

## **“OKAY BOOMER, LET ME COOK”: LINGUISTIC PERFORMANCE AND GENERATIONAL POWER DYNAMICS IN THE HYUNDAI X AMAZON ‘SLANG’ CAMPAIGN**

**Sofia Imanina E Manjaya\***

Universitas Katolik Indonesia Atma Jaya, Jakarta

[sofimana@gmail.com](mailto:sofimana@gmail.com)

\*correspondence: [sofimana@gmail.com](mailto:sofimana@gmail.com)

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines how corporate marketing strategies create intergenerational conflict, negotiate authentic status and recreate power through their use of vernacular of youth in their advertisement for the 2025 HyundaiXAmazon “Slang” through CDA. Strategic cringe usage and performative linguistic incompetence in the commercial, demonstrates how the advertisement is a sophisticated meta-narrative and not a failure of strategy; the clumsy use of sophisticated, condensed lexicon (ie. “bussin,” “sus,” and “mid”) representative of GenZ and/or rooted in Black and queer digital communities, reconnects to “stylistic hedging” regarding the promotion and usage of youth vernacular by the brand. The father figure serves to deconstruct traditional authority by representing daughters with substantial linguistic capital, while also allowing the “paternal” figure to regain power through the consumer route. The advertisement provides a pathway for brands to reclaim power as corporations through this foundation of financial exchange, while simultaneously adhering to contemporary standards of cultural awareness. This study concludes that this pattern perpetually accelerates and causes semantic bleaching and commodification of subculture language, positioning neoliberalism as the solution to social and cultural issues complexity. This advertisement further reflects how neoliberal conceptualizations of linguistic identity serve as friction points that can be effectively resolved through platform capitalism.

**Keywords:** commodification of culture, critical discourse analysis, intergenerational communication, semantic bleaching, uncanny valley of slang

### **Introduction**

The new dialect of Generation Z is evolving and expanding every day. Teenagers use their language as a way to create their own unique identity as a group within society. According to author (Eckert, 2018) who studied adolescent language, the vernacular (or everyday spoken) practices of teens are essentially forms of identity work that serve multiple purposes.

First, it works to create a different and often opposing type of identity than that of their parents and the educational establishment. Second, it allows the kids to

unify together as members of the same group, to create a social hierarchy (or pecking order) within their peer groups and to show others that they share similar values (social capital) and experiences.

Slang provides an exclusive access point to the adolescent social world—it's the “directory” of linguistic codes that determines whether someone belongs to a particular group and/or is an accepted member of that group. Knowledge of slang terms such as “rizz” (charisma), “chronically online” (a person whose behavior has been shaped primarily by internet subcultures), or “touch grass” (a suggestion that someone should spend time engaging in real-world activities)—a teen can determine how well he/she fits in with the majority of other adolescents in their peer group.

The use of online media and platforms, such as TikTok, X (formerly known as Twitter) and Instagram, has allowed the rapid and more broadly available access to language variation and change than was ever experienced through older media types, such as music and television. Digital media are no longer just a source for words or phrases. They have become interactive experiences for users to experiment and create their own language forms. Words that originate from one user and one niche community can quickly go “viral” on a global scale. The turnaround time was once typically measured in months or years, not days. The digital community built around a word or phrase also presents unique challenges as the digital age provides access to a wealth of new information and opportunities to collaborate and create. For example, although the semantic definition of “mid” is clear, the connotations attached and how it can be used ironically are often difficult to understand for those not part of the digital community. This may lead to some degree of conflict with older generations who may understand what “mid” means, but do not “get” the additional layers of meaning behind it.

The generational split in language is far more than a list of new words; it is a stark contrast in both context and practical knowledge. Being part of a group, as well as being accepted as part of that group, is not indicated solely by knowing what “sus” means. Rather, being part of a group is demonstrated by understanding when it's appropriate to use the term in a humorous manner vs. when it is used in an accusatory manner, with whom it is suitable to use the term in a way that shows affection while ridiculing, and which media it should be used in (e.g., in a text message vs. in a TikTok comment) such that it delivers the intended effect. According to communication scholar Boyd (2014), teenagers also become skilled in “social steganography”, placing hidden meanings in open situations and being able to be understood by peers, while remaining largely invisible to the scrutiny of parents and corporations. This added layer of language awareness is typically completely overlooked by corporations and parents who have tried to appropriate this culture; they may have adopted some of the vocabulary, but they find themselves still outside the loop of the constantly evolving and changing nuances surrounding its usage, while simultaneously demonstrating the depth of the social divide they are trying to bridge, which can often result in them being classified into a category known as the “uncanny valley” with respect to their performance in relation to this social group.

