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Brunei's Digital Voices: Uncovering Algospeak and how TikTok consumers drive language change

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Abstract

This paper investigates the role of TikTok content consumers in Brunei in shaping digital language through the emergence of Algospeak - a coded linguistic practice developed to evade algorithmic censorship. While prior research has focused predominantly on content creators and Western contexts, the following study addresses a critical gap by examining how Southeast Asian users, specifically Bruneians, adopt and innovate with Algospeak. Using a mixed-methods approach that combines online surveys and meta-analysis, the paper explores users' motivations and the broader communicative implications of Algospeak both online and offline. Findings reveal that Brunei TikTok users employ Algospeak not only to bypass content moderation but also for emotional buffering, express political stances, and foster community through creative expression. The paper further identifies how Algospeak diverges from earlier digital languages like Netspeak and Leetspeak and challenges traditional language change theories by introducing a dynamic, user-algorithm interaction. It underscores the need for updated theoretical frameworks to account for the algorithmic forces now shaping linguistic evolution in digital spaces.

Keywords: Algospeak; TikTok; Digital language; Brunei Darussalam; Algorithmic Moderation; Language Change; Censorship; Algorithmic Awareness

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Introduction

Internet languages have evolved with online dialogues, and social media platforms like TikTok have further paved the way for new developments. The Oxford English Dictionary annually adds social media-inspired words to describe “new phenomena and behaviours associated with digital communication” (Crystal, 2013, as cited in Dembe, 2024, p. 5). According to Anderson (2024), the rapid creation and spread of new terminologies in digital platforms emphasise the dynamic nature of language online and highlight how social media platforms such as TikTok have become breeding grounds for novel linguistic phenomena. However, unlike other “followers and following” based platforms (Anderson, 2020, p. 8), TikTok is primarily algorithm-driven and is “a social network that has nothing to do with one’s social network” (Tolentino, 2019, as cited in Anderson, 2020, p. 8). This posits one to think about whether the language evolution occurring in TikTok is algorithm-driven or human-driven because algorithms govern-even curate-most communication on this platform (Ionescu & Licu, 2023).

As Milner (2016) suggests, such linguistic phenomena lead to the quick dissemination of novel linguistic forms which transcend linguistic and cultural boundaries. In Brunei, internet penetration stood at 99% of the total population, with around 66.3% active on social media, which implies that Bruneian TikTok users are not only exposed to global digital trends but also adapt and use such phenomena (DataReportal, 2024).

Originating from TikTok, Algospeak serves as a representation of the latest form of internet language. With “algo” deriving from “Algorithm”, Algospeak refers to the practice of intentionally altering, abbreviating or substituting specific words to evade content moderation systems on social media platforms, particularly platforms like TikTok (Curtis, 2022; Delkic, 2022; Steen et al., 2023). This linguistic adaptation is used in text captions, hashtags, and videos to avoid content being flagged or down-ranked by algorithmic systems (Klug et al.,

2023). Several studies describe Algospeak as a form of linguistic resistance where users adopt creative strategies, such as leet-like substitutions (e.g. “@b0rt!on” for abortion), figurative expressions (e.g. “Unalive” for dead), or emojis (e.g. 🇵 for Palestine), to create platform-safe lexicon that circumvents moderation without triggering bans or reduced visibility (Lorenz, 2022; Regaro, 2023; Stano, 2022).

The rise of Algospeak indicates a shift in digital communication, emphasising how users interact with and adapt to digital environments that shape their expressions. Additionally, as Brunei’s digital youth have begun to incorporate global linguistic trends, such dynamic interaction between user-driven linguistic adaptation and algorithmic constraints calls for a closer examination of language formation and change in digital platforms.

The following paper examines the perspectives of Bruneian content consumers on Algospeak and how user-driven language innovation on platforms like TikTok contributes to broader trends in language change. The investigation into whether Algospeak opposes traditional linguistic theories of language change contributes to current debates within the field regarding the adequacy of existing frameworks in explaining language change in the digital age, thus providing a deeper understanding of the dynamics of digital communication.

Situating the Study of Digital Language Innovation

In an era of digitalization, language transcends the realms of verbal and written communication. Language is constantly changing, which is crucial for the preservation and vitality of linguistic systems. On the other hand, cyberspace is a medium of ever-evolving communication that is bound to create various forms of language that are a hybridization yet differentiation of both oral and written language. Crystal (2001, p. 238) states that “Netspeak is going to change the way we think about language in a fundamental way because it is a linguistic singularity – a genuine new medium”. He also posits that rather than thinking of internet language as a single hegemonic medium, it would be accurate to think of it as having many varieties that enrich the linguistic landscape. These various forms or dialects are often called Netspeak or Special Internet Language Varieties (SILVs), but they are also known as Netlish, Weblish, electronic discourse, or Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC). Additionally, considering that user communication in online environments has been shown to involve spoken and written linguistic effects depending on the tenets of the platform and the user community, Netspeak

can be further fragmented into narrower types, forming a hyponymic relationship. Consequently, variants of Netspeak, such as LOLspeak, Leetspeak, and Algospeak, have been created and adapted (Bucher & Helmond, 2018; Crystal, 2001; Klug et al., 2023; McCulloch, 2020; Stano, 2022).

When it comes to the development of digital language, user creativity and the need for effective communication were the main forces behind the emergence of early forms like Netspeak and Leetspeak (Crystal, 2001). These forms, which were represented by symbols, acronyms, and abbreviations, provided users with the ability to express themselves while functioning within the limitations of early digital platforms such as emails, chatrooms, and newsgroups. The language choices made by users have changed from efficiency to evasion, though, as algorithms are now used to moderate online interactions. In the history of digital language innovation, Algospeak marks a turning point from user-driven language evolution to a dynamic interaction between algorithmic influence and user behaviour.

Algospeak as a Novel Phenomenon

Social media's dynamic and innovative nature has encouraged Algospeak to diversify its functions beyond its role to avoid having users' posts flagged, removed, or demonetised by TikTok's content moderation algorithm. Several studies highlighted additional uses of Algospeak by TikTok content creators, including the strategic obscurity of political affiliations or positions on social media (Hagman, 2024), concealing linguistic vulgarities and avoiding online sanctions (Regaro, 2023), and creating a comedic effect where the unexpectedness of the language creates humour (Klug et al., 2023). This phenomenon reflects a broader response to platform-imposed restrictions, where users manipulate language to maintain discoverability and adapt to the algorithmic environment that is constantly evolving (Moskal & Supernak-Polnik, 2023).

