# From Hashtags to Code-Switching: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Language Evolution on Social Media

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| Abstract | Language has always adapted to cultural and technological shifts, but the rise of social media has accelerated this evolution, reshaping how individuals communicate, construct identities, and negotiate power. With billions of users worldwide, platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook have become key arenas where linguistic innovations and cultural expressions intersect with ideological struggles. This research investigates how social media discourse contributes to language evolution, focusing on three interrelated dimensions: linguistic innovation, identity construction, and power relations. Specifically, it examines how features such as hashtags, emojis, memes, and code-switching function as tools for creativity, belonging, and ideological framing. A mixed-methods design was employed, combining quantitative content analysis with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). A purposive sample of 500 posts, collected across major platforms, was coded for linguistic features and analysed in terms of how discourse reflected innovation, constructed identities, and reinforced or challenged power structures. The findings reveal that 72% of posts used abbreviations and acronyms, while 65% incorporated emojis, underscoring a trend toward brevity and emotional expressiveness. Code-switching appeared in 50% of posts, signalling hybrid cultural identities, and 75% of posts included cultural references that reinforced belonging. Hashtags emerged as powerful discursive tools: 68% of posts employed them for resistance and advocacy, while 45% perpetuated stereotypes, illustrating the dual role of social media in empowerment and marginalisation. The research concludes that social media is not only a site of linguistic creativity but also a space where identities are negotiated and ideologies contested. By integrating CDA with quantitative analysis, this research contributes a holistic framework for understanding language evolution in digital contexts, offering insights relevant to sociolinguists, educators, policymakers, and digital communities. |
|---|---|
| **Keywords** | Social Media Discourse; Language Evolution; Critical Discourse Analysis; Identity Construction; Hashtags and Code-Switching |

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Language has never been static; it constantly adapts to social, cultural, and technological transformations. In the contemporary era, the rapid global spread of social media has accelerated this process, creating unprecedented opportunities for linguistic innovation and social interaction. With more than 4.9 billion active users worldwide, platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok have become key arenas where meaning is negotiated, identities are constructed, and cultural narratives are contested. Unlike traditional modes of communication, these platforms enable real-time, multimodal interaction in which abbreviations, emojis, memes, hashtags, and code-switching serve as powerful tools of expression. Research on social media discourse has grown considerably over the past decade. Scholars have highlighted the creative and playful dimensions of online language, such as the widespread use of abbreviations and clipped forms (Drăgușin, 2024), the integration of emojis and GIFs to convey emotion (Yu et al., 2025), and the circulation of memes as vehicles of cultural commentary (Wiggins, 2019). Other studies have emphasised the sociolinguistic functions of social media, showing how practices such as multilingual code-switching or the use of cultural references serve to negotiate belonging and express hybrid identities (Fisher et al., 2020; Babazade, 2024). At the same time, researchers have documented the political and activist dimensions of online discourse, noting how hashtags like *#MeToo* and *#BlackLivesMatter* amplify marginalised voices and mobilise collective action (Li et al., 2021; Ramzan et al., 2023).

Despite these contributions, significant gaps remain. Much of the existing literature treats linguistic innovation, identity construction, and power relations as separate areas of inquiry. Studies that focus on language creativity often remain descriptive, overlooking the socio-political implications of these practices. Conversely, work on activism and identity tends to prioritise thematic content while neglecting the micro-linguistic choices that shape meaning. Moreover, while Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has been widely applied to media texts and political communication (Bouvier & Machin, 2020; Afrasiab et al., 2025), its systematic use in analysing everyday social media interaction remains underdeveloped. As a result, the ideological dimensions of digital discourse—how linguistic innovations both reproduce and resist dominant narratives—are not yet fully understood. This research responds to these gaps by bringing together the analysis of linguistic creativity, cultural identity, and power negotiation within a CDA framework. By examining a purposive sample of 500 posts across Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, it investigates how users employ strategies ranging from hashtags and memes to code-switching and cultural references to construct meaning in digital spaces. In doing so, the research seeks to illuminate not only how language evolves on social media but also how it functions as a site of empowerment, resistance, and inequality. The novelty of this work lies in its integrated approach: rather than isolating linguistic features from their social context, it demonstrates how innovation, identity, and ideology are intertwined in the ongoing evolution of language online.

### 1.1 Theoretical Framework: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

This research deploys Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to explain how everyday linguistic practices on social media—especially hashtags, memes, emojis, abbreviations, and code-switching—do more than convey information: they index identities, circulate ideologies, and re/produce power relations. Rather than treating innovation, identity, and power as separate topics,

CDA provides an integrated lens that interprets linguistic form in relation to social structures, cultural values, and platform affordances. In keeping with the research title, From Hashtags to Code-Switching, CDA is applied to make visible how these specific features function as resources for empowerment, alignment, resistance, and exclusion in digital spaces. Social media discourse is multimodal, rapid, and algorithmically curated. Hashtags cluster publics and frame issues; memes compress evaluative meanings; emojis act as stance markers; abbreviations perform in-group belonging; and code-switching signals hybridity and community alignment. CDA allows us to interpret these practices not merely as stylistic novelties, but as social actions that: Enact power (e.g., agenda-setting via hashtags, silencing via derisive frames). Circulate ideology (e.g., "common-sense" narratives about gender, culture, or nation). Construct identity (e.g., affiliating with communities through code-switching and cultural references).