The use of youth vernacular in advertisements presents a dilemma to marketers. The trade-off for brands when deciding to adopt slang is that they may be perceived as “authentic” or “cringe-worthy.” Brands have strategically used

slang in an attempt to connect with and be relatable to their target audiences; however, as noted by Kapitan and Silvera (2022), the effectiveness of this strategy rests upon a very thin line. An example of this thin line can be seen through the “uncanny valley” effect, which illustrates the disapproval associated with a perceived misfire or exaggerated use of youth vernacular, thus creating a negative connotation for the brand. A more sophisticated interpretation of this dynamic may be that a majority of brands, including the Hyundai-Amazon advertisement, are participating in a meta-strategy – the intentional use of slang in an off-beat manner as a way to create humour and establish connection with the targeted age group.

This method of marketing aligns with the concept of “winking” at the audience or acknowledging the brand’s outsider status. By misusing youth vernacular, the advertiser establishes a common bond between both generations; younger viewers are afforded an opportunity to feel superior (“we know the real meaning position”) while older viewers can identify with the confusion experienced by their generation. An example of this humour in this case can be attributed to the Benign Violation Theory (McGraw & Warren, 2010), whereby a normal use of youth language is violated in a context that is deemed safe or non-threatening, thus stimulating amusement. The advertisement positions the corporation as an ally, but it does not paint a picture of a failing insider; rather, it caricatures itself as an ally who will help solve the challenge of (technological simplicity) shown as humorous. While this technique may or may not be intentional, it still has severe consequences that are much more far-reaching than the immediate metrics of the advertising campaign. This technique may also serve to catalyze a pair of closely related processes that occur in sociolinguistics, namely semantic bleaching and commodification-driven obsolescence.

Semantic bleaching is the process by which a word becomes less specific and powerful from overuse and from being placed in contexts that do not provide it with its originally intended power (Hopper & Traugott, 2003). When a corporation describes the sunroof of a car as “bussin,” the corporation is removing the original meaning of that word within African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and diminishing it into a general synonym for “good.” As such, the word “bussin” becomes de-contextualized and thus loses its embedded meanings. In this way, the target audience can no longer identify who is inside and outside of the group and the target audience will not know how to respond to others based on the use of this particular term (Bucholtz, 2011).

The “cool cycle” and accelerated obsolescence are driven by the political economy of “cool.” Frank (1997) noted that capitalism has a tendency towards commodification: capitalism systematically seeks out rebellion’s symbols and subcultural distinctions and commodifies them. Squires (2021) argues that once a slang word has been identified by a mainstream or corporate entity as being marketable in terms of “cool,” the fact that it has been adopted by that entity makes it obsolete for the original innovators who created the word. The slang word has lost its subcultural capital, or its value as an identity marker of inclusion (Bourdieu, 1986). As a result of losing its value, the subculture experiences a “lexical innovation imperative” to continue to develop new terms to create a new boundary around the language of that subculture (Eckert, 2018). So, while corporate use of slang is not necessarily wrong, their appropriation of slang can shorten its life span and force continual invention of new slang that corporations will look to further

exploit.

This research will undertake a layered discourse analysis of the Hyundai x Amazon ad that interrogates its role in the political economy of “cool” and intergenerational dialogue as opposed to simply listing elements. There are two main focus areas for this research: To identify and provide context for the explicit Gen Z slang used in the Hyundai x Amazon ad. The process of cataloging and identifying slang (such as mid, slay or bussin’) is an important part of this analysis. The intention of this study is to explore whether these slang usages are employed indexically (referring back to the original meanings) or as de-contextualized, empty references to youthful people (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). The research will draw upon theories regarding intergenerational communication (Williams & Nussbaum, 2001) and benign violation humour (McGraw & Warren, 2010) in order to assess whether these tropes support or perpetuate stereotypes and how they relate to the advertised product (Amazon/Alexa) and the societal issues illustrated within the advertisement.

