



Media and Internet Linguistics: Language Transformation in Digital Communication

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Abstract

This study examines the transformation of language form and function in digital communication, focusing on platforms such as Twitter, TikTok, Instagram, Reddit, and Kaskus. Through a qualitative-descriptive approach and multimodal analysis of 2,000 digital entries, it was found that digital communication forms a new language genre that is hybrid, visual, and performative. Phenomena such as code-mixing, acronyms, phonetic spelling, and the use of emoticons and memes reflect linguistic adaptations to the speed, efficiency, and emotional expression that characterize digital platforms. The findings show linguistic variation between generations: Gen Z tends to use visual symbols and concise language, while older generations (Millennials and Gen X) maintain a more formal sentence structure. Data visualization using NVivo and Voyant Tools strengthens the identification of dominant themes such as emotion, irony, and community slang. These findings support previous literature, such as Barrot (2022) and Kurmanbekova et al. (2023), which highlight the simplification and diversification of language in the digital era. This study confirms that social media is not only a space for linguistic expression, but also an arena for innovation, the spread of digital dialects, and shifts in communication norms. While bringing creativity and cultural engagement, these changes also raise concerns about the decline in formal literacy skills. Therefore, this study recommends further exploration of the long-term impact of digital language use on literacy education and culture.

Keywords: Code-mixing, digital language, generational variation, multimodality, social media

1. Introduction

With the advancement of digital technology and massive internet penetration, linguistic studies have now shifted from the traditional focus of exploring phonology, morphology, and syntax to the study of language in a digital context. The discipline known as media and internet linguistics examines how the form, function, and structure of language are influenced by digital media, especially social media, blogs, online forums, and instant messaging applications.

Panjaitan and Patria (2024) in their work “Social Media and Language Evolution” highlight the phenomenon of linguistic simplification, such as acronyms, phonetic spelling, and consistent variations in syntax and grammar across language communities. They found that character limitations and the need for communication efficiency drove the emergence of new registers that were informal but effective.

Similarly, Natsir et al. (2024) noted the increasing use of abbreviations, emoticons, and social media terms as characteristics of digital writing styles. Their study asserts that this language transformation has positive impacts, namely accelerating communication and strengthening social ties, but also poses challenges in cross-generational and formal contexts.

This phenomenon of shifting writing styles is supported by the development of multiliteracy theory, which states that modern literacy includes the ability to read and write in multimodal formats such as video, images, and digital text (Hajizadeh et al., 2023). This approach is needed to understand the convergence between linguistics and visuals in the digital context.

From a digital sociolinguistic perspective, virtual exchange and communication accommodation show that internet users adjust their language style depending on the audience. For example, the use of emoticons increases when communicating with women, and vocabulary changes dynamically according to social groups (Qiu et al., 2023).

Barrot (2022) describes a trend of decreasing linguistic complexity (from text length to lexical richness) in social media comments, although new vocabulary richness is consistently introduced. This indicates that digital communication creates a tendency for fast and innovative communication.

Meanwhile, the phenomenon of digital dialects as studied by Rahmatdildaevna Kurmanbekova et al. (2023) asserts that social media interactions produce new dialect variations, with new vocabulary and styles of expression that reflect the cultural context and local digital identity.

Barrot (2022) shows that contemporary literary narratives are also absorbed by digital language, with the use of hashtags, emojis, and increasingly concise structures, reflecting digital rhetorical trends.

The purpose of this study is to analyze the transformation of language form and function in digital communication, and to identify the linguistic and social implications of this phenomenon in the context of the internet and social media. This study also seeks to describe how new linguistic norms are formed and how they influence cross-cultural and generational communication practices.

It is hoped that the findings of this study can provide theoretical and practical contributions to the development of modern linguistic studies, especially in facing the challenges of language change due to digitalization, as well as becoming a foundation for the development of inclusive and sustainable digital literacy.

2. Literature Review

Linguistic studies in the digital era have developed rapidly, especially through the discipline of media and internet linguistics, which highlights how the internet and communication technologies change the form and use of everyday language (Barrot, 2022). Barrot (2022) found that linguistic simplification phenomena such as the use of abbreviations, phonetic spelling, and simplified syntactic structures are adaptive strategies that emerge due to character limitations and the need for efficiency in social media.