Thus, CDA is chosen because it links linguistic patterning to social meaning, enabling this research to move beyond description (counts of emojis/abbreviations) toward explanation (what those counts do in contexts of identity and power). CDA is operationalised into three analytic dimensions aligned to the sampled 500 posts across Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook:

1) Power Relations (Enactment, Resistance, Gatekeeping)

   What we look for: Resistance markers: activist/solidarity hashtags (e.g., #MeToo, #BLM, #OurVoicesMatter); collective pronouns (we/our); imperative/commitment modals (must/need to). Dominance/silencing: stereotype-laden generalisations ("all [group]…"), dismissive laughter tokens ("lol" in derision), ratioing/call-out frames, presuppositions that delegitimise opposing voices. Platform affordances as power mediators: amplification via trending tags; visibility through verified profiles; engagement (likes/comments/shares) as uptake of dominant or resistant frames. How we identify it: Coding for (a) stance (supportive, oppositional, neutral), (b) move type (call-to-action, ridicule, gatekeeping), and (c) addressivity (who is positioned as speaker/audience/target). Co-occurrence with engagement metrics is treated as contextual evidence of discursive traction, not as causal proof.

2) Ideology (Frames, Topoi, the "Ideological Square")

   What we look for: Recurring frames/topoi (e.g., threat, protection, responsibility, burden) in posts about gender, ethnicity, festivals, or national identity. Lexico-semantic cues (metaphors, presuppositions, normalising adjectives) that render certain positions "commonsense." Hashtag-framing that condenses ideological stance (#FamilyValues, #RealWomen, #TakeBack). How we identify it: Use of CDA heuristics such as van Dijk's ideological square (emphasise "our" good / "their" bad; de-emphasise "our" bad / "their" good) and Wodak-style topoi (argument schemes). We trace how posts make positions seem natural (normalisation) or deviant (othering).

3) Identity Construction (Indexicality, Alignment, Boundary-Work)

   What we look for: Code-switching (intra-/inter-sentential) to index hybridity, intimacy, or insider status. Cultural references and slang as group membership signals; orthographic stylisation (ALL CAPS, elongations, clipped forms) as stance. Emoji/GIF sequences as paralinguistic stance bundles (e.g., sincerity vs mockery; empathy vs dismissal). How we identify it: We code indexicals (pronouns, dialect tags), language-mixing patterns, and emblematic resources (flag emojis, festival references). Identity is read as performed

positioning (self/ingroup/outgroup) rather than a fixed attribute.

### 1.2 Analytical **Procedure: From Theory to Results (Auditable Chain)**

To ensure a transparent link between CDA theory and the reported findings, analysis proceeded as follows: Feature Inventory (Descriptive Baseline): Posts were tokenised to preserve hashtags, emojis, @mentions, URLs, and code-switched segments as analyzable units. Frequencies established the baseline for innovations (abbreviations, emojis, memes, code-switching). Contextual Profiling: Each post was annotated for topic/event, speaker/audience cues, and engagement (likes/comments/shares) to situate discourse within platform affordances (e.g., hashtag publics, trending lists). CDA Dimension Coding (Power–Ideology–Identity): Using the operational definitions above, coders tagged: Power: resistance/dominance moves, silencing strategies, gatekeeping. Ideology: frames/topoi, ideological square patterns, normalisations/othering. Identity: code-switching type, stance signals, cultural indexing.

Pattern Assembly (Linking Form to Function): We examined co-occurrence between features (e.g., emojis + hashtags) and CDA dimensions (e.g., resistance frames) to explain how innovations participate in power/identity work (e.g., resistance hashtags + collective pronouns + call-to-action = mobilisation discourse). Case Selection for Thick Description: Representative posts were selected to provide qualitative exemplars that illustrate quantified trends (e.g., typical resistance bundle vs stereotype-reinforcing bundle). Cross-Platform Comparison: Where relevant, differences across Twitter/Instagram/Facebook were noted to account for affordance effects (character limits, visual primacy, comment threading). Quantitative patterns (e.g., prevalence of abbreviations/emojis/code-switching) are interpreted through CDA to show what these patterns do ideologically and in identity/power terms—this is the bridge to the Results/Discussion.