Algospeak differs from its predecessors in digital language, such as Netspeak and Leetspeak. Netspeak delineates characteristics specific to the internet due to its nature as a global, electronic, worldwide, and interactive medium. It does not belong to either oral speech or writing but relies on a combination of features of the two with integration into electronic properties (Crystal, 2001). Meanwhile, Leetspeak is slightly similar to Algospeak in that it “is a codified form of English characterised by the substitution of letters with non-alphabetic characters, and a series of other orthographic variations” (Stano, 2022, p. 180). Algospeak’s

deviation from these two forms lies in its intent. While Netspeak was born from a combination of factors that shaped digital communication and Leetspeak was “as an attempt to avoid the systems of control used in bulletin board systems” (Stano, 2022, p. 180), Algospeak arises from a need to bypass automated content controls—mainly on TikTok—and is a form of digital survival, ensuring that content reaches its intended audience despite the platform’s restrictions.

Moreover, Algospeak is not static; it evolves as users develop their algorithm literacy and algorithms themselves adapt to user behaviour. According to Klug et al. (2023), TikTok users acquire algorithmic literacy by forming assumptions regarding the platform’s algorithm tailors content on their visible “for-you-pages”. To further clarify, user presumptions about TikTok’s content moderation system have prompted the adoption of several strategies, including: (1) Inferring that TikTok’s content moderation primarily examined written content, which led to the use of Algospeak mainly in text rather than in speech, (2) Assuming that TikTok filters video content via audio scanning—the process of identifying spoken language in videos—and detecting spoken Algospeak, which results in the use of Algospeak terms in their videos, (3) Presuming that TikTok improperly filters out undesirable visual elements of videos about everyday topics like books or business coaching, users adjust by adding Algospeak to the captions of videos they believe would be mistakenly banned for their visual content, or directly as text-on-screen to specific visual elements of a video (Steen et al., 2023).

Additionally, Algospeak users are compelled to constantly innovate new terms to prevent consequences as they notice that “the TikTok algorithm is learning and understanding the intended meaning behind Algospeak, and therefore of moderating videos accordingly” (Steen et al., 2023, p. 11). This creates a dynamic feedback loop, where users and algorithms influence each other, pushing Algospeak into new territories of linguistic creativity, making it a distinct phenomenon worthy of further investigation. It also insinuates that the existing definitions of Algospeak are inadequate because users are constantly expanding their usage beyond mere word replacements; therefore, it is essential to review the most current renditions of Algospeak.

Broader Implications of Algospeak

The emergence of Algospeak has broad implications for language change and digital communication. It illustrates how language use is significantly influenced by algorithms, thus highlighting that languages in digital platforms are actively shaped by non-human forces rather

than just evolving naturally. Scholars argue that TikTok's content moderation creates a false sense of governance and limits user autonomy by restricting controlling affordances, leaving users with little agency to express disagreement on the platform and often forcing them to encrypt their messages to bypass the constraints imposed by Automated Content Moderation (ACM) (Hagman, 2024; Schoenebeck & Blackwell, 2020). Additionally, Bakhtin (1986, as cited in Jovanovic & Van Leeuwen, 2018, p. 690) also highlights how in social media, “even in the most free, the most unconstrained conversation, we cast our speech in definite generic forms, sometimes rigid and trite ones, sometimes more flexible, plastic and creative ones”. Contrasting perspectives assert, however, that the constraints within social media are not enough to restrict human language behaviour (Jovanovic & Van Leeuwen, 2018), especially since algorithms lack the linguistic capabilities to drive language innovation despite their appearances (Birhane & McGann, 2024). This raises the question of whether the power attributed to algorithms in shaping language is overstated. Nonetheless, it also indicates how, in platforms like TikTok, algorithms are becoming key players in linguistic evolution, raising important questions about the future of language in digitally mediated environments.

Algospeak poses a theoretical challenge to conventional theories of language change. Traditional frameworks like Social Network Theory, which concentrates on human-driven linguistic change, may struggle to capture fully the complexity of language change in algorithmically driven environments (Milroy, 1987). Similarly, the significance of language change resulting from human communication needs may not be fully considered by Functional Theory (Hockett, 1958), which emphasizes the role of algorithms in shaping these needs. Therefore, not only does this challenge traditional views of language change, which have emphasized social, cultural, and cognitive factors as the primary drivers (Labov, 1994), but it indicates the need for modern theoretical models that can take into account how technology has influenced language evolution.

Although a significant body of research has focused primarily on Algospeak's role as an avoidance strategy to circumvent content moderation systems on TikTok, there has been limited exploration into its role as a catalyst in driving language change. Traditionally, cultural, social, or cognitive factors have been identified as primary drivers. However, on digital platforms like TikTok, the algorithm may serve as a new main force influencing linguistic evolution rather than the aforementioned factors. Even considering such a perspective challenges traditional language change frameworks, such as Social Network Theory and

Functional Theory, which emphasise human-driven linguistic shifts. However, arguably, while the algorithm plays a role in shaping language, it is the adopters of Algospeak who actively create new terms within it. This leads to a consideration of whether technology (or in this context, the algorithm) is indeed the driving force behind users' linguistic behaviour, or are users shaping it through their innovations.

Furthermore, much of the existing research concerning Algospeak draws upon data from TikTok content creators and limited studies that examine these issues from the perspectives of TikTok content consumers. Specifically, there is a lack of research addressing how consumers contribute to the spread of Algospeak and their motivations for adopting it, especially in the context of Southeast Asian countries, such as Brunei, where social media penetration is high. The collected data and analysis in the following sections seek to address that deficit.

Methodology

This paper employs a mixed-method approach consisting of a questionnaire to gather primary data on consumer behaviour and a meta-analysis to contextualize Algospeak within broader digital communication trends (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008; Mohammad R. Hashemi & Babaii, 2013; Yin, 2006). This not only helps validate the credibility of the findings but allows for cross-method insights on the dynamic and non-linear nature of Algospeak.

