



Semantic shift of crisis neologisms in digital media: a sociolinguistic study

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ABSTRACT

This study provides a sociolinguistic analysis of how crisis neologisms reconfigure their meanings in response to structural societal stress. Utilizing a descriptive qualitative method and Geoffrey Leech's framework of seven types of meaning, this research investigates five prominent terms: burnout, quiet quitting, job hugging, hustle culture, and underconsumption. By analyzing linguistic data extracted from the News on the Web (NOW) Corpus, this study offers empirical evidence of significant semantic migration across the entire sample set. The findings reveal that these neologisms do not remain static; rather, they shift beyond their original conceptual definitions into affective, collocative, and connotative realms to reflect modern pressures such as labor instability, mental health crises, and changing consumption patterns. This research contributes a novel framework for digital lexicography, offering practical applications for media analysts and communication experts to better identify, decode, and interpret the linguistic indicators of emergent societal tensions.

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INTRODUCTION

Language naturally changes in response to social, economic, and technological shifts, acting as a system that mirrors the real-world transformations of the community speaking it (Fang, 2021). In the modern era, this process has sped up significantly due to the widespread rise of digital media, transforming communication on a global scale (Asif et al., 2021). Digital platforms act as fast-paced linguistic environments, closing the traditional geographical and time gaps that historically required generations to bring about permanent modifications in vocabulary (Sandyha et al., 2022). Within this connected landscape, new terms known as neologisms emerge rapidly to help speakers categorize new abstract or concrete concepts in their minds (Zella et al., 2025). They often move from niche online or specialized jargon into mainstream conversations in a matter of weeks, spreading effectively across various networks of interacting users (Würschinger, 2021).

In recent years, people have had to deal with a complex mix of economic instability, changing workplace expectations, and growing mental health challenges. These shifts have placed a heavy psychological strain on society, creating new lived experiences that traditional words cannot

accurately describe. In response, digital media has sparked the creation of crisis neologisms. These expressions are more than just temporary internet slang or passing memes. When the material and psychological conditions of life change rapidly, the meanings of words must shift as well to stay relevant. This adaptive process shows how structural changes force speakers to adjust their speech levels to manage shifting social contexts (Darmasetiyawan, 2022), particularly when external pressures like urbanization push minority groups to favor a dominant language over their native dialect to achieve social mobility (Tjijombo et al., 2025).

Such meaning modifications are not random. Historical data shows that words undergoing meaning changes follow strict principles of connection, often shifting away from crowded conceptual spaces that have a higher-than-average number of synonyms (Sylvester et al., 2022). Because word use is finely balanced against communicative pressures, the widespread success of any meaning replacement relies on efficiency and clarity, ensuring that a newly introduced concept is far more contextually convenient (Koslow, 2022).

To analyze how these contemporary shifts happen in digital spaces, the semantic framework established by linguist Geoffrey Leech. Leech treats meaning as a multidimensional construct shaped by social context, speaker intent, and daily use, rather than as static dictionary entries. By using Leech's seven distinct types of meaning (Umagandhi et al., 2017), this study investigates five prominent crisis neologisms that have come to dominate modern digital conversations i.e. *burnout*, *quiet quitting*, *job hugging*, *hustle culture*, and *underconsumption*. Each of these terms was strategically selected because it captures a specific dimension of modern societal tension, serving as an empirical case study that shows exactly how vocabulary dynamically adapts to structural stress.

Linguistic scholarship outlines how rapid technological advancements have transformed digital platforms into fertile grounds for semantic and lexical innovation (Rehman et al., 2025). This rapid evolution is extensively explored through the structural and morphological classification of social media word formations across global networks like Facebook, TikTok, and WhatsApp (Sabir, 2022). Scholars have investigated how youth-driven digital shorthand impacts natural communication styles (Wijewantha, 2025), frequently raising teaching concerns about "register flattening" and the loss of standard language proficiency in formal academic writing (Tumasang, 2025). Concurrently, platforms like TikTok have accelerated these shifts through distinct visual and conversational formats, prompting researchers to track how specific online speech communities adopt and recycle terms within short video-based cultures (Hidayati et al., 2025).