Rahmatdildaevna Kurmanbekova et al. (2023) added that the evolution of digital language has also given rise to digital dialects, which are distinctive language variations that develop in online communities and reflect cultural identity and local contexts. Similar findings were also found by Marten (2021), who identified jargon and acronyms in the Dota II gaming community that influenced their English dialect.

Studies outside the local context, especially the multiyear big-data model project by Di Marco et al. (2024) who analyzed 300 million comments on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, showed a trend of linguistic simplification, such as decreasing text length and lexical neatness, even though new vocabulary continues to emerge. This shows that interactive evolution in digital communication is not only about change, but also the assimilation of new forms of expression.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, phenomena such as MLE (Multicultural London English) in the UK, which spreads through platforms such as TikTok, show how urban and regional language varieties can spread across demographics and geographies in a matter of seconds (Ekpoudom, 2024). This provides evidence that digital media not only simplifies language, but also enriches and distributes linguistic variation.

The study of multimodal literacy is also relevant: multimodal theory emphasizes the importance of the convergence of text, images, audio, and video in shaping contemporary communication styles. Havrylenko & Prykhodko (2022) also argue that the internet has fostered the emergence of hybrid registers between written and spoken language, creating new communication genres such as blogs, emoticons, and interactive forum formats.

Given the diversity of these trends, the literature review shows that digital language transformation encompasses two main dimensions: quantitative simplification (shorter texts, filtered lexis) and qualitative diversification (neologisms, dialectal variation, multimodality). However, formal literacy and advanced writing skills are questioned in the context of these changes.

3. Methods

This study uses a qualitative-descriptive approach supported by quantitative data to examine the transformation of language forms and functions in digital communication. This approach was chosen to enable an in-depth understanding of linguistic phenomena that are dynamic and contextual in the digital space.

The design used is a digital discourse analysis study, focusing on linguistic structures, communication styles, and changes in language registers in social media. In addition, this study also adopts a multimodal discourse analysis approach to explore the use of non-verbal elements such as emoticons, images, and hashtags that play a role in shaping the meaning of digital communication.

Data were collected from popular digital platforms, namely Twitter, TikTok, Instagram, and online forums such as Reddit and Kaskus, during the period from January to April 2025. Data criteria include:

1. Comment text, status, and captions (Indonesian and English).
2. Viral content that reflects new language style trends.
3. Cross-generational and cross-cultural interactions.

Samples were taken using a purposive sampling method based on hashtags (#), trending topics, and representation of age and social context. A total of 2,000 digital entries were analyzed thematically.

The data were analyzed in three stages:

1. Thematic coding: Identifying linguistic units such as acronyms, phonetics, emoticons, and digital sentence structures.
2. Multimodal discourse analysis: Examining visual and symbolic contributions in shaping meaning (emojis, images, GIFs, videos).
3. Cross-triangulation: Verifying linguistic patterns using assistive software such as NVivo 14 and data visualization with Voyant Tools.

To maintain data validity, researchers apply peer debriefing and member checking techniques to some of the data that has been analyzed. In addition, the interpretation process is carried out gradually and consistently to avoid interpretation bias.

This research is limited to Indonesian and English texts in informal contexts. The language style in formal domains (such as official documents or journal articles) is not the focus of the analysis. In addition, the dynamics of algorithms and limitations of social media API access also affect the depth of real-time data retrieval.

4. Results and Discussion

This study reveals significant transformations in both the form and function of language in digital communication platforms, highlighting how linguistic behavior adapts in response to the evolving digital environment. The results are categorized into three main thematic findings supported by multimodal elements and computational analysis.

4.1. The Emergence of Hybrid Language Forms

The analysis of 2,000 digital entries across multiple platforms (Twitter, TikTok, Instagram, Reddit, and Kaskus) identified a clear shift towards hybrid language structures that blend Indonesian and English (code-mixing), phonetic spelling, acronyms, and internet slang. Some examples of the results identified can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1: Examples identified		
Code	Example Text	Interpretation
EN-ID Mix	"Literally ngakak parah wkwk"	Combines English word "literally" with Indonesian laughter expression
Phonetic	"Gtw deh kayaknya sus"	"Gtw" = "Gak tahu", "sus" = suspicious
Slang	"This vibe is 100% me rn, no cap!"	English youth slang ("rn" = right now, "no cap" = no lie)

The findings in Table 1 support Androutsopoulos’ (2006) theory of language as performance in the digital context, where linguistic creativity is influenced by audience design and identity construction (Tilliridou, 2023).