Data Collection - Online Survey

The research utilises an online structured questionnaire created using Google Forms and dispersed via social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Instagram. To ensure that a diverse and substantial amount of data was obtained, the questionnaire was accessible to collect responses for one month, from 1st January until 1st February 2025. It consisted of open-ended and closed-ended questions (multiple- choice and Likert-scale questions) to collect qualitative and quantitative data from participants. The questions' structure aims to explore participants' motivations for using Algospeak, their familiarity with and use of Algospeak, and their perceptions of how it impacts communication. Furthermore, a small-scale pilot study was conducted for 5 days from 15th to 19th October 2024 to refine the questionnaire further and

produce preliminary data. It allows for a broad range of responses and also ensures that it will reach the relevant target population.

Participants and Sampling Technique

A homogenous purposive sampling method was used to gather participants who met the requirements for the subject of interest. To ensure that, the text message sent and the introduction within the questionnaire listed criteria that the individual needed to meet to participate in the study. To avoid unnecessary responses or data being recorded, the questionnaire also included a mechanism that would redirect unfit individuals to the exit while informing them that they do not meet the requirements.

The participant selection process included individuals of varying TikTok usages and roles as content consumers. The demographic distribution of the participants, including age, engagement frequency, and type of viewer, was systematically documented to analyze potential correlations between user characteristics and Algospeak adoption. In general, the study yielded a total of 75 Bruneian participants where 77.3% were females and 22.7% were males. Age distribution indicated that 38.7% were between 18-22 years old, 53.3% were between 23-25 years old, and 8.0% were aged 26-29. The majority of respondents were students (86.7%), while a small proportion were employed (6.7%) or neither employed nor students (6.7%). The gender imbalance in the data should not significantly affect the main objectives of this study because the main participants are TikTok users, and females account for more than 50% of social media users (Clapp, n.d.), hence, if anything, this data reflects such patterns. A summary of the participants' demographics is visualised below (see Table 1).

Table 1.*Participant Demographics (N= 75)*

Type Of Viewer	Active		Passive		Total	
	n	%	N	%	N	%
Gender						
Female	37	49.3%	21	28.0%	58	77.3%
Male	8	10.7%	9	12.0%	17	22.7%
Occupation						
Student	39	52.0%	26	34.7%	65	86.7%
Employed	3	4.0%	2	2.7%	5	6.7%
Neither	3	4.0%	2	2.7%	5	6.7%
Age						
18-22	17	22.7%	12	16.0%	29	38.7%
23-25	25	33.3%	15	20.0%	40	53.3%
26-29	3	4.0%	3	4.0%	6	8.0%
TikTok Usage						
Once a day	6	8.0%	3	4.0%	9	12.0%
Several times a day	35	46.7%	15	20.0%	50	66.7%
Every now & then	4	5.3%	9	12.0%	13	17.3%
Rarely	0	0.0%	3	4.0%	3	4.0%
Type of User						
Viewer	38	50.7%	28	37.3%	66	88.0%
Creator	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Both	7	9.3%	2	2.7%	9	12.0%

Ethical Considerations and Limitations

The following ethical considerations were considered for the study. All of the ethical considerations mentioned below in Table 2 were implemented at the beginning of the questionnaire.

Table 2.

Ethical Considerations

ISSUE	SOLUTION
Informed Consent	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Affirming that they voluntarily agreed to participate in the study and are well informed about the study's nature
Confidentiality	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Participants are provided with written assurance that information gained via the questionnaire will be kept anonymous and utilised for the study only
Potential Emotional Harm	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• To guarantee the avoidance of potential emotional harm from example Algospeak words, a disclaimer regarding the potential sensitivity of the content will be provided alongside the information that participants have the right to withdraw from the study.
Participants' lack of familiarity with Algospeak may lead to inaccurate responses caused by misunderstandings	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• To counteract such effects, the questionnaire employs definitions and examples catered to the non-linguistic general public to further their understanding of the questions and subject matter

Meta-Analysis Overview

To achieve objectives 2 to 4, the second part of the study utilised a meta-analysis of existing literature on Algospeak. Hence, secondary data from online and physical resources such as news articles, academic journals, books, published theses, and statistical data, were obtained to further develop the arguments presented in this research. Relevant terms, such as “digital language”, “TikTok”, and “Algospeak”, as well as more specific keywords guided the resource selection and facilitated the thematic mapping.

Comparative Analysis

One key focus of the meta-analysis method is to compare Algospeak with other established forms of digital language, such as Netspeak and Leetspeak. This comparative approach can highlight the distinctiveness of Algospeak in terms of its motivations and functionalities, including how users exploit language to navigate platform restrictions.

Theoretical Analysis

The study also explores whether traditional linguistic theories - such as Social Network Theory and Functional Theory - are adequate to explain the phenomenon of Algospeak or if updated, contemporary frameworks are needed. Specifically, the analysis will provide insights as to whether or not Algospeak defies traditional models of linguistic change, given its unique interaction with algorithmic content moderation and user creativity.

Data Analysis

The data from the survey and the meta-analysis was integrated to identify how TikTok consumers drive linguistic innovation through Algospeak. Moreover, the responses were analysed using a mixed-method approach to analyse recurring themes and insights related to motivations, contexts of use, and the role of users in shaping Algospeak. Specifically, the primary and secondary data was coded, thematically categorised, and analysed, to facilitate the identification of key insights. The findings from the meta-analysis situate these insights within broader discussions of language change in digital spaces.

Several tools were employed to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the data obtained, including (but not restricted to) Google Forms, Google Docs, Microsoft Excel, and Microsoft Word. These tools assisted in data collection, organisation, and analysis, subsequently enhancing the accuracy and efficiency of the research process.

Results and Discussion

Motivations behind Algospeak Usage on TikTok

The adoption of Algospeak among Brunei TikTok users reflects a complex interplay of functional, creative, and strategic motivations. The findings suggest that a significant proportion of users have encountered and engaged with Algospeak, demonstrating that this linguistic phenomenon has permeated the Bruneian social media landscape in ways that mirror global trends but are also shaped by local sociocultural dynamics, indicated by its deviation from the aforementioned global motivations for Algospeak. Figure 1 illustrates the multitude of motivations for Algospeak use on TikTok by participants. The subsequent sections discuss the most significant factors behind Algospeak usage among Bruneian TikTok Users.