When applied to macro-level crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, research shows that while political and news discourse uses language to map societal updates (Novikova & Suima, 2025), popular lifestyle slang often emerges as a form of non-medical escapism to build peer solidarity (Muzani & Lotfie, 2024). Despite these structural insights, a significant research gap persists because existing data largely centers on mapping user familiarity or measuring exposure cross-culturally across varying global regions (Bushong, 2025). While previous studies have mapped user familiarity and cross-cultural exposure to digital slang, they overlook the underlying semantic mechanisms that drive these adaptations. This critical research gap leaves the specific processes behind how words dynamically change their meanings and acquire multiple related senses in digital space unexplained. To address this limitation, the novelty of this research lies in systematically unpacking these linguistic shifts to demonstrate how contemporary vocabulary evolves in response to structural societal crises. By establishing this clear connection between socio-economic stress and semantic evolution, the study provides a rationale for its core objectives: mapping the original versus current meanings of specific crisis neologisms and categorizing their semantic trajectories.

To guide this investigation, two research questions have been established. The first question asks: what are the original and current meanings of the selected crisis neologisms in digital media? The second question asks: what types of semantic shifts have these neologisms undergone according to Geoffrey Leech's theory? From a standpoint of theoretical significance, this research seeks to directly contribute to the ongoing academic literature in digital linguistics and semantics by

demonstrating how lexical frameworks function in real-time online spaces. From a standpoint of practical significance, the study provides a clearer, more structured understanding of language development in digital media.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a descriptive qualitative method with a sociolinguistic approach to investigate the characteristics of crisis neologisms. To ensure empirical validity and methodological reproducibility, the primary linguistic data was extracted from the News on the Web (NOW) Corpus, which contains billions of words from web-based newspapers and magazines across 20 countries. The data collection relies on a systematic and documented search protocol to gather five distinct crisis neologisms i.e. *burnout*, *quiet quitting*, *job hugging*, *hustle culture*, and *underconsumption*. Each target term was entered into the corpus interface to extract relevant concordance lines and authentic usage examples. These entries were compiled into a specialized research corpus, with every entry carefully recorded alongside its contextual details, including the surrounding sentences to preserve its natural conversational setting and prevent misinterpretation during analysis.

Once the data collection process was complete, the recorded material was organized through a data coding process and examined using a qualitative semantic analysis technique guided by the theoretical framework of Geoffrey Leech. To ensure analytical transparency, the data coding process categorized the extracted text segments based on Leech’s seven distinct types of meaning using a standardized coding rubric. Consistency and reliability were maintained throughout this phase by conducting intra-coder reliability checks, where the dataset was re-evaluated after a set interval to ensure the stability of the categorizations. Additionally, peer-debriefing was utilized to validate the interpretation of ambiguous contextual usages.

This validated analytical process compared each neologism’s original conceptual meaning against the current empirical usage discovered within the digital media text. By contrasting the original literal cores with the coded digital examples under a controlled framework, the exact types of semantic shifts were categorized and mapped on how contemporary social realities reshape the modern English lexicon.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

To organize the empirical data gathered for this study, a data matrix was constructed. This matrix inventories the selected crisis neologisms, mapping each concordance line and immediate contextual environment. By isolating the key keyword co-occurrences and adjacent vocabulary, each entry is categorized under Geoffrey Leech’s seven types of meaning framework to serve as the foundation for the sociolinguistic analysis.

