

INVESTIGATING THE MORPHOLOGICAL CHANGE IN SOCIAL MEDIA

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Abstract:

The use of hashtags, emojis, slang, and abbreviations by teenagers is the primary concern of this study, which looks at how Instagram affects language evolution. New word forms like "selfie" and "adulthood," as well as morphological alterations like acronymization and semantic shifts, are all influenced by social media, which reflects its role in creating a dynamic global vocabulary. While hashtags and emojis make communication easier, acronyms like "FOMO" reflect contemporary societal concepts. Through an analysis of Instagram posts, the study demonstrates how social media transforms communication in the digital era by encouraging originality, brevity, and cultural connectiveness.

Key words: Brevity, Semantic shifts, Linguistics innovations Slang and abbreviations.

Introduction:

Language is always changing, shaped by social, cultural, and technological shifts. Today's platforms like Instagram have become major drivers of these changes, influencing how people communicate globally. Social media hasn't just changed the way we interact; it has also transformed how words are created, adapted, and spread. This aligns with the field of morphology, a branch of linguistics that focuses on studying the structure and formation of words (Bauer, 1988). Morphology, derived from the Greek word's "morph" (form/shape) and "-ology" (study), investigates how words are formed from smaller elements, such as roots, prefixes, and suffixes, and how these elements combine to create new meanings (McCarthy, 2002). Today, morphology explores not only the mechanics of word construction but also how language evolves to meet the changing needs of society (Katamba, 1993; Vogt & Giribet, 2010). Words have historically evolved and changed in response to social and cultural changes, but social media's swift speed has accelerated this process. New terms, acronyms, altered spellings, and original phrases appear and become widely used on these platforms. Once unheard-of terms like "selfie," "hashtag," and "unfriend" are now commonplace, even in offline interactions. Abbreviations such as "LOL" (laugh out loud), "BRB" (be right back), and "IDK" (I don't know) illustrate a trend toward brevity, driven by the fast and often limited-space nature of online interactions. Social media has changed how we use words, driven by people's desire to express themselves and show their individuality. Users often create unique usernames, hashtags, and phrases to stand out. These new words and ideas often start in specific groups or communities but quickly spread worldwide. This

exchange of language creates a “global vocabulary,” where words from different languages and cultures mix, reflecting the diversity of social media users (Perez, 2014).

Understanding morphology is important in building vocabulary, improving reading skills, and strengthening language abilities (Carlisle, 2007; Giyatmi, 2019). Learning how words are formed also helps to break down difficult words and grasp grammar rules, which are essential for clear and effective communication (Dominguez, 1991). This shows that morphology isn’t just important for studying social media; it also plays a key part in learning and using language in everyday life. Social media platforms, with their structural constraints, particularly character limits on platforms like Instagram, encourage users to communicate concisely. These limitations often lead to the shortening of words, the creation of abbreviations, and inventive combinations of terms to fit messages within the platform's framework. This necessity for brevity fosters an environment where creativity in language thrives. The informal nature of social media allows users to experiment with language, tailoring words to reflect their personal style, tone, or identity. The study of morphological changes in social media is significant because it highlights how technology shapes language evolution in real-time. It provides insights into how new words, abbreviations, and altered spellings emerge and spread globally reflecting cultural and social trends.

Research Questions

- i. What are the most common morphological changes observed in social media language?
- ii. How do social media platforms influence the formation and spread of new words?

Literature Review:

The evolution of social media has significantly transformed linguistic structures, particularly in the realm of morphology. This section reviews relevant studies to explore how morphological changes manifest in social media communication, highlighting their implications for linguistic innovation and societal trends.

Ngene (2019) underscores the role of morphology in examining the structure and internal composition of words, focusing on the analysis of morphemes like roots, prefixes, and suffixes. This approach provides insights into how language evolves and constructs meaning, aligning with the dynamic nature of social media, where linguistic forms adapt to platform-specific constraints and user creativity.