Figure 1.

Motivations for Using Algospeak

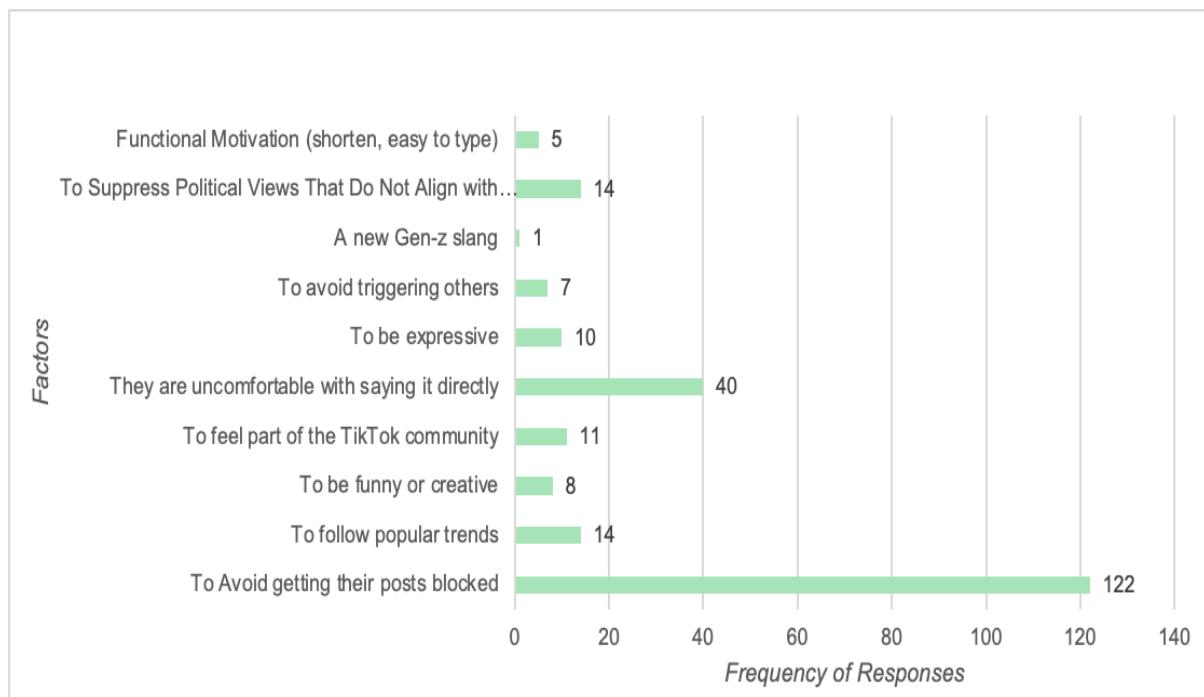


Table 3.*Participants' Algospeak Awareness*

Levels of Awareness	n	%
Heard of it and used it	26	35.0%
Heard of it but never used it	3	4.0%
Never heard of it but used it	11	15.0%
Never heard of it and never used it	35	47.0%

Strategic Evasion of Algorithmic Censorship

From Figure 1, the most prominent motivation behind Algospeak adoption is the strategic avoidance of algorithmic content moderation. This indicates that despite 62% of participants never hearing about Algospeak (see Table 3), participants can discern its original use and utilise it in the “traditionally correct” format, which also suggests some Algorithmic awareness among the Bruneian TikTok community

TikTok's content moderation policies are meticulous and strict, particularly concerning sensitive topics such as political issues, violence, or explicit content (Refer: <https://www.tiktok.com/community-guidelines/en>). The data suggests that Bruneian TikTok users have adapted their communication patterns to bypass these filters by using Algospeak.

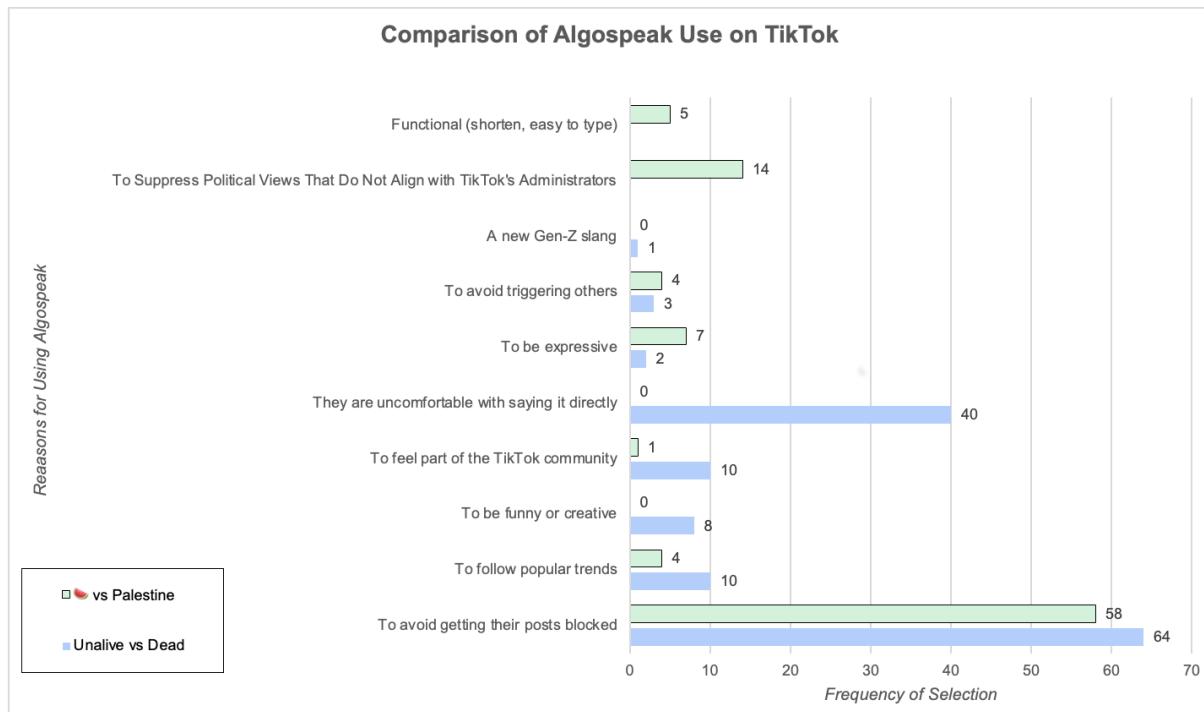
This aligns with global patterns observed in other digital platforms, where similar strategies have been employed to evade algorithmic suppression. For example, the substitution of sensitive words with alternative characters is not unique to TikTok but reflects broader strategies of linguistic adaptation seen in Netspeak and Leetspeak.