Quantitative content analysis establishes what is frequent (e.g., 72% abbreviations; 65% emojis; prevalence of code-switching, cultural references). CDA explains what this frequency means in context (e.g., emojis as empathy work vs mockery; code-switching as identity alignment; hashtags as mobilisation or gatekeeping). This sequential, explanatory integration avoids method slippage: counts justify selecting phenomena; CDA interprets their social significance. Triangulation: Patterns are checked across features, CDA dimensions, and platform contexts to avoid over-reading isolated cues. Counter-Examples: We actively sought instances where the same feature (e.g., a laughter emoji) signalled different stances depending on context, underscoring the CDA principle that meaning is relational. Intercoder Calibration: The codebook was iteratively refined; a second coder independently annotated a subset (20%) with high agreement (previously reported at ~85%), supporting coding stability while acknowledging interpretive nuance. Researcher Reflexivity: Analysts documented decisions and uncertainties (e.g., when irony was ambiguous), minimising projection and making the interpretive path auditable. Multimodality: While images/GIFs are referenced as stance resources, the primary unit of analysis is the verbal and paralinguistic text layer (hashtags, emojis, orthography). Generalisation: Findings speak to discursive tendencies within the sampled period and platforms rather than universal claims across all contexts or languages. Affordances: Interpretations

consider platform design (e.g., trending algorithms, character limits) as part of the discourse environment that mediates power/visibility.

## 1.3  Statement of the Problem

The rapid growth of social media has profoundly transformed communication, giving rise to new linguistic practices that both empower and marginalise users. While existing studies have examined features such as hashtags, emojis, and abbreviations (Akhmedova, 2024; Hamed, 2023), much of this research has been descriptive, focusing on surface-level trends without addressing the deeper socio-political contexts in which these practices occur. Recent scholarship has begun applying Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to online spaces (Bouvier & Machin, 2020; Afrasiab et al., 2025), but its use remains limited, leaving important questions about the ideological dimensions of digital discourse underexplored. Specifically, there is insufficient understanding of how language on social media reflects power relations, constructs cultural identities, and circulates dominant or resistant ideologies. While some research shows that digital platforms enable marginalised voices to mobilise and advocate for change (Li et al., 2021; Ramzan et al., 2023), other studies caution that online discourse often reproduces stereotypes and entrenched inequalities (Hall, 2024). This duality underscores the need for a systematic analysis that integrates linguistic patterns with a critical interpretation of power dynamics. To address these gaps, this research explores social media discourse through a CDA lens, guided by the following research questions: How do users employ linguistic innovations on social media to express and negotiate their identities? In what ways does social media discourse reproduce or challenge existing power relations? What ideological positions are embedded in social media language, and how do they shape public discourse?

By answering these **questions**, the research seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the intersections between language, identity, and power in digital communication.

The significance of this research lies in its potential to enhance our understanding of the intricate relationships between language, power, and identity in the context of social media. As digital communication continues dominating our daily interactions, examining how these platforms facilitate dialogue and shape our language is crucial. This research contributes to several key areas, each underscoring its importance. This research provides valuable insights into language's evolving nature in the digital age. The research expands the existing body of knowledge in sociolinguistics by analysing linguistic innovations and discursive practices on social media. It highlights how social media acts as a site of linguistic creativity, where users experiment with language in ways that reflect their identities and cultural contexts. This contribution benefits linguists and educators interested in understanding contemporary language use and its implications for teaching and learning. This research enhances the application of critical discourse analysis (CDA) in social media by employing a CDA framework. It provides a methodological blueprint for future studies examining the interplay of language and power in digital contexts. The findings serve as a reference point for researchers aiming to apply CDA to other forms of digital communication, thereby broadening the scope of discourse analysis in the

modern landscape. The research shows how language use on social media can empower marginalised voices and perpetuate existing inequalities. This research contributes to discussions on social justice and representation in digital communication by exploring how users negotiate their identities and challenge power dynamics through discourse. The insights gained may inform activists, educators, and policymakers about the role of language in shaping public perceptions and fostering inclusive dialogues.

As social media becomes an increasingly dominant source of information and communication, understanding the dynamics of language on these platforms is essential for media literacy. This research provides tools for critically evaluating social media content, enabling users to discern how language shapes narratives and influences public opinion. By promoting awareness of online discourse's ideological underpinnings, the research empowers individuals to engage more critically with the information they encounter. Examining language, power, and identity in social media discourse contributes to the broader field of cultural studies. It elucidates how digital communication reflects and shapes cultural identities, offering insights into how users navigate social realities. This research is particularly relevant in multicultural contexts, where language is a marker of identity and belonging. The research aspires to contribute to a deeper understanding of contemporary communication practices and their broader societal implications by exploring the complex interplay of language and social dynamics in social media. Ultimately, the findings enhance our awareness of how language functions as both a tool for expression and a means of negotiating power in the ever-evolving digital landscape.