Fazio and Gallagher (2014) discuss the importance of morphological awareness in expanding vocabulary and understanding the relationships between words with shared roots, prefixes, or suffixes. For instance, recognizing a morpheme like "bio-" in words such as biology and biosphere facilitates comprehension and innovation. This principle is evident on social media, where users coin new terms and abbreviations to fit their communicative needs.

Clahsen et al. (2010) argue that morphological knowledge enhances linguistic competence, particularly in educational contexts. Breaking words into morphemes empowers learners to decode complex terms and infer meanings. On social media, users mirror this approach by adopting morphological strategies to generate novel expressions, reflecting the platform’s informal and fast-paced nature.

Manyak et al. (2018) highlight the foundational role of morphology in language development. Introducing concepts such as prefixes, suffixes, and roots at an early stage equips learners with tools to decipher unfamiliar terms. Social media users apply these skills intuitively, contributing to the emergence of new linguistic forms like hashtags and blends that enrich the digital lexicon.

Tong (2011) emphasizes how morphological awareness aids reading comprehension by enabling readers to infer meanings from word components. On social media, this translates into the ability to interpret acronyms, internet slang, and other creative expressions. This adaptability underscores the centrality of morphology in navigating the linguistic innovations of digital platforms.

Rafikovna (2023) investigates morphological and semantic shifts in English internet slang, focusing on word formation processes such as abbreviations, blending, and semantic narrowing. These patterns are prevalent on social media, where users frequently experiment with language to convey identity and creativity. The study illustrates how social media accelerates linguistic evolution, contributing to a globalized vocabulary.

While previous studies have looked at how morphology helps us understand words and language development, there is a gap in exploring how social media influences the way we create and change words. Social media platforms encourage users to abbreviate, shorten, and invent new words for quicker, creative expression. Future research should focus on how social media drives these changes and how new words spread across different cultures and languages. By filling this gap, we can better understand how social media shapes the evolution of language.

Materials and Methods

This study uses a qualitative descriptive case study to explore how teenagers' use of social media, especially Instagram, influences language changes. It focuses on how words are formed and modified (morphological changes). It examines common features like acronyms, abbreviations, slang, and emojis to understand how these affects everyday language use. The research targets teenagers aged 13 to 19, who are frequent social media users and play a key role in language evolution. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, ensuring a mix of teens from different socioeconomic backgrounds, language skills, and levels of social media use. In addition, random sampling was applied to select specific posts, comments, and hashtags on Instagram, which represent real-life usage and help refine the analysis.

Data was collected from Instagram posts that include hashtags or comments reflecting teenagers' interests, such as hobbies, trends, and social interactions. These posts were carefully analyzed for linguistic features like shortened words, new abbreviations, and creative use of emojis to convey messages. This study focuses on how teenagers naturally use language on Instagram, providing insights into the changes happening in their communication styles. The methods used ensure that the research captures a wide variety of language examples and offers a clear understanding of how social media influences the way teenagers shape and use language.

Data Analysis:

Researchers analyze the impact of social media on teenage language qualitatively by utilizing various websites, particularly Instagram. According to the research data, Instagram users predominantly adopt an informal style. After collecting captions, the data were analyzed by applying Labov's theory of language change to explore the influence of social media platforms on teenagers' language evolution.

1. Slang and Colloquialisms:

Slang is defined as a set of colloquial words or phrases in a language, that is ever-changing due to factors such as sociocultural changes and advancement, technological development, and mass media (Namvar & Ibrahim, 2014). Teenage Instagram users frequently employ slang in their captions to give their images more personality, relatability, or humor.

