

Food, Feelings and Filters: The Cultural Evolution of English through Social Media

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Abstract

Over the past decade, social media has become a major influence on how people interact, express ideas, and use language in everyday life. This study examines the impact of social media on English communication, focusing on the emergence of food-related metaphors, new word formation, the use of hashtags, and meme-based communication. It also considers how these changes reflect broader cultural trends.

The paper analyses how digital platforms encourage the creation and spread of new vocabulary, including slang, abbreviations, and hybrid expressions, many of which draw from food-related imagery such as “spilling the tea”, “salty”, and “that’s my cup of tea.” It further investigates how hashtags function not only as tools for categorizing content but also as a means of expressing opinions and emotions in a concise and impactful way.

In addition, the study discusses how meme culture depends on shared cultural understanding and frequently employs figurative language such as irony, exaggeration, and metaphor. Another key focus is the distinction between digital English and academic English. While digital communication tends to be informal, dynamic, and creative, academic writing follows structured and formal conventions. This contrast is particularly significant for students who navigate between both styles. Ultimately, this paper suggests that social media does not simply reflect changes in language but actively contributes to the evolution of modern English through culturally influenced and metaphor-rich forms of expression.

Keywords: Social media, Food-Based Metaphors, Digital Expressions, Hashtags, Meme culture, Language Evolution

Introduction

Language continuously changes over time, particularly with the rise of digital technology. In the past decade, social media has become one of the most influential forces shaping communication worldwide. Platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok have created dynamic spaces where people interact daily, share ideas, and express themselves in ways that are often quick, informal, and highly creative. As a result, English communication has undergone significant changes, with new words and expressions continuously emerging through online interactions. One clear example of this shift is the rise of food-based metaphors such as “serving”, “cooked”, and “that’s my cup of tea”, which convey emotions and opinions in a relatable and engaging manner. Alongside these, hashtags and memes have introduced new ways of expressing meaning that go beyond traditional sentence structures, making language more dynamic and context based.

This paper explores on understanding how social media contributes to changes in English communication and reflects broader cultural transformations. It examines vocabulary expansion, the role of hashtags, the influence of meme culture, and the use of food-based metaphors in digital discourse. It also highlights the contrast between digital English, which is informal, flexible, and creative, and academic English, which remains structured and formal. Through this analysis, the research aims to provide a clearer understanding of how language is evolving in the digital age and what this means for communication in both academic and social contexts.

Literature Review

The influence of social media on language and communication has become an important area of research in recent years. Earlier, digital platforms were mainly viewed as tools that enabled communication across distances. However, more recent studies suggest that social media actively shapes how language evolves and is used in everyday interactions (Dembe, 2024; Petrovic, 2025). Crystal (2011) argues that language naturally adapts to technological developments, particularly in online environments where communication tends to be more informal and creative. Similarly, Baron (2008) points out that digital communication encourages brief, fast, and conversational forms of expression, which differ significantly from traditional academic writing. Building on this, researchers have increasingly examined how new forms of language emerge and spread through social media. Online platforms provide spaces where users create and share new words, abbreviations, and hybrid expressions, forming flexible “micro-languages” within different communities (Dembe, 2024; Sikorska et al., 2025).

In this context, figurative language plays an important role. Food-based metaphors, for instance, are widely used to express emotions and opinions in ways that are both simple and culturally meaningful. In addition, hashtags and meme culture have become central to digital communication. Zappavigna (2015) highlights that hashtags are not only used to organize content but also to express identity and social meaning. Likewise, memes function as powerful tools for communication, often relying on humour, irony, and shared cultural knowledge. Studies suggest that memes allow ideas to be communicated quickly while also reflecting social attitudes (Ismail, 2025). At the same time, there is a clear distinction between digital English

and academic English. While digital communication is typically informal, flexible, and creative, academic writing follows more structured conventions and prioritizes clarity (Baron, 2008; Petrovic, 2025). This difference can create challenges for students, who must shift between these two styles depending on context. Taken together, existing research shows that social media plays a significant role in shaping modern language by encouraging creativity and cultural expression.

However, although many studies address language change broadly, there is still limited research focusing specifically on the use of food-based metaphors in digital communication.

This gap highlights the need to further explore how such metaphors influence meaning and expression in online interactions. This study therefore moves beyond viewing digital language as merely functional, instead recognizing it as a reflection of evolving cultural identities and patterns shaped by online communication.

Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative analysis of digital language with quantitative survey data to examine the influence of social media on English communication, particularly focusing on food-based metaphors, hashtags, and meme culture.

1. Research Design

A descriptive research design was used to analyze patterns in language use among social media users. The study focuses on identifying how frequently students use digital expressions, especially food-related metaphors, and how they perceive their impact on communication.