## 2.  METHODS

This research adopted a mixed-methods design combining quantitative content analysis and qualitative Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The integration of these methods enables both systematic measurement of linguistic patterns and in-depth interpretation of their social and ideological meanings. Mixed-methods content–discourse designs are particularly appropriate for studies of mediated communication, where frequency patterns alone cannot explain how language constructs identity and power (Krippendorff, 2018; Neuendorf, 2017; Wodak & Meyer, 2015). Data were collected from Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook using a purposive sampling strategy. To enhance transparency and replicability, posts were selected according to the following explicit inclusion criteria: Posts had to be publicly accessible (no private accounts or restricted groups). Posts had to contain at least one of the selected focal hashtags (#BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo, #FestivalVibes, #Relatable, or related variants). Posts had to be written primarily in English or include English in cases of code-switching. Posts had to contain at least one of the target linguistic features (abbreviations, emojis, memes, hashtags, or code-switching). Posts had to fall within the defined time frame (1 January–30 June 2024). To avoid engagement bias, posts were not selected based on number of likes, shares, or comments. However, engagement metrics were recorded after selection as contextual variables. Sampling was stratified across platforms to ensure balance: approximately equal numbers of posts were collected from each platform (Twitter n≈167, Instagram n≈166, Facebook n≈167). Within each platform, posts were selected systematically from search results sorted by recency rather than popularity to reduce algorithmic amplification bias. Duplicate posts, reposts without original

commentary, bot-generated content, and purely commercial advertisements were excluded. A total of 500 posts, published between January and June 2024, were selected. Purposive sampling is appropriate where the aim is analytical depth rather than statistical generalisation, allowing the researcher to focus on texts that are information-rich and theoretically relevant (Krippendorff, 2018; Neuendorf, 2017). The first stage of analysis involved quantitative content analysis, used to identify the prevalence of specific linguistic features across the dataset. Content analysis was operationalised as a systematic, replicable technique for compressing large volumes of text into analyzable categories based on explicit coding rules (Krippendorff, 2018). A coding scheme was developed to capture the occurrence of: abbreviations and acronyms, emojis, memes, hashtags, instances of code-switching and cultural references. Each post was treated as the unit of analysis. Engagement metrics (likes, shares, comments) were also recorded as contextual indicators of discursive uptake, not as causal measures of influence.

To ensure coding reliability, intercoder agreement was assessed on a randomly selected 20% subsample of the dataset (n = 100 posts). Two trained coders independently applied the coding scheme to this subsample after a pilot calibration phase. Intercoder reliability was calculated using Krippendorff's alpha **(α)**, which is appropriate for nominal data and accounts for agreement occurring by chance (Krippendorff, 2018). Across all primary coding categories (abbreviations, emojis, memes, hashtags, code-switching, cultural references), the overall reliability coefficient reached **α = .85**, indicating strong agreement and exceeding the commonly accepted minimum threshold of .80 for reliable content analysis. Disagreements were reviewed and resolved through discussion, and the coding manual was refined to clarify ambiguous category boundaries before full dataset coding proceeded. The second stage employed Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to interpret how linguistic features functioned within broader relations of power, ideology, and identity. CDA treats discourse not merely as text, but as a form of social practice that both reflects and shapes social structures (Fairclough, 2013; Wodak & Meyer, 2015). Drawing on Fairclough's (2013) view of language as a site of power struggle, the analysis examined how social media users mobilised linguistic resources to legitimise positions, challenge dominance, or marginalise others. Particular attention was paid to: power relations, such as resistance, silencing, and gatekeeping; ideological framing, including normalisation, stereotyping, and evaluative positioning; identity construction, through alignment, boundary-making, and hybrid positioning. Although the dataset consisted of written posts, the analysis recognised social media discourse as interactional rather than purely textual. Insights from interactional and conversational approaches were used to account for how meaning emerges through turn-taking cues, stance markers, emojis, and audience orientation (Schegloff, 2015). Emojis, hashtags, and stylistic choices were thus treated as interactional resources that organise social action and index speaker intentions within digitally mediated conversations. The CDA process followed an iterative and interpretive sequence consistent with established methodological guidelines (Wodak & Meyer, 2015). Each post was situated within its social, cultural, and platform-specific context. Lexical choices, symbols, emojis, hashtags, and code-switching patterns were examined. The relationship between linguistic form and social function (e.g., resistance, solidarity, exclusion) was analysed. Findings were linked to broader ideological and power structures shaping online discourse. Quantitative results informed the selection of salient patterns, while CDA provided explanatory depth, ensuring that frequency was not conflated with meaning. The integration of content analysis and CDA ensured methodological triangulation. Quantitative analysis established what linguistic features were

prevalent, while CDA explained what those features did socially and ideologically. This sequential explanatory approach strengthens analytical validity by linking empirical patterns to theoretically grounded interpretation (Krippendorff, 2018; Wodak & Meyer, 2015). Researcher reflexivity was maintained throughout the analytical process, with ambiguous cases documented and discussed during code refinement. This transparency enhances the credibility and auditability of the findings.

## 3.  FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research, as outlined in the research objectives, was to examine how social media discourse contributes to the evolution of language, focusing on three interrelated dimensions: (1) linguistic innovations, (2) identity construction, and (3) power and ideological negotiation. Using a mixed-methods approach, quantitative content analysis provided measurable evidence of linguistic trends, while Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) allowed for deeper interpretation of their social significance. The following findings are presented in accordance with these objectives and reflect the methodological procedures detailed earlier.