Table 1. Corpus Data Collection Matrix

Entry ID	Target Neologism	Concordance Line	Collocates / Co-text	Meaning Category
BO-01	<i>Burnout</i>	Samira Mohan, had the difficult job of playing a doctor on the edge of burnout, constantly second-guessing herself, and even convinced herself she was dying.	doctor, edge of, second-guessing, dying	Conceptual Meaning

BO-02	<i>Burnout</i>	Not only did O'Connor have big shoes to fill, he ascended to the role at a time when the industry was still reeling from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, record-high inflation and workforce burnout.	pandemic, record-high inflation, workforce	Collocative Meaning
BO-03	<i>Burnout</i>	The most recent Censis-Eudaimon Report, which revealed that 31.8% of people feel close to burnout due to work stress.	report, 31.8% of people, work stress	Stylistic / Social Meaning
BO-04	<i>Burnout</i>	The thinking behind it was that there's been a lot of burnout and frustration, particularly with folks that have been active in the street, fighting...	frustration, active in the street, fighting	Affective Meaning
BO-05	<i>Burnout</i>	Maryland and across the country is at a pivotal point shaped by workforce shortages, burnout and labor disputes.	workforce shortages, labor disputes	Collocative Meaning
QQ-01	<i>Quiet Quitting</i>	When expectations around support, resources, and working conditions are not met, this contract becomes strained or broken, leading to withdrawal behaviours such as quiet quitting.	contract strained, broken, withdrawal behaviours	Connotative Meaning
QQ-02	<i>Quiet Quitting</i>	It differs from "quiet quitting", which is when workers choose to do the bare minimum at work.	differs from, choose, bare minimum	Conceptual Meaning
QQ-03	<i>Quiet Quitting</i>	...quiet quitting (meeting only the basic expectations of a job or task), etc.	basic expectations, job, task	Conceptual Meaning
QQ-04	<i>Quiet Quitting</i>	Gallup research shows only 14 per cent of Australian workers are truly engaged at work. The phenomenon has a name now – "quiet quitting" – but it's really just disengagement.	Gallup research, engaged, phenomenon, disengagement	Connotative Meaning
QQ-05	<i>Quiet Quitting</i>	Trends like 'quiet quitting' (doing no work beyond your job description) and 'bare minimum Mondays'...	trends, job description, bare minimum Mondays	Collocative Meaning
JH-01	<i>Job Hugging</i>	But Job Hugging is not loyalty, it's survival. And survival mode is not where innovation...	loyalty, survival, survival mode, innovation	Affective Meaning
JH-02	<i>Job Hugging</i>	At the same time, employees are increasingly "job hugging", holding on to roles despite dissatisfaction, driven by economic headwinds and layoff...	holding on, dissatisfaction, economic headwinds, layoff	Collocative Meaning
JH-03	<i>Job Hugging</i>	The phrase "job hugging" is used to describe workers holding on to their existing positions instead of seeking new opportunities, often because they perceive the labour market as unstable or unpredictable.	existing positions, perceive, unstable, unpredictable	Conceptual Meaning
JH-04	<i>Job Hugging</i>	Economists are calling it "job hugging" -- clinging to your current role as economic uncertainty makes stability feel more valuable...	economists, clinging, current role, economic uncertainty, stability	Stylistic / Social Meaning
JH-05	<i>Job Hugging</i>	Amid the uncertainty in the industry, "job hugging," a buzzing workplace behaviour, is gaining attention. Simply put, it refers to employees choosing to	uncertainty, buzzing workplace behaviour, stay, exploring	Stylistic / Social Meaning