4.2. Functions of Emoticons, Hashtags, and Visual Symbols

Multimodal discourse analysis revealed that non-verbal elements play a crucial role in expressing tone, emotion, and subtext that are otherwise absent in text-based interactions. This includes the strategic use of:

1. Emojis to reinforce sarcasm or emotion (e.g., 😭 = exaggerated sadness, 😏 = irony).
2. Hashtags as thematic classifiers and identity markers (e.g., #healing, #FOMO, #WorkLifeBalance).
3. GIFs and Memes as intertextual tools to compress shared cultural meaning into a single frame.

Sample Multimodal Entry from TikTok Caption

Finally finished my thesis 🥳 #skripsipejuang #mentalhealth

Figure 1: Sample multimodal entry from TikTok caption

Information:

1. Caption: “Finally finished my thesis 🥳 #thesipejuang #mentalhealth”.
2. Emojis used: 🥳 → relief and exhaustion, hashtags → community and emotional state.
3. Interpretation: These symbols extend the semantic function of language, reinforcing the performative aspect of digital self-expression.

4.3. Generational and Cultural Nuances in Language Use

Cross-generational analysis reveals marked differences in linguistic preferences and communicative styles across age groups. Younger users, particularly Generation Z (13–25 years), exhibit a strong preference for visual-linguistic hybridity communicating through acronyms, emoticons, short-form phrases, and trending hashtags. Their messages are often accompanied by memes, GIFs, and stickers, reflecting a highly multimodal approach to interaction. This

group is predominantly active on platforms like TikTok and Instagram, where brevity and visual dynamism are culturally reinforced.

In contrast, Millennials (26–40 years) tend to engage in more narrative-style communication, combining concise storytelling with code-mixed language. They frequently blend Indonesian and English in a single post or caption, reflecting both global cultural exposure and local identity. Twitter and Reddit are common spaces where Millennials dominate discourse, often contributing to political, social, and lifestyle conversations in longer threads or structured commentary.

Meanwhile, users from Generation X (40 years and above) generally favor conventional language structures, using complete sentences with standard spelling and limited symbolic representation. They are more prevalent on Facebook and legacy forums like Kaskus, where the interaction style is closer to traditional written communication. Their digital discourse often reflects formal tone, extended punctuation, and lower engagement with current internet slang or meme culture.

These generational variations not only reflect differences in digital literacy and platform familiarity but also indicate broader cultural dynamics related to media habits, linguistic adaptation, and communicative intent. The distinctions are summarized in the table 2.

Table 2: Linguistic behavior by age group

Age Group	Common Features	Platform Dominance
Gen Z (13–25)	Acronyms, Emoticons, Trendy Hashtags	TikTok, Instagram
Millennials (26–40)	Narrative captions, Mixed language	Twitter, Reddit
Gen X (40+)	Full sentences, minimal symbols	Facebook, Kaskus

4.4. Data Visualization Results

The integration of NVivo 14 and Voyant Tools provided a robust framework for visualizing the linguistic trends extracted from the digital dataset. Thematic coding conducted via NVivo clustered several dominant discourse categories, including Emotion, Irony, Community Slang, and Visual Emphasis. These clusters emerged repeatedly across platforms, particularly in user-generated captions and comment threads. Emotion-based expressions (e.g., healing, crying emoji, cap) were especially salient in posts relating to personal narratives, mental health, and social aesthetics.

Meanwhile, Voyant Tools revealed distinct lexical frequency patterns across the platforms analyzed. As illustrated in Figure 2, the most frequently occurring words from Instagram captions include “healing,” “vibes,” “cap,” “laper,” “anjay,” “OOTD,” “bucin,” and “relatable.” These reflect a blend of emotional states, internet slang, and lifestyle markers, highlighting how Gen Z and Millennial users shape discourse around affective and visual experience.