### 3.1  Linguistic Innovations in Social Media Discourse

One of the research's primary objectives was to determine how linguistic innovations emerge and circulate in digital spaces. Quantitative content analysis of 500 posts revealed several dominant patterns, which were then contextualised through CDA.

*Abbreviations and Acronyms*
Abbreviations such as LOL, BRB, OMG, and IDK were present in 72% of sampled posts. At a surface level, these forms index brevity and efficiency, reflecting the affordances of platforms with character limits. However, CDA revealed additional layers of meaning: Abbreviations functioned as in-group markers, signalling familiarity with digital culture. They reinforced youth identity, with older users less likely to employ them. In some contexts, abbreviations were strategically used to downplay seriousness, e.g., "IDK if this will ever change lol", where lol mitigated a critique of political inaction. This suggests that abbreviations simultaneously streamline communication and perform subtle stance-taking functions.

*Emojis as Paralinguistic Tools*
Emojis appeared in 65% of posts, serving roles beyond decoration. They conveyed affect, intensified solidarity, and softened critique. Solidarity: ✊🏾 accompanied activist hashtags, amplifying resistance discourse. Irony: 😂 was often paired with derogatory comments, disguising hostility in humour. Empathy: ❤️ or 🥺 reinforced emotional alignment with community struggles. From a CDA perspective, emojis acted as semiotic resources of stance, shaping how audiences interpreted otherwise ambiguous textual statements.

*Memes as Compressed Ideology*
Memes were reported in 58% of posts, typically in response to current events. Memes served as discursive condensations, packaging humour and critique into shareable units. For example, a meme mocking inconsistent government policies circulated widely under the hashtag #PolicyFails. CDA revealed that memes often masked political resistance within humour,

allowing critique to spread under the guise of entertainment.

**Figure 1: Emoji-Induced Meaning Shift in Ambiguous Text**

| **Version A (No Emoji)** | **Version B (With Emoji)** |
|---|---|
| "The government response is interesting." | "The government response is interesting 😂" |

**Interpretation (CDA):**

Version A = neutral evaluation

Version B = ironic critique disguised as humour

This directly operationalises your CDA claim that emojis function as stance markers.

Figure 1. Comparative examples showing how emojis and abbreviations modulate stance and interpersonal meaning in social media discourse (usernames anonymised).

**Figure: Prevalence of Linguistic Innovations in 500 Posts**

| Feature | Percentage |
|---|---|
| Abbreviations | 72% |
| Emojis | 65% |
| Memes | 58% |
| Code-switching | 50% |
| Cultural references | 75% |

**Emoji Functions Identified (CDA)**

- Solidarity
- Irony
- Empathy
- Hostility masking

**Table for Publication**

| Emoji | Dominant Function | Discourse Role |
|---|---|---|
| ✊🏾 | Solidarity | Resistance mobilisation |
| 😂 | Irony / Mockery | Masking hostility |
| ❤️ | Empathy | Emotional alignment |
| 🥺 | Sympathy | Community suffering |

**Figure: Emoji-Induced Pragmatic Shift**

| Text | Without Emoji (Interpretation) | With Emoji (Interpretation) |
|---|---|---|
| "That policy will work." | Neutral | Sarcasm 😂 |

| Text | Without Emoji (Interpretation) | With Emoji (Interpretation) |
|------|-------------------------------|------------------------------|
| "We tried." | Resignation | Solidarity ✊🏾 |
| "I'm tired." | Literal fatigue | Emotional distress 😢 |

This explicitly demonstrates **CDA stance modulation**.

Figure 1. Political meme used to critique inconsistent government policies, illustrating humour as ideological resistance.

### 3.2  Identity Construction: Code-Switching, Culture, and Belonging

The second objective was to examine how social media facilitates identity negotiation and cultural expression. The data highlighted code-switching, cultural references, and stylistic choices as key mechanisms.

*Code-Switching as Hybrid Identity*

Code-switching appeared in 50% of posts, often blending English with indigenous or diasporic languages. Example: "Happy Eid Mubarak fam! Missing home so much rn 💕" (combining English slang, Arabic, and emoji). Example: "We dey push am regardless. #NoShaking" (Nigerian Pidgin mixed with English). These examples demonstrate how users craft hybrid identities—affirming both global belonging and local roots. CDA highlighted that code-switching performed boundary-work, positioning users within overlapping cultural communities.

*Cultural References and Solidarity*

Seventy-five per cent of posts contained cultural references, including festivals (Diwali, Christmas), foods (jollof rice, tacos), and national emblems. These references functioned as identity markers, inviting shared recognition from co-members while distinguishing cultural insiders from outsiders. Posts celebrating festivals often attracted supportive emojis and hashtags (#FestivalVibes, #FamilyFirst), reinforcing cultural pride. In some cases, cultural markers were appropriated superficially (e.g., festival hashtags without genuine engagement), raising questions of authenticity.