The data indicates that 26% of the respondents who are aware of Algospeak use it as a defensive mechanism and as a proactive tool for shaping the visibility and reach of their content. This points to a sophisticated understanding of TikTok's algorithmic architecture, reinforcing the notion that users are not passive recipients of platform rules but active agents in navigating them. This is discussed further in the following sections.

The widespread use of Algospeak reflects not only a strategic effort to bypass TikTok's censorship but also a deeper motivation to keep content visible and accessible. This underlying intent complements the primary goal of evading moderation, together driving the continued use of Algospeak. These secondary motivations fluctuate depending on the choice of context and the word to be censored, and its original intended use. The following sections further elaborate on this.

Figure 2.

Comparison of “⌚ vs Palestine” and “Unalive vs Dead”



Emotional Sensitivity and Discomfort with Direct Expression

According to participants, the second most mentioned motivation for Algospeak usage is their discomfort in mentioning the original word directly (see Figure 1); hence, they use Algospeak to filter their words to sound more polite or less offensive. This answer is frequently mentioned when asked (see Figure 2)

Why do you think people use words like "unalive" on TikTok instead of "dead"/"killed"/"suicide"/"passed away"?

The use of "unalive" instead of direct references to death or self-harm illustrates a nuanced form of co-dependence between strategic evasion and emotional sensitivity. The findings reveal that users' avoidance of direct language about self-harm or death is not solely motivated by the fear of TikTok censorship but is equally driven by a reluctance to confront or articulate such sensitive topics directly (see Table 4). The discomfort associated with terms like "suicide" or "death" reflects a broader cultural and psychological tendency to avoid open discussions of mental health and mortality.

Table 4.

Co-occurrence Matrix for Motivations of Using "Unalive"

Reason	Frequency of Mentions
To follow popular trends	8
To be funny or creative	3
To feel part of the TikTok community	4
They are uncomfortable with saying it directly	24
To be expressive	2
To avoid triggering others	3
It's a new Gen-Z slang	1
To suppress political views that do not align with TikTok administrators	0
Functional reasons (shorten, easy to type, etc.)	0

Note. Frequencies reflect how often each reason was mentioned alongside the intention to avoid post removal or blocking on TikTok.

This suggests that Algospeak serves a dual function in this context. It adopts a functional role in avoiding algorithmic censorship to prevent content removal or account penalties and an emotional role by providing a linguistic buffer that allows users to approach sensitive topics without fully engaging with their emotional weight. In a sense, Algospeak is utilised as a euphemistic Face-Saving strategy.

The emotional avoidance component is significant because it reflects broader cultural patterns of discourse avoidance around mental health issues in Brunei. The substitution of terms like "unalive" with euphemisms reduces the perceived emotional intensity of the discussion, creating a psychological barrier between the user and the subject matter. Therefore, while strategic evasion remains the primary motivator, the emotional discomfort with direct articulation creates a reinforcing loop where the functional and emotional drivers become mutually reinforcing.

Moreover, the prevalence of such coded terms among younger Bruneian TikTok users suggests that Algospeak is not merely a linguistic shortcut but a social mechanism for navigating emotionally charged or taboo topics. This creates a layered communicative strategy where strategic and emotional factors intersect to produce a more socially palatable form of discourse. The fact that the same pattern has emerged in global social media spaces underscores the universality of this dual function, but the specific linguistic choices reflect Bruneian users' adaptation of global digital norms to local cultural sensitivities. One would argue that using Algospeak in this manner would risk contributing to a culture of silence and shame surrounding these sensitive topics but a therapist interviewed on the Madison News outlet stated the contrary where "in the case of social media, though, it's the avoidance of using the actual, uncensored word that allows awareness and conversations to even be possible" (McMillan, 2023).

Political Expression and Suppression

Figure 1 also indicates that most participants indicate an emerging distinct pattern in the use of Algospeak to discuss political issues, particularly regarding Palestine (see Figure 2). This data was obtained when participants were asked the following survey question:

One example is using the emoji "国旗" or "Pale\$tine" to show support in social media (Whatsapp, TikTok, Instagram). Why do you think you or others use such a method instead of directly writing "Palestine"?

The findings show that Bruneian TikTok users deliberately modify language when discussing Palestine, not only to avoid algorithmic suppression but also to signal political alignment and solidarity (see Table 5). Several responses to this question are quoted in Table 6.

Table 5.*Co-occurrence Matrix for Motivations of using “🍉”*

Reason	Frequency of Mentions
To follow popular trends	2
To be funny or creative	0
To feel part of the TikTok community	0
They are uncomfortable with saying it directly	0
To be expressive	5
To avoid triggering others	3
It's a new Gen-Z slang	0
To suppress political views that do not align with TikTok administrators	13
Functional reasons (shorten, easy to type, etc.)	3

Note. Frequencies indicate the number of times each motivation co-occurred with the intention to avoid getting posts blocked by using the watermelon emoji (“🍉”) on TikTok.

