficient and culturally specific. By 2013, it was the Oxford Word of the Year, validating McCulloch’s theory that slang survives when it fills a practical utility gap in the “Spectrum of Formality.”

2. “Ghosting”: Naming the Negative Space

While “selfie” names a visible object, “ghosting” names a silence. This term highlights the sociolinguistic concept of “labeling the unsaid.”

The Digital Affordance: In face-to-face interaction, walking away without a word is socially difficult and physically obvious. In

digital communication, the “end” of a conversation is ambiguous. Interfaces allow users to “read” a message without responding (Read Receipts), creating a state of suspended animation.

Semantic Shift: Historically, “ghosting” referred to spiritual phenomena or identity theft. Its migration to the dating lexicon (circa 2014–2015) represents a metaphorical shift. It transforms the passive act of not replying into an active verb, assigning agency to the silence. [3]

Social Validation: The term’s entry into the Collins Dictionary in 2015 marked its transition from niche dating-app forums to general usage. It validates a specific modern anxiety: the ambiguity of digital presence. As Rolandsson & Couture (2024) note, “ghosting” is now a “spectral” media practice, where the interface itself haunts the user. [4]

3. “Stan”: Amelioration and Indexicality

“Stan” represents the power of “weak tie” networks—the loose connections between strangers on social media—to reshape meaning.

- Etymology: Originating from Eminem’s 2000 song about a murderous fan, the term began as a pejorative.
- Amelioration: Through “Stan Twitter,” the term underwent amelioration (the process of a word’s meaning becoming more positive). Fans of K-pop and Western pop artists reclaimed the term to signify “high-dedication” rather than “pathology”. [5]
- Grammatical Productivity: Unlike the other terms, “stan” became a verb (“I stan”), a noun (“a stan”), and a participant in complex grammar (“we have no choice but to stan”).
- Indexicality: Using the word “stan” functions as an indexical marker of “Post-Internet” identity. It signals that the speaker understands the norms of fandom culture. Its entry into the OED in 2017 confirms that this subcultural index has been “enregistered” as standard English. [5]

Findings

The analysis yields three primary findings regarding the lifecycle of internet slang:

The Utility Imperative: Slang terms that survive are not merely “fun”; they are functional. They solve a linguistic problem created by technology. “Selfie” solved the problem of naming a front-facing photo; “ghosting” solved the problem of naming digital silence.

The Weak-Tie Accelerator: As per McCulloch’s application of Granovetter’s network theory, terms do not spread through close friends (strong ties) but through “weak ties”–influencers and viral posts that bridge disparate social clusters. “Stan” moved from Hip-Hop culture to K-Pop culture to General Twitter culture via these weak bridges.

The Spectrum of Formality: The movement is consistently from “Informal/Oral” to “Formal/Written.” All three terms appeared first in ephemeral comments, then in think-pieces/journalism, and finally in dictionaries. This confirms that the internet acts as a “beta-testing” ground for the English language.

Educational Implications

The legitimization of internet slang has profound implications for pedagogy, particularly in English Language Teaching (ELT).

Critical Digital Literacy: Rather than banning slang, educators should use it to teach register awareness. Asking students to analyze why they use “ghosting” instead of “ignoring” fosters metalinguistic awareness. [6]

Code-Switching: Teachers can frame internet slang not as “bad English” but as a distinct code. Matias (2023) found that while slang influences academic writing, students are capable of code-switching if explicitly taught the difference between “textspeak” and “academic register”. [7]

Morphological Awareness: Analyzing terms like “unfriend” (reversal of semantic norms) or “selfie” (suffixation) can be a powerful tool for teaching how English words are constructed.

Limitations & Future Scope

English-Centrism: This study focuses primarily on Anglophone internet culture. Future research should examine if similar pathways exist in other major internet languages like Spanish, Mandarin, or Hindi.

Platform Decay: The terms analyzed here originated in the “Web 2.0” era (social media). As the internet shifts toward “Web 3.0” or fragmented “cozy web” spaces (Discord, WhatsApp), the transmission mechanisms for slang may change again, becoming more insular and less likely to hit the mainstream.