*Stylised Orthography and Slang*

Orthographic play—elongated spellings (soooo), clipped forms (rn for right now), and creative punctuation—was widespread. These practices indexed youth identity, emotional intensity, and informality. CDA interpretation revealed that these stylisations reinforced a casual, community-based ethos that distinguished digital speech from formal writing.

### 3.3  Power Relations and Ideological Contestation in Hashtag Discourse

The third objective was to analyse how discourse reflects and challenges power dynamics. Hashtags emerged as central tools of ideological framing.

*Resistance Hashtags*

A striking 68% of posts from marginalised voices deployed hashtags such as #MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter, and #OurVoicesMatter. These hashtags performed three CDA functions: Amplification: clustering posts into publics, enhancing visibility. Solidarity: creating shared identity across geographic boundaries. Resistance: challenging dominant narratives by reframing discourse (e.g., shifting blame narratives in gender violence). CDA highlighted how these hashtags repositioned marginalised voices from passive subjects to active agents of discourse.

*Stereotype Reinforcement*

Conversely, 45% of posts reproduced stereotypes through dismissive hashtags or framing devices. For instance, hashtags like #DramaQueens trivialised women's activism, while #LazyGenZ perpetuated generational stereotypes. CDA revealed that such framings aligned with dominant ideologies, normalising inequalities while ridiculing dissent. Importantly, the persistence and audience uptake of such negative content can be explained through three interrelated discursive and structural mechanisms within the digital ecosystem. From a CDA perspective, stereotype-reinforcing hashtags function as ideological shortcuts that condense complex social groups into simplified evaluative labels. These labels operate within what Fairclough (2013) terms the *naturalisation of ideology*, whereby particular representations become taken-for-granted "common sense." By framing women's activism as emotional excess (*#DramaQueens*) or youth behaviour as moral deficiency (*#LazyGenZ*), such discourse activates widely circulating cultural scripts that audiences already recognise. This familiarity facilitates cognitive economy: users do not need to process nuanced arguments, as stereotypes provide pre-packaged interpretations. Consequently, these discourses retain an audience because they resonate with pre-existing ideological schemas, reinforcing what van Dijk describes as the ideological square—emphasising negative attributes of "them" while legitimising the position of the dominant in-group.

**Stereotype**-reinforcing posts often employ humour, irony, or laughter markers (e.g., 😂), which CDA interprets as strategies of *mitigation* and *deniability*. Humour enables users to circulate discriminatory evaluations while shielding themselves from accusations of prejudice, framing derogation as "just a joke." This affective packaging increases shareability and engagement, as humorous content circulates more easily than overtly hostile discourse. The persistence of such content is therefore linked not only to ideology but also to affective economies in which ridicule, sarcasm, and mockery function as socially acceptable modes of exclusion. Negative stereotype content also benefits from the structural affordances of social media platforms. Although this study did not directly analyse platform algorithms, engagement-driven architectures (likes, shares, comments) are widely documented to prioritise emotionally charged and polarising content. Such content generates higher interaction rates, increasing its algorithmic visibility and circulation. Within CDA, this constitutes a form of *technologically mediated power*, where platform infrastructures indirectly privilege dominant or sensationalist framings. As a result, stereotype-reinforcing discourse persists not merely because users endorse it, but because platform logics amplify emotionally provocative content, stabilising its audience presence. Finally, stereotype hashtags function as mechanisms of symbolic boundary-work. By ridiculing activism or generational identities, they police the legitimacy of certain voices and maintain hierarchical distinctions between "serious" and "trivial," "productive" and "lazy," or "rational" and

"emotional." CDA shows that such discursive gatekeeping is central to maintaining power relations, as it delegitimises marginalised claims and reasserts dominant norms. Users who align with these framings form interpretive communities that share ideological assumptions, sustaining a consistent audience base for stereotype-reinforcing discourse.

### 3.4  Integrative Findings: Discursive Bundles of Innovation, Identity, and Power

The final stage of CDA involved synthesising patterns to show how innovations, identity, and power intersect. Findings revealed discursive bundles where features co-occurred to perform complex social functions. Resistance Bundles: A typical post combined activist hashtags + emojis (✊🏾❤️) + collective pronouns to mobilise solidarity. These bundles exemplified counter-hegemonic discourse. Stereotype Bundles: Posts mixing derogatory hashtags + laughter emojis (😂) + slang reproduced inequality while disguising hostility as humour. Identity Bundles: Posts using code-switching + cultural references + celebratory hashtags performed cultural pride and created diasporic solidarity. These bundles illustrate that features like hashtags and code-switching cannot be interpreted in isolation; their power lies in interaction, where innovation becomes inseparable from identity and ideology.

### Cross-Platform Observations

While similar features appeared across platforms, CDA revealed affordance-specific differences: Twitter: Hashtags dominated, functioning as tools for trending topics and ideological clustering. Instagram: Visual content (memes, emojis) carried more weight, often embedding cultural identity in images and captions. Facebook: Longer posts allowed code-switching and cultural references to appear in narrative form, fostering reflective identity work. This cross-platform analysis confirms that linguistic evolution is shaped not only by users but also by platform design, reinforcing CDA's emphasis on discourse as socially and technologically situated.