2. Data Collection

a) Social Media Language Samples

Language samples were observed from platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok. These included captions, comments, and memes that demonstrate the use of expressions like “tea,” “salty,” and other informal digital phrases.

b) Survey Data

A structured survey was conducted among 24 students. The questionnaire included multiple-choice and frequency-based questions. It focused on:

- Frequency of social media usage (e.g., rarely, occasionally, frequently)
- Usage of food-based metaphors such as “tea” and “salty”
- Understanding and usage of hashtags and memes
- Perception of whether social media improves or affects communication

- Preference between digital English and formal academic English

3. Evaluation Criteria

The responses were analyzed based on:

- **Frequency of Usage** – how often students use social media and digital expressions
- **Metaphor Usage** – use of food-related expressions in communication
- **Awareness and Understanding** – ability to interpret memes and hashtags
- **Perception** – opinions on the effectiveness and impact of social media language

4. Data Analysis

- **Quantitative Analysis** was used to calculate response patterns (e.g., “rarely”, “once”, “often”), presented in percentages.
- **Qualitative Analysis** was applied to interpret how students use and understand food metaphors and digital expressions.
- **Comparative Analysis** was used to examine differences between digital communication and formal academic English.

5. Limitations

- Limited sample size (24 students)
- Data based on self-reported responses
- Focus on a specific student group
- Rapidly changing nature of social media language

Results and Analysis

This section presents the findings based on survey responses collected from 24 participants. The results highlight the influence of social media on English communication, particularly through food-based metaphors, memes, and digital expressions.

Survey Results

These findings reveal that **75%** of respondents identified social media as their main source for learning new English words related to food, while **25%** rely on friends or peers. This indicates the strong role of digital platforms in vocabulary development.

When looking at the usage of the term “*foodie*”, **45.8%** of participants reported that it is their primary term, while **29.2%** rarely use it and **25%** use it occasionally. This suggests a shift from traditional terms like “gourmet” to more informal, trendy expressions.

Food-based metaphors such as “tea” (gossip) and “cooked” (in trouble) were widely recognized, often appearing alongside related expressions like “brunch” and “hangry.” This reveals that food-inspired figurative language has become a common part of everyday communication.

When asked about hashtags, **45.8%** of participants reported that they do not use them, while **33.3%** use them to increase visibility and **12.5%** to follow trends. Only **8.3%** use hashtags to express opinions, showing that hashtags are still more functional than expressive for many users.

Interestingly, a strong preference for visual communication was also observed, with **75%** of respondents stating that emojis are more effective than words when describing food. This reflects the growing importance of visual elements in digital interaction.

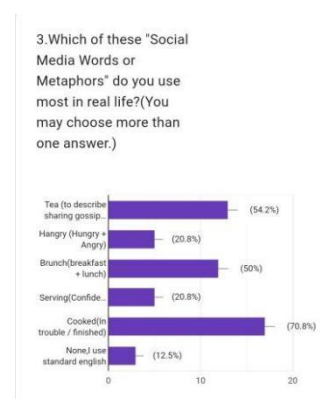
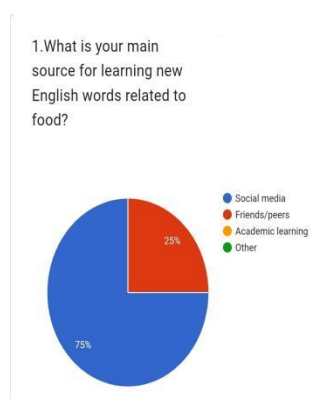
In relation to memes, **58.3%** of participants stated that memes are a primary source for learning new expressions, while **41.7%** reported partial influence. Additionally, **62.5%** believe that social media is the biggest reason for changes in the English language.

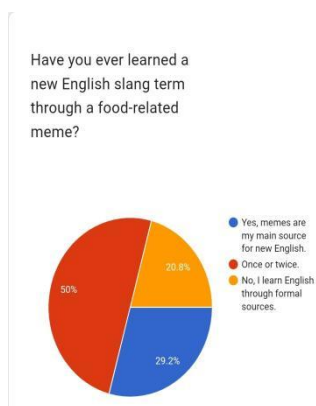
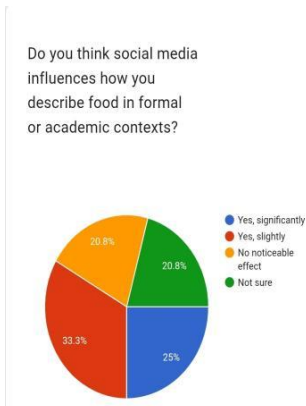
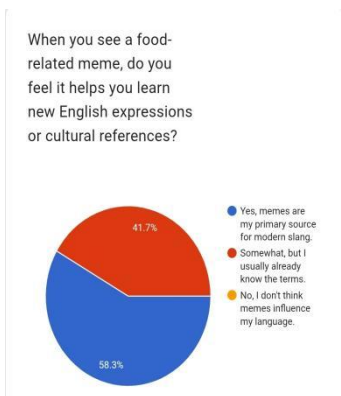
Most participants (**62.5%**) felt that social media is the main reason behind changes in the English language, while **33.3%** believed it is just one of several influencing factors. This suggests that social media is widely seen as a powerful force shaping how English is used today.