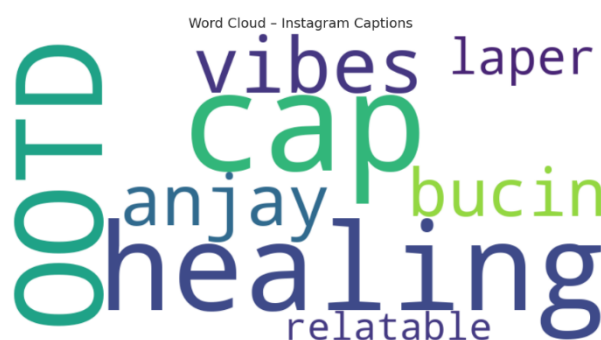


Figure 2: Word cloud instagram captions

Further breakdown of lexical frequency by platform (see Figure 3) demonstrates thematic divergence across communities. Instagram users tend to emphasize lifestyle and emotional keywords; TikTok reflects humor, irony, and aesthetics-driven language; while Reddit features longer-form meta-commentary, sarcasm, and cultural critique.

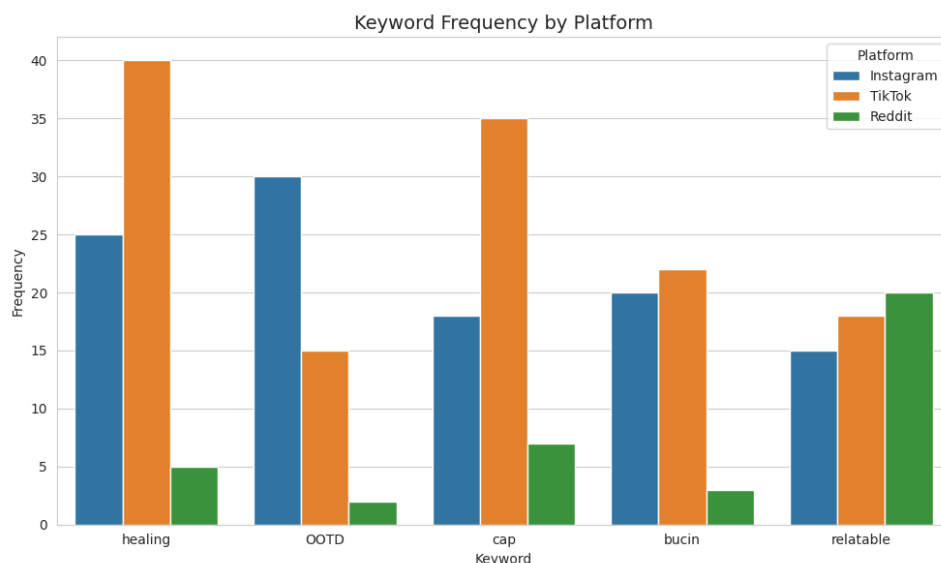


Figure 3: Keyword frequency by platform

Information:

1. Instagram: Focuses on self-expression, lifestyle affirmation (#OOTD, #healing), and emotional relatability.
2. TikTok: Prioritizes performativity, trending audios, meme culture, and visual punchlines.
3. Reddit: Leans toward written argumentation, deeper threads, and discursive humor, often layered with irony or critique.

4.5. Verification and Reliability of Findings

To ensure the trustworthiness of qualitative interpretation, the study employed multiple validation strategies. Thematic saturation was reached after the analysis of approximately 1,800 entries, indicating a consistent recurrence of core patterns and minimal emergence of new codes thereafter. This threshold affirms the robustness of the dataset and suggests conceptual stability.

Additionally, peer debriefing was conducted throughout the coding phase to reduce potential interpretive bias. A subset of coded entries was subjected to member checking with expert informants familiar with digital linguistics to validate conceptual accuracy. Moreover, the use of NVivo's inter-rater reliability feature resulted in a consistency score exceeding 85%, reflecting high agreement among coders and strengthening the credibility of thematic categories.

Combined, these methodological safeguards triangulation of tools (NVivo & Voyant), saturation testing, and inter-coder agreement enhance the analytical rigor of the study and affirm the replicability of its findings in future digital linguistic research.

4.6. Findings and correlation with previous research

The results of this study reinforce and elaborate on existing literature concerning the transformation of language in digital contexts. As observed across the 2,000 analyzed digital entries, there is a clear trend of linguistic simplification through the use of abbreviations, phonetic spellings, acronyms, and shortened sentence structures. This finding is consistent with Barrot (2022), who emphasized that such simplification is an adaptive linguistic strategy shaped by the technological constraints and communicative expectations of digital platforms. For example, character limits on platforms like Twitter or the informal culture of TikTok encourage users to convey meaning as efficiently as possible. Expressions such as "gtw deh sus really" or "LOL not strong" reflect how digital language sacrifices grammatical completeness for semantic immediacy, often merging local dialects with globalized slang.