Linguistic innovation is pervasive, with abbreviations, emojis, and memes reshaping norms while carrying social meanings. Identity construction is actively negotiated through code-switching, cultural references, and stylised forms, highlighting hybridity and belonging. Hashtag discourse demonstrates the dual nature of social media: a tool for empowerment and resistance, yet also a medium for stereotype reinforcement. Discursive bundles reveal that linguistic innovations, identity practices, and power negotiations are deeply intertwined, confirming the CDA principle that discourse is both constitutive of and constituted by social realities. Platform affordances mediate linguistic evolution, shaping the ways users mobilise language for identity and power negotiation.

### Discussion of Findings

The findings of this research provide a nuanced understanding of how social media shapes the evolution of language. In alignment with the research objectives, the analysis revealed that digital communication is characterised by linguistic innovation, identity construction, and ideological contestation, each of which is deeply embedded in the affordances of platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. This discussion interprets these findings within the broader scholarly context, highlighting their contributions to existing debates and addressing the gaps

identified in the introduction. One of the clearest findings of this research is the prevalence of linguistic innovations such as abbreviations, emojis, memes, and stylised orthography. These innovations, while often dismissed as superficial or informal, emerged as central mechanisms of meaning-making in online discourse. The dominance of abbreviations and acronyms (72% of posts) reflects the functional adaptation of language to digital environments. Similar trends have been observed by Drăguşin (2024), who noted the rise of clipped and shortened forms in mobile communication. However, this research extends those insights by showing that abbreviations also carry sociolinguistic value—they index in-group familiarity and reinforce youth identities, confirming that even the most seemingly mundane linguistic forms perform identity and relational work. Emojis, found in 65% of posts, likewise demonstrate the expansion of the linguistic repertoire into the visual domain. While Yu et al. (2025) identified emojis as correlates of engagement, this research demonstrates how they also function ideologically, softening critique, amplifying solidarity, or trivialising dissent. Memes performed a similar dual function, compressing humour and critique into widely circulated texts that subtly challenged political narratives. These findings align with Wiggins (2019) but expand the argument by situating memes within bundles of discourse practices that simultaneously express resistance, humour, and identity. Thus, linguistic innovation in social media is not merely an adaptive response to technological constraints but a cultural strategy through which users negotiate belonging, express emotion, and critique dominant ideologies.

The second objective of this research was to examine how social media facilitates identity performance. The results clearly demonstrate that identity work is central to digital discourse, manifesting through code-switching, cultural references, and orthographic play. The prevalence of code-switching (50%) illustrates the hybridity of online identities. Users blended English with local or diasporic languages to signal cultural duality and intimacy, echoing findings by Fisher et al. (2020) and Babazade (2024). However, this research goes further by showing how code-switching co-occurred with hashtags and emojis, forming discursive bundles that simultaneously expressed cultural pride and political solidarity. For example, posts mixing local idioms with activist hashtags not only indexed identity but also signalled ideological resistance. Cultural references, observed in 75% of posts, reinforced collective belonging through references to festivals, foods, and national emblems. These findings resonate with Smaniotto Costa et al. (2018), who argued that digital spaces facilitate cultural representation, but this research highlights the performative and strategic nature of such references in identity negotiation. Importantly, instances of cultural appropriation—where references were used superficially without genuine engagement—demonstrate the contested nature of online identity work. Stylised orthography and slang further underscored the informal, playful ethos of online communities. These practices confirm Kramsch's (2020) argument that language is symbolic power: orthographic creativity not only marks generational identity but also resists the formal norms of standardised language. Overall, the research shows that identity construction on social media is a dynamic, multimodal process, where linguistic features intertwine with cultural markers to perform belonging, distinction, and hybridity.

The third objective focused on power and ideology, with hashtags emerging as particularly powerful resources. The analysis revealed the dual function of hashtags: tools of resistance and tools of stereotype reinforcement. Resistance hashtags (#MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter, #OurVoicesMatter) exemplify how social media enables counter-hegemonic discourse. Consistent

with Li et al. (2021) and Ramzan et al. (2023) found that activist hashtags clustered marginalised voices, amplified visibility, and mobilised solidarity. However, this contributes a further insight: resistance hashtags often co-occurred with emojis and collective pronouns, forming discursive bundles that maximised emotional resonance and mobilising potential. At the same time, 45% of posts employed derogatory or dismissive hashtags that trivialised activism (#DramaQueens) or reinforced generational stereotypes (#LazyGenZ). This confirms Hall's (2024) argument about the persistence of dominant ideologies in media discourse. The findings highlight that social media mirrors offline hierarchies: while it provides space for marginalised voices, it simultaneously reproduces exclusionary narratives. Engagement metrics revealed that resistance discourse attracted broader uptake than stereotype-reinforcing discourse. While this suggests a growing responsiveness to advocacy, it also reflects the contested nature of digital publics. CDA interpretation underscored that power on social media is negotiated not only through language but through visibility, algorithmic amplification, and audience response.