HC-01	<i>Hustle Culture</i>	stay in their current roles rather than exploring new opportunities,...	idealisation, hard work, led to, burnout	Conceptual Meaning
HC-02	<i>Hustle Culture</i>	The idealisation of hard work, also known as hustle culture, has led to burnout among other factors.	pressure, constantly work, monetise, every hobby	Connotative Meaning
HC-03	<i>Hustle Culture</i>	...while many also felt hustle culture creates pressure to constantly work or monetise every hobby.	self-employment, attractive, excessive pressure, earn more money	Affective Meaning
HC-04	<i>Hustle Culture</i>	... self-employment appear more attractive than it actually is, while 81 per cent felt that hustle culture puts excessive pressure on people to constantly work or earn more money.	Gen Z entrepreneurs, reject, 18-hour days, sacrificing sleep, founders	Stylistic / Social Meaning
HC-05	<i>Hustle Culture</i>	Shark Tank investor Kevin O'Leary has urged Gen Z entrepreneurs to reject hustle culture, warning that working 18-hour days and sacrificing sleep does not make founders successful...	complicated daily existence, busier, mindfulness	Collocative Meaning
UC-01	<i>Underconsumption</i>	Hustle culture" makes an already-complicated daily existence busier and less open to mindfulness.	global economy, chronic, deflationary bias, demand-led growth	Conceptual Meaning
UC-02	<i>Underconsumption</i>	It would rebalance the global economy away from chronic underconsumption and deflationary bias towards stable, demand-led economic growth.	Stanford scientists, examined, poorer economies	Stylistic / Social Meaning
UC-03	<i>Underconsumption</i>	The two Stanford scientists also examined the issue of underconsumption in poorer economies.	content, thrift, estate sale hauls, upcycling tutorials, aspiration based...	Reflected Meaning
UC-04	<i>Underconsumption</i>	Underconsumption content, thrift and estate sale hauls, and upcycling tutorials are offering aspiration based...	economic anxiety, trends, niche online movement, mainstream	Connotative Meaning
UC-05	<i>Underconsumption</i>	And as economic anxiety rises, underconsumption trends -- once a niche online movement -- may become mainstream.	underconsumption core, viral trend, TikTok, spend-happy, conscientious, homes	Collocative Meaning
UC-05	<i>Underconsumption</i>	Then there's "underconsumption core," the viral trend on TikTok that encourages consumers to be a little less spend-happy and more conscientious about what they bring into their homes.		

Burnout

Burnout is extreme tiredness or mental or physical illness caused by working too hard or trying to do too much (Cambridge Dictionary, 2026a). The corpus data demonstrates that while this original definition remains an anchor in professional or clinical discussions, the current meaning of the term in digital media has broadened to encompass broader systemic, emotional, and social dimensions of stress. According to Geoffrey Leech's theory, the data highlights a clear evolution through multiple types of meaning. For instance, its literal definition appears clearly when framing high-stress occupations, such as medical professionals. However, as the term moves through different digital contexts, it undergoes a shift into collocative meaning when paired with broader macroeconomic factors like "COVID-19 pandemic" and "record-high inflation", or when embedded

in discussions regarding “workforce shortages” and “labor disputes”. Furthermore, the data reveals a transition into affective meaning when digital media utilizes the term to convey the shared emotional fatigue, hopelessness, and exhaustion experienced by social activists fighting on the streets. This demonstrates how structural economic pressures force linguistic adaptation. Much like how Asif et al. (2021) observed rapid language evolution during the pandemic, *burnout* has been democratized in digital spaces to capture societal fatigue rather than isolated individual illness, illustrating a collective coping mechanism.

Quiet Quitting

Quiet Quitting is the activity of doing the work that you need to do in order to keep your job but doing it without great enthusiasm or effort, and without agreeing to do extra tasks (Cambridge Dictionary, 2026b). In modern digital media, this core meaning persists as a foundational reference point, but its usage has expanded to capture deeper social debates about workplace contracts, employee engagement, and lifestyle trends. Applying Leech’s framework to the corpus data reveals how the term’s connotative meaning has shifted based on who uses it. In institutional contexts, it is heavily associated with negative attributes such as contractual breakdown, psychological withdrawal, and passive “disengagement”. Digital media platforms have transformed the term’s collocative meaning by pairing it with modern lifestyle trends like “bare minimum Mondays”. Consistent with Muzani & Lotfie (2024) findings on how digital slang builds peer solidarity, the reappropriation of this term by younger digital natives empowers workers to redefine boundaries, shifting the narrative from a corporate metric of passive disengagement to a protective strategy for mental health preservation.