Table 6.*Participants' responses to using Algospeak instead of directly using “Palestine”*

Motivation	Participant Responses
Political Solidarity & Resistance	“It's probably because of censorship, and the known fact that contents in social media are controlled by specific demographic”
	“to support the cause and avoid getting silent by the silencer...”
	“Because most zionist would tackle these kind of contents down”
	“Due to TikTok not supporting palestine I'm assuming and the fact that the content/videos would be taken down.”
	“bcos TikTok's are supporting Israel, everytime they use it the comments/post get auto-deleted by the system”
	“because the parties controlling social media do not like to involve politics or are unsupportive of it”

The strategic evasion of censorship in this case indicates that there is a collision of political expression and resistance due to Bruneian TikTok consumers' perception of ideological control by platform administrators. The suppression of content related to major political matters on major social media platforms, including TikTok, is not uncommon. Bruneian users' adoption

of Algospeak when discussing Palestine suggests an acute awareness of this political sensitivity and a deliberate effort to counteract perceived bias in content moderation. This echoes existing research that argues how subjects stigmatized in online spaces often reflect those that face significant social stigma in offline settings—particularly those in political discourse at national and international levels—and that TikTok strategically obscures political affiliations or positions on its platform (Dawson, 2024; Hagman, 2024)

Furthermore, the findings suggest that Bruneian TikTok users view suppression not as an unintended consequence of automated moderation but as a systemic issue rooted in platform bias (see Table 6). Dawson (2024) highlights that social media platforms tend to favour capitalist and consumer-driven content while actively suppressing political discourse, particularly when it challenges dominant ideological frameworks (Awasthi, 2015). The vagueness of community guidelines and the implicit ideological biases embedded in moderation policies contribute to the suppression of content even when it does not technically violate platform rules. This is further supported by reports of TikTok moderators receiving explicit training to flag and remove content based on subjective criteria, including discussions on marginalized identities (Hern, 2020).

As Dawson (2024) notes, users often attribute censorship solely to "the algorithm," positioning TikTok as an adversarial force against which they must struggle. While the algorithm is indeed instrumental in filtering content, this perception can obscure the role of human moderators, platform developers, and even other users in shaping what is visible and what is silenced. In this context, the adoption of Algospeak is not only about evading suppression but also about resisting and exposing the mechanisms of digital invisibilization. This dynamic reflects a broader trend in global digital activism, where Algospeak functions not only as a tool for evasion but also as a symbol of collective political identity. Unlike global trends where political Algospeak is often reactive, Bruneian users' adoption of such tactics appears to be both strategic and symbolic - a means of preserving political agency within a constrained discursive environment.

Creative Expression and Community Building

Beyond strategic evasion, Algospeak functions as a creative tool and a means of reinforcing social identity within digital subcultures. The creative nature of Algospeak allows users to engage with trends, memes, and in-group references in a playful and culturally resonant manner. Figure 1 suggests that Bruneian users are drawn to Algospeak not only for its utility in evading censorship but also for its ability to foster a sense of belonging and exclusivity within online communities.

For instance, Brunei-based TikTok users have demonstrated a tendency to localize Algospeak terms by incorporating Malay-English code-switching and culturally specific references (see Table 7).

Table 7.

Examples of local “Algospeak” by Participants

Local Algospeak* Words	Participant Responses
	<i>Baguk (police), Bos ku (Parents), mem (girlfriends)</i>
	<i>palOI (palui)</i>
	<i>Poklen (puak lain)</i>
	<i>Whatsapp (wasabi), bonie (bonia bags) loklek (rolex watches)...often seen when people sell fake goods on tiktok live</i>
	<i>"vavi" for 'babi'</i>

Note. * indicates uncertainty regarding their status as genuine instances of Algospeak.

This localization process reflects a form of digital identity construction where Bruneian users adapt global trends to fit local communicative norms. This mirrors global findings where localized adaptations of Netspeak or memes often reflect cultural nuances, reinforcing the argument that Algospeak functions as a hybrid of global and local linguistic trends.

Algospeak as a Unique Linguistic Form: Comparative Analysis with Netspeak and Leetspeak

In comparison to its preceding forms, such as Leetspeak and Netspeak, Algospeak symbolises a distinct shift in the evolution of digital language. While earlier digital language variants emerged largely from group identity formation, user-driven creativity and playful linguistic innovation (Crystal, 2001; Danet & Herring, 2007; Steen et al., 2023), Algospeak arose primarily in response to algorithmic censorship and moderation policies on social media (Lorenz, 2022; Steen et al., 2023).

Netspeak denotes using acronyms and abbreviations and originated in chatrooms and early internet forums to enhance efficiency in real-time communication (Crystal, 2001). Similarly, Leetspeak originated as coded communication within hacker and gaming subcultures to signify identity (Blashki & Nichol, 2005; Hishamudin Isam, 2025). Both forms are rooted in user-driven linguistic innovation, often employed for humorous or subcultural purposes. In contrasting, Algospeak differs in its linguistic structure and its underlying motivations. Unlike Netspeak, which is often playful, or Leetspeak, which originally served as a subcultural code, Algospeak is primarily a functional and strategic response to the governance mechanisms of digital platforms. One could argue that Algospeak shares stylistic elements, such as orthographic manipulation, and conceptual lineage with Leetspeak, especially in their shared use of obscuring messages to avoid detection. However, this comparison overlooks several key distinctions. One is that Algospeak does not simply involve orthographic or alphabetical manipulations but also coining peculiar synonyms or euphemisms (e.g. “unalive” for “dead/suicide”), figurative expressions (e.g. “blinky” for “gun”, “mascara” for “sexual assault”), emojis (e.g. 🇵 for Palestine), and other encoded words to avoid getting posts removed by ACM (Lorenz, 2022).

Images 1 and 2 illustrate real-world instances of Algospeak on TikTok. Leetspeak is less effective in bypassing ACM in comparison to other forms of Algospeak which were harder to comprehend (Steen et al., 2023).

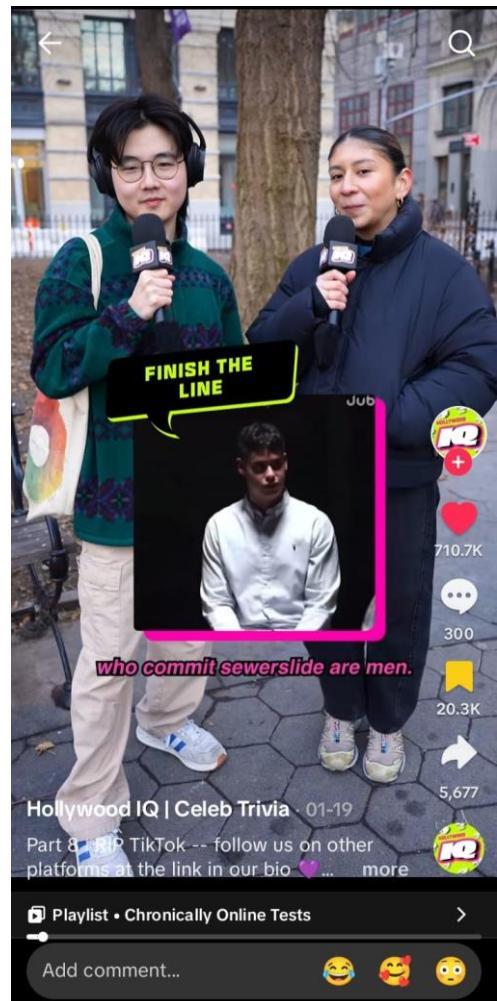
Image 1.