This research aims at exploration of advertising opportunities based upon the developing understanding of “cringe” as a meta-narrative technique to create new meaning for the audience. We will take an alternative view to the current concept of “cringe,” not as humiliation or failure, but rather how creators might use the cringe factor to convey the effect of their own awkwardness. To test our theory, we will study both winking advertising (Kasnit & Silvera, 2022) and the uncanny valley as it applies to marketing strategies (Mori 1970; Tinwell et al., 2011). In doing so, we will demonstrate the effectiveness of using an apparent failure (or an unsuccessful attempt) to actually foster viral, socially engaging content and media discussion. This study will be conducted as a qualitative, critical discourse analysis on the original 31-second “Slang” commercial created by HyundaiUSA, which was released on the YouTube and social media platforms in early 2025. Analysis will include the verbal script of the advertisement (with a focus on slang use and dialogue), visual and semiotic analysis of the advertisement (casting, setting, expressions of the characters, and depictions of ‘tech’), and paralinguistic analysis (intonation, timing, and actor performance). The context of the commercial will be looked at in light of Hyundai’s association with Amazon as a strategic partnership in their pursuit of a technology-forward brand image in the automotive industry. McCulloch (2019) writes in *Because Internet*, that slang found on the Internet has a quick and predictable rise and fall in popularity. She explains that when a slang term is adopted by people not in the original group, also known as ‘outsiders’ (parents, news, companies), it indicates that the term has peaked and is no longer ‘cool’. This occurs when those who created the slang word, or were early adopters of the slang word, stop using the term, which is a direct correlation found in commercials that market to a mass audience. This relationship is also found in Eckert (2018), who discusses how adolescents use linguistic innovation to develop and maintain their group identity by creating and enforcing group boundaries.

Research in Consumer Psychology demonstrates the need for brands to be seen as authentic by their consumers, especially the younger generations of consumers (Beverland, 2022). When a brand communicates a personality/vibe that is inconsistent with its existing identity and actions, the consumer will experience a distrust/skepticism response (Kim & Lee, 2020). The uneasiness created where a brand is attempting to emulate both human and subcultural characteristics but falls

short of truly matching them can be explained through the concept of the “Uncanny Valley” (Mori, 1970). This is an adaptation of the concept of the Uncanny Valley, which has been applied to marketing processes in recent years to show the discomfort created when a brand is trying to reflect both human and subcultural behaviour in an advertisement (Kapitan & Silvera, 2022). In this particular example of a brand advertising, the incorrect using of slang words will fall under the category of the Uncanny Valley and cause discomfort for the audience.

### **Method**

The research utilizes Norman Fairclough’s Critical Discourse Analysis as a theory to analyze how the Hyundai x Amazon 'Slang' advertisement depicts the Power Imbalance between Corporate Authority and Youth Subculture. The analysis of the Text provides an Analysis of how the Commercial Utilises an Intertextual Appropriation of Gen-Z Vernacular (e.g., the term ‘bussan’ as an African-American Vernacular English [AAVE] origin and 'sus' from Online Gaming). Along with the use of this type of Language, The Ad Utilises the Function of a Parasocial Address modelled after Twitch Streamers when it frequently uses the Phrase ‘Chat, How are you feeling?’ This use of Language does not reflect any sort of Authentic Inclusion of Gen-Z Culture as the Characters within the Video rely upon the Father’s Cringe Inducing Performance in order to create this Performative Display of Language Usage.

Additionally, as defined by Kapitan and Silvera (2022), this type of Marketing falls under the category of ‘Winking Marketing’ and relies upon an understanding of the Intertextual Appropriation of the Terms Utilised in the Commercial, thereby creating a Hierarchy of Knowledge between those who are familiar with the referenced Content and those who are not. Furthermore, the use of the Term ‘Daughters’ (referring to the two main Characters in the Video) is intended to further Subvert Traditional Authority Structures in which the Average Person (the Father) holds the Linguistic Capital in the Advertised World, as well as Spoiling the Expected Norm by Having the Daughters Hold the Linguistic Capital in the Commercial.