Table 1: Examples of Slang and Colloquialisms in Instagram Captions

	Slang/Colloquialism	Old Use/Meaning	New Use/Meaning
1)	LitAF	Lit: To light up; AF: Abbreviation for "as f**k"	Used to describe something extremely exciting, excellent, or enjoyable. Often combined for emphasis.
2)	Slaying	To kill or destroy	Excelling or looking exceptionally good, particularly in fashion, confidence, or creative performance.
3)	Wanderlust	A strong desire to travel	Expresses passion for exploring new destinations and engaging in cultural or leisure adventures.
4)	AdventureAwaits	Adventure: A daring experience; Awaits: To wait for something	A phrase signaling enthusiasm for spontaneous travel or thrilling new experiences.
5)	Goals	An aim or desired result	A term used to express admiration for something aspirational, such as relationships, looks, or lifestyle.
6)	Throwback	To recall a previous time	Used in captions to refer to nostalgic or past

			events, often paired with #TBT (Throwback Thursday).
7)	Glow-Up	Glow: To shine	A transformation or improvement in appearance, confidence, or lifestyle over time.
8)	Squad	A small organized group of people	Refers to a close group of friends or social companions, particularly in casual or fun contexts.

The following are some instances of slang used in captions on Instagram:

- "Just scored tickets to the concert! Can't wait to see my fav band perform live! #LitAF 🎵🔥"
- "Rocking my new look and feeling fierce 🧚‍♀️ #Slaying"
- "Just another day of exploring new places and making memories 🌍🌟 #Wanderlust"
- "No plans today, just cruisin' through the day and seeing where it takes me. 🚗👉 #AdventureAwaits"

Table 2: Morphological Changes in Social Media Language

Word/Phrase	Old Morphological Form	New Morphological Form	Explanation
Selfie	"Self" (noun)	"Selfie" (noun with suffix "-ie")	Addition of the diminutive suffix "-ie" to "self" to describe a photo of oneself.
Bae	"Babe" (noun)	"Bae" (noun, clipped form)	Clipping of "babe" to create a shorter, casual term of endearment.
DM	"Direct Message" (noun phrase)	"DM" (abbreviation/acronym)	Acronymization of a phrase commonly

			used in social media for brevity.
Adulting	"Adult" (noun)	"Adulting" (gerund/verb)	Conversion of the noun "adult" into a verb to describe taking on adult responsibilities
Stan	"Stan" (proper noun)	"Stan" (noun/verb)	Morphological shift to a verb or noun meaning an intense fan of something.
Viral	"Virus" (noun)	"Viral" (adjective)	Derived from "virus," now used as an adjective to describe something spreading rapidly online.
Unfriend	"Friend" (noun/verb)	"Unfriend" (verb)	Addition of prefix "un-" to signify the act of removing someone from a friend list.
Hashtagging	"Hashtag" (noun)	"Hashtagging" (gerund/verb)	Conversion of "hashtag" into a verb to describe tagging posts with keywords.
Instagrammable	"Instagram" (noun)	"Instagrammable" (adjective)	Derived to describe something worthy of sharing on Instagram.
Unfollow	"Follow" (verb)	"Unfollow" (verb with prefix)	Prefix "un-" changes meaning to indicate reversing the action of following.
Repost	"Post" (verb/noun)	"Repost" (verb)	Addition of "re-" to indicate repeating the action of posting.

- New Word Creation: Words like *selfie* and *bae* are entirely new formations derived from existing words through clipping or suffix addition.
- Semantic Shift: Existing words like *viral* and *snap* have changed from meaning to fit the digital/social media context.
- Functional Shifts: Words like *adulting* and *hashtagging* show a shift in grammatical category, such as turning nouns into verbs.

- Productivity: These examples demonstrate how social media drives word formation and popularizes non-standard forms, impacting how we communicate.

2. Emojis and Emoticons:

Adding visual signals to express emotions, tone, and context, emojis and emoticons are crucial to the communication of Pakistani youth on Instagram. Teenagers frequently use emojis extensively in their stories, comments, and captions. They can choose from a large selection of symbols to convey a variety of emotions, including happiness, grief, enthusiasm, and love.