Visual Example of Algospeak; use of “blinky” to reference a gun.



Image 2.

Visual Example of Algospeak; use of “sewerslide” to reference “suicide”



Secondly, despite its evolving usage, Algospeak remains firmly tied and does not stray from its foundational purpose: to bypass algorithmic surveillance. In contrast, Leetspeak's original motivation—to conceal communication from outsiders—has largely faded, and it has arguably “exceeded its expiration date” as its subcultural utility has expanded into internet vernacular for humorous or ironic effect (Flamand, 2007), blurring the boundary between Leetspeak and general Netspeak. Algospeak, on the other hand, maintains its relevance precisely because its function—resisting algorithmic control—continues to be urgent and necessary. With the dynamic and constantly evolving nature of AI moderation, Algospeak adapts accordingly and is continuously moulded by algorithmic updates (Aloise, 2024).

Hence, Algospeak's persistence and conformity suggest that its utility is directly proportional to the presence of censorship, which can be supported by history. Stano (2022) argued that Aesopian language is an “antecedent of algospeak, since they rely precisely on cryptic or ambiguous expressions to convey concealed meaning to informed members, while maintaining the appearance of a neutral meaning to outsiders (to avoid censorship)” (Stano, 2022). Both forms rely on shared understanding among insiders to circumvent suppression (or censorship), while appearing neutral or innocuous to outsiders. This reiterates that Algospeak is a language utilised to overcome limitations imposed on its users and further distinguishes it from other forms of digital language.

Algospeak's linguistic evolution aligns with prior studies on digital language transformation, where language adapts in response to external constraints (Perea et al., 2008) and marks a new phase in the trajectory of digital language in which algorithms—rather than humans—play a central role in shaping linguistic practice. Hence, unlike earlier internet languages that evolved through cultural or social motivations, Algospeak exemplifies a reactive linguistic strategy born out of technological governance.

Implications for Offline Communication

Digital sociolinguistics has always pondered over whether internet languages, such as Algospeak, influence offline communication. While Algospeak emerged within the digital affordances of social media spaces, its influence has transcended the digital realm. This echoes patterns witnessed from previous digital vernaculars, hence blurring the boundaries between online and offline discourse, particularly among younger demographics (Crystal, 2001; Tagliamonte & Denis, 2012, as cited in Dembe, 2024).

One of the clearest signs of linguistic spillage of Algospeak into offline discourse is the increasing utilisation and acknowledgement of terms like “unalive” and “mascara” (McMillan, 2023). Such a phenomenon is arguably inevitable due to similar experiences occurring in previous digital languages, such as Netspeak and Leetspeak. This is because researchers tend to see online and offline as two distinct spaces that exist in separate circumstances when in fact online discourse is a part of social life, not separate from it (Bolander & Locher, 2020) and often migrates across spatial boundaries (Lee, 2015), hence the lines between the two are so often blurred.

As Androutsopoulos (2013, as cited in Bolander & Locher, 2020) underscores, online communication should be viewed as “discursively related spaces which are dynamically linked to offline activities” and that rather than viewing computer mediated communication as static and separate, they are linked to real-world activities and are a part of ongoing social processes. This presents the concept that Algospeak’s migration to offline communication is not just lexical but pragmatic. This is because speakers internalise the communication styles within digital platforms—such as being ambiguous, brief, or ironic—which translates to how they talk offline. Wargo (2015) explored this concept in Snapchat where he focused not only on the content shared on the platform but also how users physically engage with the medium and embody the communication styles offline. For example, within the context of Algospeak, phrases like those in Image 3 or saying, “I feel so unalive” (McMillan, 2023) in real life mimic TikTok-style euphemisms and rely on shared cultural-linguistic context for interpretation. Utilising “alive” in digital platforms allows users to talk about sensitive or difficult topics while circumventing algorithmic violations. In this sense, they employ a cautious approach to expression, where although they are conveying their emotions, they are doing so in a roundabout way to avoid the detection of ACMs. In offline contexts, the word embodies a similar strategy where speakers would use it to indirectly talk about taboo or sensitive topics that might be socially uncomfortable or judged, hence symbolising a form of self-censorship in offline interactions. This thus indicates that Computer Mediated Communication, even Algospeak, and their communicative features create hybrid environments that are no longer compartmentalised into “online” platforms.

Image 3.

Protest in support of Palestine where Algospeak “⌚” is utilised in signages



However, the diffusion of Algospeak into real-life communication may provoke concerns. Compared to other forms of digital language that mostly are for purposes related to simplifying language—thus removing power from the words—to increase efficiency, Algospeak usage in online platforms maintains the power of language despite systemic suppression as it allows stigmatized and marginalised communities to express themselves and be visible (Duffy & Meisner, 2023). However, its use in offline communication seems to risk desensitizing the sensitive issues they originally aimed to address. The power they originally possessed in digital spaces may diminish as boundaries between offline and online become less distinct. As users begin to employ these terms in everyday interactions, their initial protective qualities are eroded, potentially leading to desensitization or misinterpretation of the issues they were designed to safeguard. While Algospeak's shift to offline communication reflects the increasingly hybrid nature of our linguistic environments, it also raises important questions about the consequences of this linguistic evolution.

User Innovation and Algorithmic Influence

Algospeak's ability to continuously adapt to environmental changes is a critical aspect of this digital form. Studies found that TikTok would evolve its content moderation system as a response to Algospeak by learning and understanding the intended meanings behind them; so, users have to constantly revise Algospeak terms or methods to keep evading the algorithm. This creates a dynamic feedback loop where “users react to the behavior of the algorithm, and the algorithm reacts to the behavior of users” (Klug et al., 2021). Such an iterative cycle poses questions regarding linguistic agency: Are users driving language change, or are they merely working within algorithmic constraints?