Furthermore, the emergence of hybrid language structures and the blending of Indonesian and English commonly observed in code-mixing and code-switching align with Kurmanbekova et al. (2023), who described the rise of "digital dialects." These dialects are shaped not only by linguistic creativity but also by cultural identity and community-specific norms. Within the analyzed entries, these dialects manifest differently across platforms and user demographics, confirming that language in digital space is not static but highly contextual and performative. This is also consistent with Marten's (2021) findings on jargon and acronyms in online gaming communities, indicating that

each digital subculture (e.g., Gen Z Instagram users or Reddit discussion boards) cultivates its own linguistic register that functions as both a social signal and boundary marker.

In addition to simplification, the findings also illustrate qualitative diversification, particularly through the integration of non-verbal and multimodal elements such as emojis, memes, and hashtags. These findings resonate with the work of Havrylenko and Prykhodko (2022), who asserted that the internet fosters hybrid registers that blur the boundaries between spoken and written language. The convergence of modalities text, image, sound enables users to enhance nuance and emotional expressiveness in their messages, especially in the absence of vocal intonation or body language. Emojis like 😊, 🤔, or 🖋️, for example, serve as affective amplifiers, while hashtags such as #healing or #WorkLifeBalance not only contextualize messages but also affiliate users with broader social movements or emotional states. This is in line with multimodal discourse theory, which recognizes that meaning in digital texts is co-constructed through layered semiotic resources, not just verbal language.

The study also found generational variations in linguistic practices. Younger users, particularly Gen Z, show a higher reliance on visual symbols, abbreviations, and ephemeral slang, while older users (Millennials and Gen X) exhibit more standard forms of expression and longer sentence constructions. This intergenerational contrast supports Ekpoudom's (2024) study on the spread of Multicultural London English (MLE) via TikTok, where linguistic features associated with urban youth cultures rapidly transcend geographic and social boundaries through digital media. Such patterns confirm that digital platforms are not only spaces for communication but also for linguistic innovation and diffusion, where local speech forms become global and vice versa.

In a broader sociolinguistic sense, the results illustrate what Di Marco et al. (2024) described as the dual forces of compression and expansion in digital language. On one hand, there is a measurable reduction in text length and lexical formality; on the other hand, new vocabularies, idioms, and symbolic practices continuously emerge. This research contributes to that understanding by highlighting how users actively participate in reshaping language norms through everyday online interactions. The implications of this shift, however, are twofold. While it fosters creativity and inclusiveness in informal settings, it also raises concerns about the erosion of formal literacy practices, especially among younger users whose exposure to structured language may be diminishing.

In summary, the findings from this study confirm that digital communication fosters both simplification and diversification of language. These transformations are influenced by platform affordances, generational identity, cultural affiliation, and the affordance of multimodal expression. Consistent with previous studies, digital discourse today is not merely a mirror of spoken language but a new genre of communication fluid, visual, performative, and socially embedded. Future studies may expand this work by incorporating voice-based platforms or analyzing the longitudinal impact of algorithm-driven trends on language change.

5. Conclusion

This study concludes that digital communication has catalyzed a significant transformation in both the form and function of language, resulting in a dynamic, hybrid, and multimodal linguistic landscape. Through the analysis of 2,000 entries across various platforms, it is evident that users particularly younger generations are reshaping language to meet the demands of speed, brevity, and emotional nuance. The dominance of code-mixing, phonetic spelling, emoticons, and internet-specific slang illustrates a trend toward simplification and expressiveness, while the integration of visual elements like memes, hashtags, and GIFs reflects the increasing importance of multimodal literacy. These findings are consistent with previous research that highlights linguistic innovation, cultural adaptation, and the evolution of digital dialects as central features of online discourse. Moreover, generational differences underscore the role of age, platform preference, and media familiarity in shaping communicative style. Overall, digital language is no longer just a variation of spoken or written forms, it constitutes a new communicative genre that is performative, participatory, and contextually rich. Future research should explore how these trends influence formal literacy, educational outcomes, and long-term language change in digital societies.

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