Table 3: Emojis and Emoticons in Social Media Language

Caption Example	Emojis/Emoticons Used	Context/Explanation	Relation to Morphological Change
"Weekend plans with friends: beach day! 🏖️☀️👯 Can't wait to soak up the sun and have some fun! 🤝 #BeachBums"	🏖️, ☀️, 👯	Emojis represent fun, relaxation, and excitement; #BeachBums adds a playful tone to the caption	The hashtag #BeachBums combines two words to form a compound term, indicating lifestyle.
"Didn't get the job I interviewed for. 😞💪 Keeping my head up and staying positive! 💪 #StayStrong"	😞, 💪	Emojis express sadness and resilience; #StayStrong encourages positivity.	The hashtag #StayStrong turns a motivational phrase into a morphologically compact unit.
"When you realize it's only Tuesday... 😂📅 Counting down the days until the weekend! 📅 #WeekdayBlues"	😂, 📅	Emojis highlight humor and frustration; #WeekdayBlues captures the sentiment of midweek exhaustion.	#WeekdayBlues combines "weekday" and "blues" to create a new noun phrase.
"Accidentally spilled coffee on myself this morning. 🙈☕ Monday mornings,	🙈, ☕	Emojis add humor and embarrassment; #ClumsyMe conveys self-deprecation.	The hashtag #ClumsyMe personalizes the sentiment,

am I right? 🍷 #ClumsyMe"			combining "clumsy" with "me."
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- Hashtag Formation: Emojis are often used with hashtags to create new words or phrases, summarizing emotions or events, like #ClumsyMe or #BeachBums.
- Emoji Substitution: Emojis act like words, replacing them in text. For example, 🏖️ means "beach," and 🙌 shows excitement.
- Semantic Shift: Some emojis, like 😂 (meant for laughter), are now used for sarcasm or exaggeration too.
- Contextual Economy: Emojis make messages shorter by replacing long sentences with simple symbols.

3. Acronyms and Abbreviations:

An acronym is defined as "a word formed from the initial letters of a series of words or phrases, often pronounced as a single word" (Crystal, D. 2008). In the context of morphological change, acronyms represent a reduction process that shortens longer expressions, thus simplifying and altering the morphological structure of the original phrase. This change reflects how language adapts to the needs of its users, especially in digital and informal contexts. Teenage Instagram users frequently use acronyms and abbreviations, which are shorter versions of words or phrases, to communicate more effectively and expressively. These language shortcuts are frequently made up of the first letter or syllable of words or phrases that are longer.

Table 4: Acronyms and Abbreviations in social media

Acronym	Full Form	Meaning/Use	Age Group	Context and Cultural Relevance	Morphological Change in Language Use
FOMO	Fear of Missing Out	The anxiety of missing out on something, typically on social media	Teens-30s	Commonly used on social media or experiences not attended	Condensing a longer phrase into a single, expressive term reflecting a modern cultural phenomenon.
BRB	Be Right Back	Used to indicate a brief departure from a conversation or activity	Teens-30s	Used in text messages, chats, and online interactions to indicate a	Transformation of a full sentence into a simple, concise phrase for faster communication

				temporary absence	
TBH	To Be Honest	Used to preface an honest opinion or confession	15-24	Common in high school and college social media, particularly in Instagram posts and comments.	Shortening phrases for efficiency and an informal tone.
YOLO	You Only Live Once	A phrase used to encourage taking risks or living life to the fullest	Teens-30s	Popularized on social media, particularly among younger users, often encouraging bold or adventurous actions	A simplification of a motivational phrase that fits the fast-paced and risk-taking culture of digital spaces.

- Condensation of Meaning: Acronyms such as "FOMO" or "YOLO" condense complex cultural concepts into simple, quick expressions.
- Cultural Relevance: These acronyms reflect modern attitudes or experiences, such as fear of missing out (FOMO) or living boldly (YOLO), making them culturally significant in digital communication.

Conclusion:

Social media, especially Instagram, is rapidly shaping language, with teenagers leading the change. Acronyms, slang, emojis, and new words simplify and speed up communication, making it more creative and relevant. Abbreviations like "FOMO" and verbs like "adulthood" reflect how language adapts to digital life. Emojis and hashtags replace full sentences, conveying emotions and ideas instantly. These changes make language faster, more dynamic, and more personal while fostering cultural connection. Social media's impact on language is transforming how we express ourselves, making communication more inclusive and suited to the fast-paced digital world.

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