Social Network Theory (SNT) examines how social relationships and interactions influence language use and individual behaviour within a community (Fiveable, 2018) while Functional Theory (FT) posits that language is a dynamic, evolving system that changes according to the needs of the users and emphasises that language cannot be separated from social function, or what humans do with language (Halliday 1985, as cited in Gebhard & Accurso, 2022). These two theories attribute language change to human interaction and necessity. However, Algospeak presents a new pattern. Here, language evolution is not solely driven by human social networks but instead shaped by the algorithmic structures governing online communication.

This shift is evident in the case of TikTok. The dynamic feedback loop includes users continuously reinventing Algospeak terms, hence influencing broader linguistic patterns (Klug et al., 2021; Steen et al., 2023). This suggests that the algorithm does not merely restrict language—it actively reshapes it. The emergence of Algospeak mirrors traditional processes of language evolution but occurs within a highly reactive, non-organic feedback loop.

Other scholarship argues that Algospeak is “non-organic”, even as a digital vernacular, because it is generated between a system (ACM) and user interaction (Jovanovic & Van Leeuwen, 2018) rather than interhuman interactions. This links to several arguments that in such interactions, users are provided a false sense of autonomy (Hagman, 2024; Jovanovic & Van Leeuwen, 2018), wherein the algorithm constructs an “echo chamber” that limits linguistic diversity and reinforces existing patterns rather than enabling organic linguistic evolution (Cinelli et al., 2021). The affordances of Algospeak, while appearing to grant users control, actually enforce a form of self-censorship where users engage in guesswork to determine permissible speech, with algorithmic moderation mechanisms remaining largely opaque (Hagman, 2024). Users, therefore, operate within the “affordances and constraints of pre-designed templates and how users respond to these affordances and constraints”; hence, while they can draw upon their offline conversational logic, they also “have to cast these in the pre-designed visually realized generic templates made available by specific social media platforms, which may be rigid and trite, or more flexible, plastic and creative” (Bakhtin, 1986). Compared to traditional theories regarding the “networked self”, there is a shift towards the “algorithmized self” (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022; Riemer & Peter, 2021) where power of linguistic curation is stripped from users and is controlled by “entities that are distinctly inhuman but undeniably created and continuously constructed by human biases, ideologies, and agendas” (Dawson, 2024). This further reiterates how Algospeak symbolises that the consistent dictation of Algorithms regarding the boundaries of speech may cause traditional sociolinguistic forces to be replaced by algorithmic governance as the main engine of language change.

Meanwhile, an alternative view suggests that while algorithms shape communication conditions, users remain the active agents of change. While algorithms limit content visibility and dissemination, they do not fully dictate linguistic evolution. Instead, users co-create and modify language in response to these constraints, ensuring continuous adaptation and innovation. Research suggests that algorithmic moderation does not eliminate linguistic agency

but fosters an environment where users develop alternative communication strategies (Dawson, 2024). This aligns with Birhane and McGann's (2024) critique of exaggerated claims about Large Language Models (LLMs)—such as TikTok's algorithm—which argues that LLMs should not be seen as possessing true linguistic competence or understanding. LLMs, lack true linguistic competence and merely generate text based on statistical models that predict token sequences rather than engaging with language meaningfully. This overlooks the dynamic, interactive nature of human communication, which cannot be reduced to token relationships in data sets. The authors highlight two key assumptions in LLM design: language completeness (the belief that language can be fully modelled) and data completeness (the assumption that all aspects of language can be captured in data). They contend that human language is fluid, embodied, and constantly evolving through social interaction, making it impossible to fully represent through algorithms (Birhane & McGann, 2024). This critique is crucial in the context of Algospeak, as it emphasizes that while algorithms may shape communication conditions, such as moderating content or promoting trends, they do not control linguistic outcomes. Instead, users remain active agents, continually adapting and innovating their language to push the boundaries of algorithmic governance, creating new forms of expression and ensuring that language in digital spaces remains dynamic and user-driven.

As such, Algospeak illustrates the ongoing discussions between algorithmic constraints and user-driven linguistic adaptation. While moderation systems act as linguistic restrainers, users continuously reshape language in response, creating a recurring cycle of restriction and innovation. This interplay challenges traditional linguistic theories, highlighting the need for a hybrid framework that integrates both sociolinguistic and digital media perspectives. Rather than viewing Algospeak as purely resistance or control, it is best understood as a negotiation—an evolving dialogue between human creativity and technological constraints, setting the stage for a re-evaluation of language evolution in the digital age.

Conclusion

This paper showed that while Algospeak originated as a strategy to evade content censorship, it has evolved into a complex, multifunctional linguistic phenomenon shaped by emotional, cultural, and political contexts. Significantly, findings suggest Algospeak in Brunei is not merely a replication of global trends, but a localized linguistic phenomenon shaped by motivations to not only navigate algorithmic restrictions but also to express emotional sensitivity, reinforce political solidarity, and foster creative identity within digital communities.

Moreover, findings indicate that the influence of Algospeak extends beyond digital platforms into offline communication, particularly among younger users. Expressions like “unalive” are now used in real-world conversations, functioning as a form of social cushioning to navigate sensitive topics. This linguistic migration illustrates how users internalize digital communication norms, suggesting the blurring of boundaries between online and offline linguistic behaviours.

Overall, the paper sheds light on the complex interplay between user innovation and algorithmic influence. While TikTok’s content moderation system imposes constraints on language, users remain active agents who continually revise and innovate Algospeak to maintain communicative agency. This dynamic feedback loop challenges traditional models of language change by introducing algorithmic governance as a new driver of linguistic evolution. Yet, while algorithms shape communicative environments, they do not possess true linguistic competence or creativity; rather, it is the users who transform limitations into innovation, making Algospeak a symbol of linguistic resistance and adaptability.

This points to future avenues of research that not only work toward developing hybrid models that integrate algorithmic agency, user resistance, and socio-cultural dynamics in digital communication, but also pair linguistic theory and algorithm studies as a way to examine in-depth the co-evolution of language and AI-driven systems.

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