Ephemeral Nature: Some slang dies as quickly as it is born (e.g., “YOLO”). A longitudinal study on failed slang terms would provide a valuable counter-narrative to this success-bias analysis.

Conclusion

The journey from “online” to “everyday” is not a degradation of the English language, but a testament to its vitality. Through the lens of Because Internet, we see that terms like “selfie,” “ghosting,” and “stan” are sophisticated linguistic responses to a rapidly changing world. They are the artefacts of a society learning to navigate new technologies and new social contracts. As digital culture continues to integrate itself more deeply into daily life, the boundary between “internet slang” and “standard English” will continue to erode. For linguists and educators, the task is no longer to guard the gates against these changes, but to understand the logic of the network that drives them.

References

1. Agha, A. (2003). The social life of cultural value. *Language & Communication*, 23(3–4), 231–273.
2. Baron, N. S. (2008). *Always On: Language in an Online and Mobile World*. Oxford University Press.
3. Crystal, D. (2001). *Language and the Internet*. Cambridge University Press.
4. Crystal, D. (2011). *Internet Linguistics: A Student Guide*. Routledge.
5. Gibson, J. J. (1979). *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*. Houghton Mifflin.
6. Granovetter, M. S. (1973). The strength of weak ties. *American Journal of Sociology*, 78(6), 1360–1380.
7. Keffer, D. (2024). *A Content Analysis of Everyday Definitions of Ghosting*. University of Mary Washington Student Research, 1610.
8. Lorant, E. (2025). The Gag City Grammar Police: Language and Algorithmic Community on Stan Twitter. *Journal for Undergraduate Ethnography*, 9(1).
9. Matias, F. M. (2023). Impact of Internet Slang on the Academic Writing of Students. *American Research Journal of Humanities Social Science*, 6(7).
10. McCulloch, G. (2019). *Because Internet: Understanding the New Rules of Language*. Riverhead Books.
11. Rolandsson, T., & Couture, S. (2024). *Becoming Spectral: Toward a Media History of Ghosting*. *Media, Culture & Society*.
12. Squires, L. (2010). Enregistering internet language. *Language in Society*, 39(4), 457–492.
13. Wierzbicka, A. (2023). ‘Wanna take a selfie? Oh, defo!’: Why Aussies love shortening so many words. *SBS News*.
14. <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/wanna-take-a-selfie-oh-defo-why-aussies-love-shortening-so-many-words/j53w5rp8k>
15. <https://idiomintel.com/selfie-word-origin/>
16. https://scholar.umw.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1610&context=student_research
17. <https://rucforsk.ruc.dk/ws/portalfiles/portal/107618176/rolandsson-couture-2024-becoming-spectral-toward-a-media-history-of-ghosting.pdf>
18. <https://ojs.library.dal.ca/JUE/article/view/12513/11244>
19. <https://nijse.org/index.php/home/article/download/421/411/841>
20. <https://www.arjhss.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/F674454.pdf>

21. https://vc.bridgew.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2049&context=br_rev
22. https://www.academia.edu/42929757/Sociolinguistic_Variation_and_Enregisterment_in_an_Online_Community_of_Practice_A_Case_Study_of_MetaFilter_com
23. <https://www.washingtonindependentreviewofbooks.com/bookreview/because-internet>
24. https://www.reddit.com/r/asklinguistics/comments/plhn3t/why_do_australians_seem_to_add_an_o_at_the_end_of/
25. <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Enregistering-internet-language-Squires/3fcc0d8ebc248c9b4469377a00e89c5fa429545b>
26. <https://hislopiajournal.in/the-influence-of-social-media-slang-on-academic-writing/>
27. <https://ojs.library.dal.ca/JUE/article/view/12513>
28. <https://castlewallsediting.com/book-review-because-internet-by-gretchen-mcculloch/>
29. <https://ejal.info/menuscript/index.php/ejal/article/download/1127/427/3091>
30. <https://englishexplorations.check.uni-hamburg.de/wanna-cuppa-the-diminutive-in-australian-english/>
31. <https://www.ijlll.org/vol9/IJLLL-V9N5-442.pdf>
32. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4867548
33. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/sociolinguistics/indexicality-stance-and-fields-in-sociolinguistics/CD68827F765CAA1EE5714D5264DDFE9D>