The final example is created so as to encourage a broader social understanding of subcultures' commodification in relation to their use as a source to market youth culture (Frank 1997). It employs generic signifiers of “cool” within youth culture, and explains these elements through interpretive conceptions of intergenerational struggles that support the notion of technology as a remedy to said struggles. The narrator’s statement near the end that “purchasing an automobile via Amazon is easier than attempting to speak like an individual from Generation Y” presents a critical argument (Bourdieu, 1991) in the sense it resolves the artificial crisis created by the commercial through an avoidance of building bridges with cultural understanding, and instead through the marketing of a consumerist solution, thus consolidating dominant power back into corporate-commercial entities. Rather than offering a narrative that attempts to authentically interact with the complexities of culture for individuals inside youth culture, it places these complexities as an issue solved through an application of the marketing logic of an easy, non-friction-based transaction.

## Findings and Discussion

From the CDA, the researcher can map out what slang terms are used in the video, how they are used, and how they relate to each other in terms of power. Below is a table showing each of the slang terms, the context in the video, and their power function:

Table 1. Hyundai x Amazon slang commercial

Term	Context in Video	Power Function
“Chat”	Father addressing his family.	Appropriation: Attempting to turn a private dinner into a public “stream.”
“Mid”	Daughters describing pancakes; Father describing “aura.”	Evaluation: A tool for immediate dismissal of quality.
“Aura	Father critiquing his daughter’s energy.	Subversion: The father uses a “cool” word to perform a “dad” lecture.
“Sus”	Father describing the car-buying situation.	The “Cringe” Peak: This is the moment the daughters beg him to stop.
“Let me cook”	Father’s final plea for respect.	Desperation: Using a term of competence while appearing incompetent.

Findings from the Hyundai x Amazon “Slang” Commercial represent a transition in corporate communications from trying to look “cool” to engaging in what we’ve termed “strategic cringe.” Power struggles over language representation and meaning are central to Fairclough’s (2010) CDA. In the Hyundai x Amazon Slangs commercials, instead of trying to appropriate Gen Z’s language to seem trendy, Hyundai uses “The Father” as a means of showcasing the ridiculousness of how a corporation can co-opt youth culture. In doing so, the brand demonstrates its alignment to the audience’s distrust of a brand co-opting their culture. As such the father uses terms such as “bussin” and “sus” incorrectly and in the wrong context for comedic effect, demonstrating the brand’s own awkwardness. The brand is thus able to “win” through this illustration of “double irony”.

By devaluing it in the case of saying “aura” about his daughter (as an insult), the father also detracts from someone else’s social capital. According to Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of linguistic capital, when the dominant group’s (Boomers - Corporations) use language from an underclass/subordinate culture, that culture loses its functionality of being “cool” to the original culture. The daughters’ body language and visible discomfort during the video showcase the process of semantic bleaching (i.e., it is happening in real-time while they are using the words).

The narrator’s interruption during the video to provide Amazon’s / Hyundai’s car buying interface can be seen as the most pivotal part of the narrative. It solidifies and confirms the cliché message associated with the advertisement: that all of Gen Z’s cultural interactive relationships in the past have been confusing and inaccessible even to their parents, while being portrayed as easily accessible and functional through the newly formed partnership between Amazon and Hyundai. The underlying message of the ad is that while the “language” is a point of conflict, there is “clarity” via entry into the marketplace.

Last but not least, the usage of “Let me cook” on the final page of the advertisement completes the cycle of “street cred” for this specific phrase. By the time a new phrase has made its way onto a 30-second automotive ad, it has been completely assimilated into popular culture. This particular ad is essentially a

“linguistic morgue,” letting us know that the phrases we saw in this ad do not hold that same meaning anymore, and they belong to institutionalised corporations and no longer have that “bussin” appeal.