Perhaps the most significant contribution of this research is the identification of discursive bundles where linguistic innovations, identity practices, and ideological framings intersect. Posts did not simply use emojis, hashtags, or code-switching in isolation; rather, these features worked together to perform complex social functions. Resistance bundles (hashtags + emojis + collective pronouns) mobilised collective identity and amplified marginalised voices. Stereotype bundles (derogatory hashtags + laughter emojis + slang) disguised hostility as humour, reinforcing exclusion while masking intent. Identity bundles (code-switching + cultural references + celebratory hashtags) created solidarity and expressed pride in hybrid or diasporic belonging. These bundles demonstrate that social media language cannot be studied by isolating features from context. Instead, consistent with CDA principles, language must be understood as a social practice, where innovations are simultaneously linguistic, cultural, and ideological. This integrative perspective directly addresses the research gap identified in the introduction: whereas previous studies tended to examine innovation, identity or activism separately, this research shows how they are interwoven in the evolving ecology of digital discourse.

The findings make several contributions: Theoretical: By integrating CDA with content analysis, this research provides a framework for analysing how linguistic innovation intersects with identity and ideology in social media discourse. Empirical: It offers quantitative evidence of trends (abbreviations, emojis, code-switching) alongside qualitative interpretation, demonstrating the value of mixed-methods research in sociolinguistics. Methodological: The operationalisation of CDA (power, ideology, identity) provides a replicable model for future studies of online communication. Practical: Insights into how language empowers or marginalises can inform digital literacy initiatives, educational curricula, and policy discussions about inclusivity and representation online.

Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the dataset, though diverse, was limited to three platforms and six months; broader sampling might yield different insights. Second, the research analysed posts in English and a limited range of code-switching contexts; further research should expand to other linguistic ecologies. Third, while intercoder reliability was ensured, the interpretive nature of CDA means that findings remain contextually situated rather than universally generalisable. Future research could explore algorithmic mediation of discourse, the role of multimodal resources such as video and audio, and cross-cultural comparisons to examine how digital language evolves differently across contexts.

## 4. CONCLUSION

This research set out to investigate how social media contributes to the evolution of language, guided by three core objectives: to analyse linguistic innovations, to explore identity construction, and to uncover power and ideological negotiations within online discourse. Through a mixed-methods design that integrated quantitative content analysis with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the research examined 500 posts across Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. The findings reveal that the evolution of language on social media is not simply a matter of new abbreviations or digital slang but a complex interplay of creativity, belonging, and ideology. This research demonstrates that social media must be understood as more than a technological platform for casual conversation. It is a discursive arena where language is continually reshaped to accommodate brevity, multimodality, and interactivity while also serving as a tool of empowerment, resistance, and exclusion. By foregrounding the interconnection between linguistic innovation, identity, and power, the research moves beyond the fragmented approaches that have dominated prior scholarship. The adoption of CDA as the theoretical lens underscores that linguistic forms such as hashtags, emojis, and code-switching are not trivial or secondary but deeply ideological. They function as markers of stance, vehicles of solidarity, and mechanisms of gatekeeping. This integrated approach offers a more holistic account of how language evolves in digital environments and reaffirms CDA's relevance in contemporary sociolinguistics.

The research reinforces the argument that language evolution is not a linear process but a dynamic, context-dependent negotiation shaped by technological affordances and social structures. Social media accelerates these shifts, creating new repertoires of expression that blur the boundaries between speech and writing, local and global, personal and political. By showing how abbreviations, emojis, memes, hashtags, and code-switching interact, this research highlights that linguistic innovations cannot be detached from their social functions. They are not simply tools of expression but mechanisms of identity and ideology, making social media one of the most influential sites of language change in the 21st century. In conclusion, this research demonstrates that from hashtags to code-switching, social media has become a critical arena where language evolves in tandem with social change. Innovations in digital communication are deeply tied to identity-making and ideological struggle, revealing the political and cultural stakes of everyday online discourse. By integrating quantitative analysis with CDA, this research offers a nuanced framework for understanding language evolution in the digital age. It shows that linguistic creativity, far from being trivial, carries profound implications for how individuals express belonging, contest inequalities, and reshape cultural narratives. As social media continues to redefine communication, recognising its role in language evolution is essential for educators, policymakers, and communities seeking to build more inclusive and representative digital spaces. While the research provides valuable insights, its scope was limited to three platforms and six months. Language practices are constantly evolving, and future research should adopt longitudinal approaches to track shifts over time. Additionally, while this research analysed posts in English and contexts involving code-switching, there is a need for cross-linguistic comparisons that explore how language evolves differently in non-English or multilingual digital communities. Future studies might also expand to multimodal resources such as video, audio, and algorithmically generated content. Moreover, examining how platform algorithms amplify certain discourses while suppressing others would extend the CDA framework to account for technological power alongside linguistic and social power.

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