Job Hugging

Unlike historical workplace terms that imply organizational loyalty out of pride or long-term dedication, the neologism *job hugging* carries a distinct current meaning in digital media (Qandle, 2026). It describes defensive employment retention, where workers cling to less-than-ideal roles simply because they perceive the broader market as unstable. Based on the corpus data, the conceptual meaning of the term centers on risk-averse behavior where workers avoid seeking new opportunities due to an unpredictable labor market. Under Leech’s theory, this term operates through affective meaning, as its digital usage directly reveals an attitude of sheer survivalism and anxiety rather than corporate commitment. The data reflects a notable collocative meaning shift, as the phrase frequently co-occurs alongside corporate threats like “economic headwinds,” “layoffs,” and industry-wide uncertainty. The semantic narrowing of this term aligns with Sylvester et al. (2022) principles of connection, which suggest that words shift to fill new conceptual voids. By subverting historically positive concepts of “loyalty,” the term reflects how contemporary labor market forces a lexical restructuring of corporate commitment into a defensive, risk-averse posture.

Hustle Culture

Hustle Culture is the act of non-stop labor, working excessive hours, and sacrificing personal well-being to achieve financial success. In contemporary digital media, the meaning of the term has transitioned from a positive ideal of ambition into a contested critique of hyper-capitalism and personal strain. When analyzed through Leech’s seven types of meaning, the data demonstrates that while its conceptual meaning remains anchored in the idealization of hard work, its connotative meaning has shifted to evoke persistent financial pressure and the unhealthy monetization of personal hobbies. The text also illustrates an affective meaning shift, conveying an underlying societal anxiety and a growing critical stance against relentless work demands. Digital media also has pushed the term into collocative meaning by pairing it with wellness-based vocabulary like “mindfulness”. This semantic inversion directly supports Koslow’s (2022) finding that meaning modification is driven by communicative efficiency and necessity. As the reality of gig-economy

labor worsened, the linguistic utility of *hustle* shifted from aspirational to critical, demonstrating the capacity of digital discourse to serve as a medium for societal pushback against traditional labor norms.

Underconsumption

Underconsumption is consumption of less than is produced that is caused by insufficient purchasing power and is a cause of business depression (Merriam-Webster, 2026). However, the corpus data reveals a semantic transformation in digital media, where the term has been recontextualized into a viral lifestyle movement and personal identity marker focused on sustainability. According to Leech's theory, the word undergoes a powerful shift into reflected meaning, as digital subcultures select the macroeconomic term but layer it with a sense of ethical consumption and environmental activism. This evolution is further documented by its connotative meaning, which associates the term with economic survival strategies and a rejection of hyper-consumerism. The term acquires a distinct collocative meaning through its immediate digital pairing with words like "core," "viral trend," and "TikTok". This recontextualization mirrors Zella's et al. (2025) research regarding the role of neologisms in accelerating social change within climate debates. By hijacking a clinical economic metric and embedding it with eco-friendly, aspiration-based connotations, digital communities are using vocabulary to construct new moral frameworks that resist mainstream hyper-consumerism.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that contemporary crisis neologisms undergo rapid semantic shifts driven by societal stress. Corpus analysis reveals that *burnout* expanded from its conceptual meaning of occupational exhaustion into generalized fatigue via collocative and affective shifts. *Quiet quitting* transformed its conceptual bare-minimum definition, shifting its connotative and collocative associations from passive disengagement to empowered boundary-setting. *Job hugging* codified risk-averse retention through negative affective survivalism and strong collocative links to layoffs. *Hustle culture* shifted from a positive conceptual idealization of labor toward connotative and affective critiques of systemic pressure and collocative ties to mindfulness. *Underconsumption* transitioned via reflected meaning from a sterile macroeconomic metric to a sustainable lifestyle choice with eco-friendly connotative and collocative attributes. Future research should utilize larger, multilingual corpora to conduct comparative analyses of crisis vocabulary. While limited by a qualitative focus on just five English terms, this study provides a foundational framework for analyzing digital semantic shifts. To address these constraints, future research should use multilingual corpora to investigate whether non-English ecosystems undergo similar adaptations under shared socioeconomic pressures.

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