Half of the respondents reported learning new slang through food-related memes at least occasionally, while **29.2%** considered memes their main source of vocabulary. This further emphasizes the role of meme culture in language development.

When examining the influence on formal communication, responses were mixed: **33.3%** observed slight influence, **25%** significant influence, while the rest reported no effect or uncertainty. This suggests that digital language is gradually entering formal contexts.

Finally, responses regarding text-speak in formal writing were mixed. About **33.3%** admitted to using it frequently, whereas **37.5%** stated that they consciously avoid it. This indicates an emerging overlap between informal digital language and academic writing practices.





Analysis

The results make it clear that social media plays a major role in shaping modern English communication. The high percentage of participants relying on social media for vocabulary learning confirms its influence as a linguistic platform.

Food-based metaphors such as “*tea*”, “*sweet*”, and “*cooked*” shows how everyday concepts are transformed into expressive language tools. These metaphors make communication more engaging, relatable, and culturally relevant.

The widespread use of emojis and memes further highlights a shift from traditional text-based communication to more visual and symbolic forms. This supports the idea that digital English is becoming more creative and context driven.

At the same time, the partial influence of social media on academic writing suggests that while digital language is powerful, formal English still maintains its structure and importance. However, the presence of text-speak in academic contexts indicates a gradual blending of these two forms. Taken together, these patterns show that social media is not just expanding vocabulary but also reshaping how meaning is formed and interpreted, particularly through creative expressions such as food-based metaphors.

Comparative Analysis of Food-Based Expressions

| Expression | Meaning | Traditional Meaning | Social Media Influence |
|------------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------|---------------------------------------------------|
| Tea | Gossip/news | A drink | Popularized through memes to mean sharing secrets |
| Spicy | Bold/exciting | Flavor (hot) | Used for dramatic or controversial content |
| Cooked | In trouble/failed | Prepared food | Meme slang for being defeated or exposed |
| Ate (ate and left no crumbs) | Did something perfectly | Eating food | Used to praise performance (Gen Z slang) |
| Salty | Annoyed/irritated | Taste (salt) | Used to describe emotional irritation |
| Snack | Attractive person | Food item | Used in comments to describe good-looking people |

The table clearly shows how simple food-related words are being used in new and creative ways in social media communication. These expressions make conversations more engaging and help people share feelings and ideas quickly and effectively. This highlights how social media is not just influencing language, but also changing the way people think and express themselves in everyday life.

The transformation from complete sentences to hashtag-based expressions can be illustrated as follows

“I really enjoyed this homemade chocolate cake” → #homemade #chocolatelover #delicious

“This trip was very relaxing and peaceful” → #peaceful #vibes #traveldiaries

“I am very excited about this event” → #excited #cantwait #event

From these examples, it becomes clear that social media favors short, keyword-based expressions rather than complete sentences. This makes communication faster and more eye-catching, while still conveying the intended meaning effectively.

Shift from Formal to Informal Language in Social Media Communication

| Formal Expression | Informal / Social Media Version | Context of Use |
|--------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| I am very happy | I'm so hyped / This is sweet | Expressing excitement |
| I like this very much | This is my jam | Showing personal preference |
| Please share the details | Spill the tea | Asking for gossip |

| | | |
|-----------------------|----------------|---------------------------------|
| He is very confident | He's got sauce | Describing confidence/style |
| I am in trouble | I'm cooked | Expressing difficulty or stress |
| That is disappointing | That's bitter | Expressing dissatisfaction |

The table highlights a clear shift from formal language to more informal styles in social media communication. Users tend to favor shorter, more expressive phrases rather than traditional, structured forms. Many of these informal expressions include food-related metaphors, which add a sense of relatability and emotional depth to communication.

This trend points to the growing influence of digital platforms in shaping how language is used, encouraging both creativity and personal expression. Although formal language continues to play an important role in academic and professional settings, informal styles are more commonly used in online interactions, particularly among younger audiences.

Conclusion

Social media today plays a significant role in shaping how language is used and understood, particularly through the creative use of food-related metaphors. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter not only introduce new expressions but also bring older ones back into use, often with updated meanings that keep them relevant in everyday communication. This ongoing process highlights the flexible and evolving nature of language in the digital age.

The popularity of these metaphors also shows how users connect emotions, trends, and shared cultural experiences with familiar food imagery, making communication more engaging and easier to relate to. Rather than replacing traditional forms of language, social media reshapes them, allowing older expressions to adapt and remain meaningful for a new generation.

Taken together, these findings suggest that social media does more than influence language—it supports its continuous evolution while maintaining a link between past usage and present-day expression.

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