### ***Discussion***

The findings from this research demonstrate how the advertisement for the Hyundai model vehicle debuted on Amazon as a sophisticated and intentional ideological text that implemented an effective three-part discourse strategy (Calculated Appropriation, Performative Disempowerment, and Commercial Resolution). As a result, the analysis concluded that “cringe” was not an error made in the advertisement but was actually a core feature of the product being advertised. By using a concentrated lexicon of youth slang (e.g., “bussin” and “sus”) that originated in Black and Queer Digital culture, the ad portrayed a brand performing a ritual of “stylistic hedging” (Kapitan & Silvera, 2022), where brands convey their understanding of youth culture, while retaining a degree of distance (self-deprecation). In turn, this practice helps brands avoid being labeled as culturally appropriative through their actions and thus protects the brand's reputation. Therefore, this type of performance acts as a recognized marketing tactic that helps navigate the “attitude-behavior gap” in which consumers value authenticity, but they are cynical about companies that make direct claims to authenticity (Beverland, 2009).

The narrative of this advertisement design manipulates previous structures of authority. The process of temporarily transferring linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 1991) from parent to child creates a spectacle of generational role reversal; this trope creates comedy from a form of benign violation (McGraw & Warren, 2010). Although this process is subverted, the discounting of the power to the youth culture is closely contained, with the corporate and technology partnership becoming the ultimate last authority. The resolution of the voiceover presents the conflict to be resolved as an ordinary friction point along the consumer journey that has now been completely removed from the Amazon platform. The voiceover reaffirms the neoliberal notion that the market will provide a solution to the many diverse and complex social and cultural issues people must navigate (Harvey, 2005). The advertisement thus commodifies the generational divide itself, with the advertisement utilizing a product to outlet to resolve a situation that occurs through the promotion of excessive theatricality and reductionism.

This study demonstrates how the advertised use of language is part of the growing cycle of “digital slang”. McCulloch (2019) argues that once a subcultural term is used by multiples, it has lost its value as a subcultural term and become part of mainstream language. Because of this commercialisation of these terms, it creates an increased rate of “semantic bleaching” (Hopper & Traugott 2003) by removing the contextual meaning and the “cool” from the subculture. Thus, the advertisement is both a product and a contributor to the cycle identified by Frank (1997); corporate capitalism will find, remove and neutralise a cultural icon from the margins and create a need to continuously work from the margins. The result of this is that although youth have short-term power, structural power to determine what has value, resolve conflict and ultimately determine how long a word is valid, continues to lie with global companies.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this Critical Discourse Analysis of the Hyundai x Amazon commercial by illustrating the complexity of how power is negotiated through Corporate Strategy versus Cultural Engagement. The commercial was intentionally designed with a significant reliance on Gen Z slang words (i.e., “bussin’,” “sus,” etc.), many of which have been pulled from their original use and creation within Black and Queer digital communities (Smitherman, 2022). Rather than being perceived as an ineffective mode of communication, this commercial represents a strategic approach to using content. By scripting the father's awkward attempts to mimic youth slang, Hyundai and Amazon are able to perform a form of Stylistic Hedging (Kapitan & Silvera, 2022) that communicates awareness while simultaneously maintaining a safe distance from engaging in true Cultural Appropriation. The advertisement employs a strategy that uses the performance of disempowerment of parental authority to temporarily elevate Youth Cultural Capital and utilizes a Consumerist Bypass to resolve the constructed tension between Youth Cultural Capital and Parental Authority through the business relationship between Hyundai and Amazon.

The commercial's narrative reinforces and endorses a strong neoliberal ideology within the framework that all social and cultural diversity can find their most effective solution using the logic of the market (Harvey, 2005). When the voiceover announces that “picking out a car is far easier than picking up slang”, it firmly endorses and re-establishes authority not for youth and their parents, but for Amazon's seamless platform. In addition, this commercial not only sells vehicles, but also contributes to the process of commodification of subculture (Frank, 1997) by using innovations in language to monetize and commodify them, and at the same time accelerates the process of semantic ‘bleaching’ and erosion of the very terms that it is promoting (McCulloch, 2019), as well as the process of language change (Hopper & Traugott, 2003). As a result, the “uncanny valley of slang” is revealed not as an unintentional misfire, but as an intentional spectacle engineered to engage in the act of consumption as if to promote the idea of Freedom, suggesting that digital commerce is not concerned with mastery of language, but rather mastery of the checkout procedure.

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